

Alphabet

al' fa-bet:

1. Definition

An alphabet is a list of the elementary sounds used in any language. More strictly speaking it is that particular series, commonly known as the Phoenician or Canaanite alphabet, which was in use in the region of Palestine about 1000 bc, and which is the ancestor of nearly all modern written alphabets whether Semitic or European. It is the alphabet therefore of Old Testament Hebrew and Aramaic and New Testament Greek, of the superscription of Caesar and the Latin inscription on the cross, as well as of English through the Greek and Latin. It is an interesting fact, with many practical bearings on text and exegesis, that three sets of letters so very unlike in appearance as Hebrew, Greek and modern English should be the same in origin and alike in nature. Although the earliest surviving inscriptions must be a good deal later than the separation between the Greek and Hebrew, the records in each are more like one another than either is like its own modern printed form.

The characteristics of an alphabet are (1) The analysis of sounds into single letters rather than syllables or images, (2) The fixed order of succession in the letters, (3) The signs for the sounds, whether names or written symbols.

Of these the analysis into single letters, instead of whole words or syllables, is the characteristic element. The order of the letters may vary, as that of the Sanskrit does from the European, and yet the list remain not only alphabetic but the "same" alphabet, i.e. each sound represented by a similar name or written character. On the face of it, therefore, it might be imagined that the Egyptian and Babylonian, the Cypriote, the Minoan and other forms earlier than the Canaanite which are known or suspected to have had phonetic systems, may have had lists of these forms arranged in a fixed order, but these lists were not alphabetic until the final analysis into individual letters.

2. Name

The name alphabet comes from the first two letters of the Greek, *alpha beta*, just as the old English name for the alphabet, *abc* or *abece*, is simply the first three letters of the English alphabet, and thus is merely an abbreviation for the whole alphabet. It appears that the

Greeks also used the first and last letters of the alphabet (*alpha* and *omega*) as the Jews did the first and last, or the first, middle and last letters of their alphabet, as abbreviation for the whole and in the same sense that in English one says “a to izzard.” *Alpha* and *beta* are themselves derived from the Semitic names for the same letters (*'ālēph*, *bēth*) and have no meaning in the Greek.

3. Invention

The question of the invention of this alphabet differs from the question of the origin of the written forms of the letters with which it is often confused, and relates to the recognition of the individual letters. Alphabetical language whether written or spoken, inward or outward, is distinguished from the pictographic, hieroglyphic, and syllabic stages by this analysis into individual sounds or letters. It begins with the picture, passes to the ideogram and syllable, and from the syllable to the letter. This is best seen in writing, but it is equally true in speech. At the letter stage the alphabet begins. It is alleged by some that another stage, a consonantal writing, between syllabic and alphabetic writing, should be recognized. This would deny to the Phoenician the character of a true alphabet since, as in all Semitic languages, the vowels were in ancient times not written at all. Some go so far as to speak of it as syllabic in character, but on the other hand it may be said with equal pertinence that various syllabaries are nearly alphabetic. When a syllabic writing is reduced, as was the case with the Egyptian, the Cypriote and others, to a point where a character represents uniformly a certain consonant and a certain vowel, the vocal analysis has been made and the essential alphabet begun, although it was only later that men discovered that the consonant common to several syllables might be expressed to advantage in writing by one unvarying sign, and later still that the vowels too might be distinguished to advantage.

4. Origin of the Letters

Few modern questions are changing shape so rapidly as that of the historical predecessor of the Canaanite or Phoenician alphabet. For a long time it was thought that De Rouge had solved the problem by tracing the letters to the Egyptian hieratic. This is the view of most of the popular literature of the present time, but is wholly surrendered

by most workers in the field now, in spite of the fact that the latest studies in hieratic show a still greater resemblance in forms (Möller, *Hierat. Palaographie*, 1909). Winckler and others have claimed derivation from the Cuneiform, Praetorius from the Cypriote, Sayce gets at least three letters from the Hittite, while Evans and others incline to believe that the Minoan was the direct source of the alphabet, introduced from Crete into Palestine by the Philistines who were Cretans, or at least that the two are from a common ancestor, which is also the ancestor of many other of the Mediterranean alphabets.

Some, like Evans and Mosso, even suggest that, perhaps through the Minoan, the letter forms may be traced to the pictographs of the neolithic era in the caves of Europe. There is, in fact, an extraordinary resemblance between some of the letters of the Phoenician alphabet and some of the conventionalized signs of the neolithic age, and it may not be too fantastic to imagine that these early signs are the historic ancestors of the written alphabetical characters, but that they were in any sense alphabetical themselves is impossible if the invention of the alphabet was historical as here supposed, and is unlike from any point of view.

