

## The Cuneiform Short Alphabet: Part 9.

**The Beth Shemesh Tablet: KTU 5.24 = 8.1 (AS 33.5.165, Barton [1933] )**

**and**

**The New South Semitic Abecedary from Ugarit: KTU 9.426 (RS 88.2215, Bordreuil and Pardee [1995])**

### Detailed Discussion

#### Preliminary Remarks:

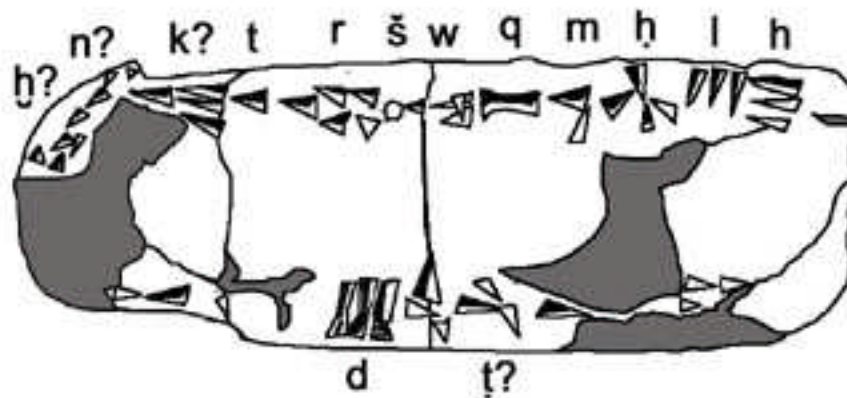
Two cuneiform abecedaries are very important in any discussion of the history of the alphabet: AS 33.5.165, the Beth Shemesh tablet (KTU 5.24) and RS 88.2215 (KTU 9.426). See most recently Hayajneh and Tropper (1997), Vita (2003) and Sass, (2005), 112 as well as several others. The goal of this study is to answer two related but somewhat different questions. First, is the Beth Shemesh tablet (KTU 5.24) representative of a short cuneiform alphabet? And second, to what extent is the morphology of certain letters (specifically b, d and m) indicative of a short alphabet?

Elihu Grant discovered AS 33.5.165 (KTU 5.24) during his 1933 excavations at Beth Shemesh (Grant [1933], 4, [1934], 27). The small clay tablet, 168x60mm, was discovered at the base of a wall in a building that Grant (1934), 27, dated to the Late Bronze Age. Barton (1933), 5, identified the writing as alphabetic cuneiform, similar to the Ugaritic alphabet, and, taking a suggestion from Albright (private correspondence, Oct 16, 1933) that the writing was in mirror image of normal alphabetic cuneiform, suggested a preliminary reading and translation. While many scholars struggled with the text on the tablet (Gaster, [1934]; Dhorme, [1934]; Virolleaud, [1935b]; Hillers, [1964]; Albright, [1964]; Weippert, [1966]; Keel and Küchler, [1982], II, 808; Bordreuil, [1983]; Puech, [1986] 207-208) it wasn't until 1987 that real progress was made. At a conference in May of that year, Loundine (1987) proposed that the text be understood as an early example of the south Semitic alphabet; "*L'ordre alphétique des signes de la tablette de Beth Shemeh correspond à l'ordre des signes des alphabets sud-sémitiques.*" Ryckmans (1988), Dietrich and Loretz (1988), 285, Sass (1991), 7, and Segert (1993), 85, among others, have adopted and in a few cases which will be discussed below improved on Loundine's suggestion.

The next big step in the understanding of the Beth Shemesh tablet came in 1988 with the discovery and subsequent publication (Bordreuil and Pardee [1995]) of RS 88.2215. Found among an archive of some 400 tablets in the house of Urtēnu (Pardee, [1996]), the tablet contains an abecedary that is also in the south Semitic alphabetical order. Yon, et al, (1990), 19, explain the exact find spot. Of course, this find and publication is now being assimilated into the discussion of the history of the alphabet and of the Beth Shemesh tablet (see for example, Hayajneh and Tropper, [1997]; Vita, [2003], 33-35; Sass [2005], 122).

