

*Abstract:*

Specialists in Northwest Semitics and Hebrew Bible study the languages and literatures of the ancient Levant, the geographical region encompassing modern day Israel, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. Northwest Semitic languages such as Ugaritic, Phoenician, Classical Hebrew, Moabite, and Aramaic are classified as a distinct subdivision in the Semitic language family because they share similar grammatical features and vocabulary. Specialists in Northwest Semitics examine inscriptions, tablets, ostraca, and biblical texts, often in collaboration with Levantine archaeologists, for information about linguistic changes, scribal practices, and other aspects of political and religious life in the region, from the Bronze Age to the Roman Period. In particular, biblical texts, and extra-biblical sources such as the Dead Sea Scrolls are used to study rise and fall of Ancient Israel, and the canonization of the Hebrew Bible.

*Statement:*

All that we have to understand the languages of ancient Northwest Semitic speakers are their written records, and they are fragmentary at best. Our reconstructions of changes in these languages are hampered by chronological gaps in the written record; moreover, the majority of texts represent the interests of religious and political institutions, rather than individuals. Even texts that narrate mythologies, or cultural practices such as sacrifice, or burial rites can present a challenge, as we have no living speakers to interpret the idioms and themes in these symbolically charged descriptions. For this reason, there is a need for innovative methodologies that harness ethnographic studies, and socio-linguistic models of how language, script, and orthographic conventions reflect cultural continuity and change. As a scholar and educator in the field of Northwest Semitics and Hebrew Bible, I intend to foster multidisciplinary dialogue

between the field of Near Eastern Studies and Linguistic Anthropology, and to integrate socio-linguistic theories into my own research of Northwest Semitic scribalism.

My fascination with the dynamic aspects of Near Eastern languages and cultures was greatly impacted by my studies in the Middle East. While studying at the ██████████ ██████████ in 2004, and at the ██████████ ██████████ in 2006-7 as a Fulbright Fellow, I became increasingly aware of the dramatic impact that political and social ideologies have on language. As a student of both modern and ancient Semitic languages, I was able to see the bigger picture of how various branches of the Semitic language family evolved over time due to social and political changes. However, throughout my language studies, I was often frustrated by the lack of scholarship examining the relationship between language and culture. Consequently, when applying to graduate school, I searched for Northwest Semitics and Hebrew Bible programs that would provide the best comprehensive training in Northwest Semitic languages, Levantine archaeology, and socio-linguistic and anthropological theory. In 2007, I found my academic niche at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), studying with Dr. ██████████ ██████████, a specialist in Northwest Semitics who integrates cutting-edge socio-linguistic theory into ██████████ work on Ancient Israel and Judah.

Since beginning my doctoral studies at UCLA, my training in Northwest Semitics and Linguistic Anthropology has strengthened my conviction that languages, even ancient ones, cannot be studied in a vacuum; languages are intrinsically tied to cultural norms and to political ideologies. In particular, my understanding of ancient scribalism has been greatly impacted by theories regarding literacy, language learning, and linguistic ideology, namely, how writing systems, spelling conventions, and language reforms are

inherently linked to political institutions and ideologies. Moreover, my research into language and identity has taught me much about how language usage indexes social identity. Language is a reflection of how speakers perceive the world—word choice is not at all haphazard. For example, colloquialisms in biblical texts can be studied to better understand developments in vernacular or “spoken” Hebrew, and how they reflect cultural transitions.

In sum socio-linguistic models derived from anthropological studies are invaluable tools for reconstructing the cultural contexts of Northwest Semitic languages. As a scholar in the field, I hope to bridge the current gap between the fields of Northwest Semitics and Hebrew Bible and Linguistic Anthropology, by integrating socio-linguistic theory into my research, that will enable me to examine inscriptions and biblical texts from a fresh perspective, to better understand how these languages were affected by social, political, and religious ideologies.

Ultimately, I hope to write my dissertation on Late Bronze Age scribalism in Canaan, specifically, on the social and political context that fostered the use of Akkadian by Northwest Semitic speaking polities. In the future, I am also interested in conducting research on the adoption of the alphabet by Levantine scribes in the Iron I, which eventually culminated in the creation of Phoenician, Israelite, and Aramaic scripts by the Iron II, using socio-linguistic models that examine how language and script are influenced by political ideologies.