If in fact the Paestos disk dates from before 1600 bc, and if Dr. Hempl's resolution of it into Ionic Greek is sound, we have another possible source or stock of characters from which the inventor of the alphabet may have chosen (*Harper's Magazine*, January, 1911).

5. Number of Letters

The ideal written alphabet contains a separate character for each sound used in any or every language. Practically in most languages the alphabet falls a good deal short of the number of recognized sounds to be expressed in that language and in pronouncing dictionaries they have to be analyzed into say a broad, a short, a open, etc., by adding diacritical marks. "In educated English without regarding finer distinctions" (Edmonds, *Comparative Philology*, 45) about 50 sounds are commonly used, but Murray distinguishes at least 96, and the number sometimes used or which maybe used is much greater, the possible number of vowel sounds alone being as many as 72.

Moreover the individual letters differ in sound in different individuals, and even in the same individual in successive utterances of what would be called the same letter or the same sound. It is

alleged that the average sound of the *a* for example, is never the same in any two languages; the *a* in “father,” even, is never the same in any two individuals, and that the same individual, even, never pronounces it twice so exactly in the same fashion that the difference may not be detected by sound photography.

The written alphabet is always thus less than the number of sounds used. The Phoenician and the Semitic alphabets generally had 22 letters, but they omitted the vowels. English has 26, of which many have two or more sounds.

6. Names of the Letters

The names of the Greek alphabet are derived from the Semitic names and are meaningless in the Greek, while in the Semitic it has been pretty clearly shown that they signify for the most part some object or idea of which the earliest form of the written letter was a picture, as e.g. *’ālēph*, the ox. The forms of the letters are apparently derived from pictures of the ox, house, etc., made linear and finally reduced to a purely conventional sign which was itself reduced to the simplest writing motion. All this has been boldly denied by Mr. Pilcher (*PSBA*, XXVI (1904), 168-73; XXVII (1905), 65-68), and the original forms declared to be geometric; but he does not seem to have made many converts, although he has started up rival claimants to his invention.

The names of the letters at least seem to indicate the Semitic origin of the alphabet, since the majority of them are the Semitic names for the objects which gave name to the letter, and the picture of which gives form to the written letter.

Following is Sayce's list (*PSBA*, XXXII (1910), 215-22) with some variants: (1) *’ālēph* = ox; (2) *bēth* = house (tent); (3) *gīmel* = camel; (4) *dāleth* = door; (5) *hē* = house; (6) *waw* = nail (Evans, tent peg); (7) *zāyin* = weapon; (8) *ḥēth* = fence; (9) *ṭēth* = cake of bread (Lidzbarski, a package); (10) *yōdh* = hand; (11) *kaph* = palm of hand; (12) *lamedh* = ox-goad; (13) *mēm* = water flowing; (14) *nûn* = fish; (15) *ṣamekh* = ?; (16) *’ayin* = eye; (17) *pē* = mouth; (18) *cadhē* = trap (others, hook or nose or steps), (19) *ḵoph* = cage (Evans says picture is an outline head

and Lidzbarski, a helmet); (20) *rêsh* = head; (21) *shîn* = tooth (not teeth); (22) *taw* = mark. Not all of these meanings are, however, generally accepted (compare also Nöldeke, *Beitrage Strassb.* (1904), 124-36; Lidzbarski, *Ephemeris*, II, 125-39).

7. Order of Letters

The order of the letters differs more or less in different languages, but it is in the main the same in all the Semitic and Western alphabets derived from the Phoenician alphabet and this is roughly the order of the English alphabet. This order is, however, full of minor variations even among the Western alphabets and in the Indian languages the letters are entirely regrouped on a different principle.

The conventional order of the Semitic alphabet may be traced with some certainty in the Biblical books to as early as the 6th century bc, even accepting the dates of a radical higher criticism, for there are more than a dozen passages in the Old Testament composed on the principle of the alphabetical acrostic ([Psa 111:1-10](#); [Psa 112:1-10](#); 119; Prov 31:10-31; Lam 1; 2; 3; 4, etc.) and the oldest of these are of this period (see ACROSTIC). The Formello abecedarium, if it is in fact from the 7th century bc, carries the known order back a century farther still and shows it prevailing in Italy as well as Palestine. Moreover, there are those who still consider some of the alphabetical psalms older even than this.

