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William M. Schniedewind. *The Finger of the Scribe: The Beginnings of Scribal Education and How It Shaped the Hebrew Bible.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. 248 pp. $34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-005246-1.

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William M. Schniedewind's *The Finger of the Scribe: How Scribes Learned to Write the Bible* has one central and one subsidiary thesis. According to the main thesis, the education of Israelite scribes inherited and followed the model of the Mesopotamian school tradition of the Late Bronze Age. Subsidiary to this thesis is the argument that much in the Hebrew Bible reflects the practices of the scribal education and thus, at some remove, the cuneiform curriculum. Instead of identifying the Neo-Assyrian or the Neo-Babylonian period as the time of transmission of cuneiform lore to the Hebrew scribes, Schniedewind situates "the vector of transmission" at a much earlier period. He does so on the premise that the transition between the Late Bronze and the Early Iron Ages was far less disruptive than has long been assumed—in part on the basis of the conquest traditions in the Bible. The material Schniedewind adduces to substantiate his claim is largely extrabiblical. His discussion of the data is often insightful and illuminating. The demonstration might have gained in cogency if more of the early layers of the Hebrew Bible had been brought into the discussion. On the whole, though, the model Schniedewind proposes is plausible. His subsidiary thesis—the influence of the scribal curriculum on the Hebrew Bible—is easier to sustain. Here Schniedewind is able to use quite a bit of data already discussed by others. Throughout the book, though, he delights his readers with new insights and interpretations of his own.

If the book has one flaw, it is in the discussion of Kuntillet Ajrud. Especially the epigraphic remains of the site—potsherds with writing and drawings, as well as plaster inscriptions once attached to the wall—have triggered a huge amount of learned commentary by modern scholars. Consensus on the meaning of the texts and the original function of the site is still beyond the horizon. Schniedewind takes the site to have been a military fortress sponsored by the Northern Kingdom. A central activity within the building was the education of military scribes. These men were known as *mahir*, an Egyptian term appropriated and later misunderstood by Israelite scribes. In the interpretation of Schniedewind, both the written potsherds and the plaster inscriptions are evidence of scribal education at the site. He reads most of the scribbles on the pithoi as scribal exercises (abecedaries, practice in epistolary phraseology, and the like), whereas the plaster inscriptions were meant for memorization by apprentice scribes. This section of the book is only tangential to the main argument. Also, Schniedewind's take on Kuntillet Ajrud is quite implausible. The site was far more likely a caravanserai along the trade route linking

Samaria to Teman. The scribbles on the potsherds were mostly greetings left by travelers for other travelers. The abecedaries might have been nothing more than a *probatio pennae*. The potsherds served like a pin board or a notebook for common use. The plaster inscriptions, on the other hand, are the remains of what once was an edifying literary text for the benefit of those who stayed the night in this *rifugio* in the desert. The trade expeditions were not without danger, and divine protection was more than welcome. If there were schools in ancient Israel, they were to be found in less desolate places.

This is a book with two faces. Schniedewind successfully argues his main and his subsidiary theses. In this sense, the book fulfills the promise implied in the subtitle, "How Scribes Learned to Write the Bible." It remains unclear, however, why so much room has been devoted to the discussion of Kuntillet Ajrud. It is not essential to the argument, nor does it in any way increase the plausibility Schniedewind's case.