### Tracing of the Beth Shemesh Tablet:

(Based on photograph published in Barton (1933), 4)



This tracing is very similar to Sass (1991), 326, although I read a *k?* where he reads a *h* and I also believe there are sufficient traces of wedges to justify reading the *n?* and *ḥ?*. I also read a *ṭ* where Sass is uncertain; while he reads *?ṭ* before the *d*. This last difference is due, in part, to our reading the line along the bottom of the text from opposite directions. Sass reads this line from left to right while I read it from right to left. Dietrich and Loretz (1988), 285, appear to read signs that I cannot see along the left edge and bottom of the tablet. They also read an *s* between the *t* and the *k*. Neither Sass, nor I can see any trace of the *s*. Nor do I think there is room for it. On the other hand, like Dietrich and Loretz (1988), 285, I believe that the Beth Shemesh tablet contained a long alphabet of 27 or so letters rather than the shorter 21-24 letters that Ryckmans (1988), Sass (1991), 324, and Mendenhall (1993) see. Based on scaled average sign widths, I do not believe there is sufficient space from the lower right edge of the tablet to the sign that I read *ṭ* to accommodate the eight missing letters. However, there does appear to be sufficient room for them if one assumes that they were written between what I identify as *ḥ* and what I identify as *d*. This and the direction of the readable wedges leads me to conclude that somewhere in the lacuna on the left side of the tablet the writing changed direction. There are three principle reasons that make me think this tablet is not written in a short alphabet. First, unlike the certain texts written in the short cuneiform alphabet, this text contains a *ḥ* which equals /*h*/ and if my observation is correct it contains a *ḥ* which equals /*h*/. The certain short alphabet texts use *ḥ* for both /*h*/ and /*h*/. Second, there is, by my measurements, sufficient room for the 27 letters of a long alphabet but a 21-24 letter alphabet would likely have gaps, gaps of a size not seen in the most legible portion on the text. Notice that there are 11 letters from the *ḥ* to the *n(?)* inclusive. The same number of letters would fit on the lower portion of the tablet. Therefore, considering just the upper and lower portions of the tablet there is room for 22 letters. However, it is clear that the writing continued around the left end of the tablet. There is room for at least an additional four or five letters on the left end bring the total number of possible letters to 26 or perhaps 27. Third, as will be seen below, a comparison of alphabet on this tablet with the recently discovered RS 88.2215 and the best reconstruction of the Old South Arabic alphabet are indicative of all three being in a long rather than a short alphabetic tradition.

### Tracing of the RS 88.2215

(Based on photograph published in Bordreuil and Pardee [1995], 856)



h l ḥ m q w ṭ(?) r

b t ḏ(?) š(?) k n ḫ ṣ(?)

s(?) p á(?) ʿ d.(?) g(?) 'd' ḡ(?)

ṭ(?) z(?) y

(The letters marked with a "?" differ significantly from their more common morphology. There is a clear indication that there was once writing below the scribe line but no letters can be identified. The right edge has a q and an r and perhaps one or more additional letters.)

All agree that this tablet is to be read from left to right. My tracing differs in a few ways from the autograph published by Bordreuil and Pardee (2001), 348. But the readings of the letters are the same as Bordreuil and Pardee (1995), 860, and Bordreuil and Pardee (2001), 348, but differ from the more preliminary reading at Bordreuil and Pardee (1995), 857.

In my estimation, this tablet has all the earmarks of a student exercise.

### A Couple of Notes on the Orthography

While the order and letter repertory of both KTU 5.24 and RS 88.2215 are nearly the same (see below) the styles of the letters show several interesting differences and perhaps one interesting similarity. First with regard to the m that can be read on both tablets. Notice that the vertical wedge of KTU 5.24 comes at the beginning of the letter while in RS 88.2215 it is at the end of the letter. Remember that the direction of writing differs at this point. The morphology of the m in KTU 5.25 is closer to that of the short cuneiform alphabet while the morphology of the m in RS 88.2215 is very similar to that seen in the canonical Ugaritic alphabet. Second, while the d in RS 88.2215 is malformed or damaged, it is instructive to compare the d in KTU 5.24 with the b in RS 88.2215. In general, the difference between these two letters is that the b has two sets of two wedges while the d has three similar sets of two wedges. Notice that the two sets of wedges in RS 88.2215's b are like those

we see in the bs and ds of the long Ugaritic alphabetic texts. Each set has a vertical wedge with a short horizontal wedge at the bottom. On the other hand, the sets of wedges in the d of KTU 5.24 are like those we have come to associate with the bs and ds in the certain short alphabetic text; each set having a vertical wedge at the top of the set with a short, upward pointing, vertical wedge at the bottom of the set.

