

Phœnician letters has yet been found in Palestine or the adjacent regions which can be dated with any certainty earlier than the famous inscription of Mesha in the ninth century B.C. On the other hand, we now know from the Tel el-Amarna letters that the earlier script of Palestine, and indeed of the whole of Western Asia, was the cuneiform syllabary of Babylonia, while Dr. Glaser and Professor Hommel have made it probable that there are inscriptions in Southern Arabia, written in the Minæan form of the "Phœnician" alphabet, which are at least as old as the inscription of Mesha. Now the South Arabian alphabet contains separate symbols for sounds which existed in the Semitic parent-speech but had been lost in the languages of Canaan, and for which, therefore, there were no symbols in Palestine. The Minæan alphabet accordingly could not have been derived from the Phœnicians; the evidence, in fact, points the contrary way, and suggests the conclusion that it was from Arabia that Canaan obtained its letters. The symbols which were no longer needed would naturally have been dropped in the process of borrowing. It is still possible to maintain that the hieratic alphabet of Egypt was the original source of that of the Phœnicians, but in this case it would have been adopted and modified, not by the nations of Palestine but by those of Arabia. It must, however, be admitted that an increasing number of scholars hold that the "Phœnician" letters should be traced rather to the pictorial hieroglyphs, out of which the cuneiform characters developed, than to the hieratic script of the Egyptians.