It must be noted, however, that while the order is in general fixed, there are local and temporary differences. In several cases e.g. the order of the sixteenth and seventeenth letters of the alphabet is inverted in the alphabetical acrostics, and this would seem to point to a time or place where *pē*, *ʿayin*, was the accepted order. It happens that the inversion occurs in both the passages which are counted earliest by the modern critics (G. B. Gray in *HDB*², 8). Mr. Sayce too has recently altered or restored the order by relegating the original *šamekh* to a place after *shîn*, while Mr. Pilcher has quite reconstructed the original order on a geometrical basis, to his own taste at least, as *brd*; *hvg*; *mnl*; *szt*.

A certain grouping together of signs according to the relationship of the objects which they represent has often been noticed, and Sayce (*PSBA*, XXXII (1910), 215-22) thinks that he has (after having put

ṣamekh in its right place) reduced the whole matter to a sequence of pairs of things which belong together: ox-house, camel-tent door, house-nail, weapon-fence (city wall), bread-hand, open hand-arm with goad, water-fish, eye-mouth, trap-cage, head-tooth, *ṣamekh*, *taw*. This arranging he thinks was done by someone who knew that *'alûph* was the West Semitic for "leader" and *taw* was the Cretan sign for ending - an Amorite therefore in touch with the Philistines. The final word on order seems not yet to have been spoken.

8. The Earliest Texts

The chief North Semitic texts are (1) Moabite stone (circa 850 bc); (2) inscriptions of Zkr, Zenjirli, etc. (circa 800 bc); (3) Baal-Lebanon inscription (circa 750 bc); (4) Siloam inscription (circa 700 bc); (5) Harvard Samaritan *ostraca* (time of Ahab?); (6) Gezer tablet; (7) various weights and seals before 600 bc. The striking fact about the earliest inscriptions is that however remote geographically, there is on the whole so little difference in the forms of the letters. This is particularly true of the North Semitic inscriptions and tends to the inference that the invention was after all not so long before the surviving inscriptions. While the total amount of the earliest Palestine inscriptions is not even yet very large, the recent discovery of the Samaritan *ostraca*, the Gezer tablet, and various minor inscriptions, is at least pointing to a general use of Semitic writing in Palestine at least as early as the 9th century bc.

9. Changes in Letter Forms

The tendency of letters to change form in consequence of changed environment is not peculiar to alphabetical writing but is characteristic of the transmission of all sorts of writing. The morphology of alphabetical writing has however its own history. The best source for studying this on the Semitic side is Lidzbarski's *Handbuch* (see below), and on the Greek side the best first source is E. S. Roberts, *Introduction to Greek Epigraphy* (Cambr.). The best synoptical statement of the Semitic is found in the admirable tables in the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, V, i, 449-53.

For the later evolution of both Greek and Latin alphabets, E. M. Thompson's *Introduction to Greek and Latin Paleography*, Oxford, 1912, is far the best Introduction. In this he takes account of the great

finds of papyri which have so revolutionized the study of the forms of Greek letters around the beginning of the Christian era, since his first *Handbook* was published. (See articles on the text of Old Testament and New Testament.)

In the Hebrew, the old Phoenician alphabet of the early inscriptions had in the New Testament times given way to the square Aramaic characters of the modern Hebrew which possibly came into use as early as the time of Ezra.

The most comprehensive modern brief conspectus covering both Hebrew and Greek is that reproduced in this article from the little manual of Specht. See also WRITING.

Literature

Isaac Taylor's *Alphabet* (2nd ed., 1899) is still useful for orientation, and his article in the *HDB* likewise, but Edward Clodd's little *Story of the Alphabet* (New York, 1907), taken with Faulmann's *Geschichte der Schrift and Buch der Schrift*, is better for general purposes. For scientific purposes see the bibliography prefixed to Lidzbarski's *Handbuch der nordsemitischen Epigraphik* (1898, 2 vols) and his *Ephemeris* passim to date, Evans' *Scripta minoa*, Oxf., 1909, and the literature of the article WRITING in this Encyclopaedia. See also C. G. Ball, "Origin of the Phoenician Alphabet," *Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Archaeology*, XV, 392-408; E. J. Pilcher, "The Origin of the Alphabet," *PSBA*, XXVI (1904), 168-73; Franz Praetorius, "The Origin of the Canaanite Alphabet," *Smithsonian Rep.* (1907), 595-604; S. A. Cook, "The Old Hebrew Alphabet and the Gezer Tablet," *PEFS* (1909), 284-309. For Bible class work, H. N. Skinner's *Story of the Letters and Figures* (Chicago, 1905) is very admirably adapted to the purpose.