Special attention needs to be given to what I call the š in KTU 5.24 and the ʔ in RS 88.2215. Do they have the same morphology and what is their relationship with s<sub>2</sub> (the small circular impression) equaling /š/, /ʔ/ and /s/ in the certain short alphabetic texts? I'm not sure of the answer at this point. But while they may share a common origin from the standpoint of their general morphology, they clearly serve different phonetic functions.

Notice that the sign between the d and the ʔ in KTU 5.24 is similar in shape to the ǵ in the same position in RS 88.2215. It is on this basis that I restore the ǵ in KTU 5.24 for the comparison below.

**Comparison between KTU 5.24, RS 88.2215 and the Old South Arabic Alphabet:**

KTU 5.24

h l ḥ m q w š r t k n ḥ ]d[ ǵ ]ʔ[

RS 88.2215

h l ḥ m q w ʔ r b t d š k n ḥ s s p ǵ d. g d ǵ ʔ z y

Order of the Old South Arabic (According to Irvine and Beeston [1988])

h l ḥ m q w š r b t s k n ḥ s s f ǵ d. g d ǵ ʔ z d y ʔ z

Reference Position:

h	l	ḥ	m	q	w	š	r	b	t	s	k	n	ḥ	s	s	f	ǵ	d.	g	d	ǵ	ʔ	z	d	y	ʔ	z		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	X	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	
										0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

With the possible exception of the š /ʔ in position 7, the first 8 letters and their order are the same in all three alphabets. KTU 5.24 has the b missing from position 9 and no letters in positions X or 11. RS 88.2215 has the d in position X while Old South Arabic has it in position 26. By my reading, positions 12, 13, and 14 are occupied by the same letters in all three alphabets. Coupled with this is the fact that there is not uniform placement of the š, ʔ and s in the three alphabets. If it is correct to read the small circular letter as a š then KTU 5.24 is closer to the old South Arabic usage than is RS 88.2215. Why not read the letter in position 7 of RS 88.2215 as an š? The letter in position 11 of RS 88.2215 is morphologically similar to a canonical Ugaritic š rotated 90° counter clockwise. On the other hand, there does seem to be some confusion between the š, ʔ and s and the fact that their phonetic equivalents are represented by the small circular impression in several certain short alphabet texts should provide caution on this

issue. While one cannot be certain, it is possible that there is room for the **d** somewhere between position 15 and position 20 in KTU 5.24 making it closer to the RS 88.2215 in this regard.

Whatever one thinks of the relationship between these three alphabets or the placement of the various letters in the lacunae of KTU 5.24, it is nearly impossible to imagine that KTU 5.24 or its source lacked a **b**. This reason alone should cause caution when positing anything other than a long alphabet.

It is clear that RS 88.2215 stands closer to the order of the Old South Arabic Alphabet than does KTU 5.24. It is also clear that they are both in that tradition.

### **Concluding Remarks:**

While many issues, including the history of the alphabet and its propagation around the Near East, rest on how one interprets these two tablets, this study is primarily interested in just two questions. Is the Beth Shemesh tablet (KTU 5.24) representative of a short cuneiform alphabet? And to what extent is the morphology of certain letters (specifically **b**, **d** and **m**) indicative of a short alphabet? While there is room for debate, it is my considered opinion that the KTU 5.24 represents a long alphabet but clearly not the long alphabet of the canonical Ugaritic texts. An interesting future exercise might be to review the whole corpus of cuneiform alphabetic texts in an effort to identify any that might have been written in this alphabet. If I am correct that the Beth Shemesh tablet does not represent any short alphabet, then it is certain that the morphology of the individual letters is not diagnostic of a short alphabet. And, as RS 88.2215 shows, letter morphology may not be diagnostic of a text in the canonical cuneiform alphabet either.