

Part I

A Brief History of (Western) Writing

Why the Hebrew Script Isn't

For those in a hurry

True to this book's title, you don't have to read this chapter if all you want to do is master the skill of writing in Hebrew characters.

If talk of ancient history, Middle Eastern empires, and the like puts you to sleep – skim through it, use it as a standby against insomnia, or skip it and move on to Part II, which deals with the actual Three Steps. All the essential tips you need are spelled out there. But if you have the time and patience, I'd recommend sticking around. The backdrop to this story is a rattling good yarn, if only because so few people seem to know it, and because it hauls out of the closet one or two things that look suspiciously like skeletons. It also explains the theoretical principles behind the Three Steps method, which are interesting in themselves.

Write like an Egyptian

Most people never really ask themselves where Western writing actually comes from. They know that the alphabet we use today was created by the Romans (with the exception of letters such as *J*, *U*, and *W*, which were formalized later), and that their alphabet was in turn based upon that of the ancient Greeks – but beyond that it goes all hazy. Since classical Greece is usually regarded as the fount of all Western civilization, the average North American or European of today assumes that its alphabet sprang fully formed from its rocky soil, like the warrior-founders of

Sparta from the dragon teeth planted by Cadmus. Meanwhile, students of Hebrew as a Foreign Language (HFL) are taught the Hebrew script as if it were something entirely unrelated to the writing you are reading now – which makes it very daunting.

Both attitudes are misguided, for there is a clear historical link between the Hebrew and European alphabets that can greatly help natives of both to bridge the gap between them. This connection was largely forgotten in the Christian era and has been only recently uncovered by archaeologists and paleographers through various finds, starting with the discovery and deciphering of the Rosetta Stone in Egypt some two hundred years ago. In my case, it was only thanks to my grandfather – a sometime student of Semitic languages – that my attention was drawn, as a boy, to the fact that the very word *alphabet* is derived from the old Phoenician/Hebrew names for the first two letters (*aleph, bet*), as indeed are the names of most Greek letters.

He also showed me some of the better-known examples of this evolution, such as how the original ancient Egyptian hieratic (the cursive form of hieroglyphics) for an ox (Fig. 1-a) was adopted around 1500 BCE by the Canaanites (linguistically, the group comprising Phoenicians, Israelites, Moabites, and all other Western Semitic peoples in the areas of modern-day Lebanon, Syria, Israel, and Jordan), who turned it on its side and named it after the Semitic word for ox – *aluph* or *aleph* (Fig. 1-b). Several hundred years later, he explained, the ancient Greeks adopted it, too,

turning it yet another 90° and renaming it *alpha* (Fig. 1-c).



Fig. 1 The hieratic for “ox” (a), the Canaanite *aleph* (b), and the ancient Greek *alpha*

Other Egyptian signs were similarly transformed – thus, the hieratic for “water” (Fig. 2-a) became the Canaanite sign *mem* (Fig. 2-b), meaning the same thing. This later became the Greek and Roman letter *M*, and so on.



Fig. 2 The hieratic for “water” (a) and the Old Hebrew/Phoenician *mem* (b)

This brief glimpse into the evolution of writing left me thunder-struck and entranced. Once pointed out, it seemed so obvious and compelling, I assumed it must be common knowledge. However, years later, I learned that far from being exploited as an aid in teaching Hebrew to nonnative speakers, the very fact that the scripts of ancient Egypt, Canaan, and Europe are related in any way is either unknown or actively suppressed outside the specialist field of Near East archaeology and related academic fields. Even in modern Israel, familiarity with the forms

of ancient Hebrew writing (as opposed to the language itself) is virtually nonexistent outside these circles.

A mutually convenient silence

There is no official explanation that I am aware of for this widespread ignorance of the historical kinship of these scripts, but it is not difficult to surmise.

One reason may be the uneasy, at times downright hostile, relationship between Christians and Jews for most of the past two millennia. Portraying the opposing culture as something entirely alien made it easier for both parties to discourage their followers from excessive interest in the other. Admittedly, Hebrew has always played an important role in the study of early Christianity, but it was the language of the Old Testament (as opposed to the New, which was Greek), and its linguistic and alphabetic differences made it a convenient symbol, for anyone so inclined, of the contrasts between Judaism and Christianity, Asia and Europe, Semitic and European. Thus, any memory of the common ancestry of the Hebrew and European alphabets that might have lingered during Roman times was played down and ignored by Christians until eventually it was forgotten. This denial suited Orthodox Jewry, too, as it helped to maintain its barriers against outside influences. Both parties thus perpetuated and widened a largely imaginary divide.

Even today, and particularly in circles more favorably disposed toward Judaism – especially mysticism, popular Kabbala, etc. – there is little desire to discover that Hebrew and European scripts have a shared

ancestry. After all, the power of the Hebrew alphabet lies precisely in its exotic quality: if it transpires that it is a mere cousin of the mundane letters of daily newspapers and graffiti throughout the Western world, its aura of mystique goes right out the window. So, too, do mythic images of Moses and the Tablets as portrayed in paintings such as Rembrandt's *Moses Smashes the Stone Tablets with the Text*, where the Ten Commandments are spelled out in the square letters of medieval and modern Hebrew.²

A similar reluctance to acknowledge the kinship of Hebrew to European scripts can be seen in the writings of medieval Christian Hebrew scholars, whose preoccupation with the exotic in Hebrew typography of the period (thicker horizontals than verticals, the literal square template) often exceeded the care required to distinguish between similar-looking Hebrew characters. Indeed, their delight in stressing such superficial stylistic features often led to heavily flawed or downright misleading rendition of several characters, betraying a fundamental ignorance of the basic forms of the Hebrew alphabet. There certainly appears to be no awareness that it shares a common ancestry with the Roman or Greek characters of the main text (Fig. 3).

The best kept secret

All of which brings us to the most interesting but least known argument against linking the scripts of the Old Testament and the New, namely that what we commonly have known as the Hebrew script for over two thousand years is not the original Hebrew script at all, but a

more distant cousin.

It is in fact a late variety of Aramaic. Originally the language of the Assyrians to the north and northeast of the Israelite kingdoms, Aramaic is closely related to Hebrew and Phoenician but was initially written in the cuneiform script of Mesopotamia. Around 1000 BCE, however, this was discarded in favor of the script common throughout Canaan.

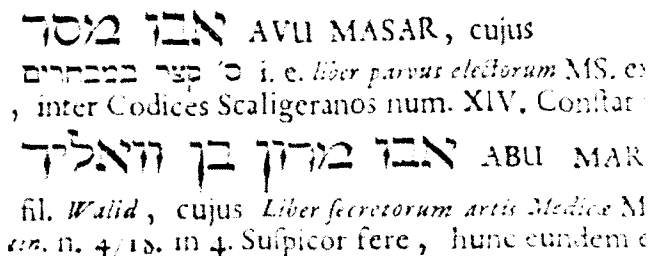


Fig. 3 The traditional European view of the Hebrew alphabet is apparent in this sixteenth-century German volume on Hebrew authors and writings (Reprinted from Wolf 1527, p. A-3).

This proved to be a wise move; the Canaanite script was vastly more effective than cuneiform, and with a few tweaks to make the forms more regular and distinctive from one another, it outlived the Assyrian empire to become the chosen medium of administration of the two empires that succeeded it: Babylon and Persia. Over five hundred years of such intensive use, the Aramaic script, as it became known, diverged noticeably from its Canaanite origins, even though in name and function the characters remained the same.

Hebrew vs. Aramaic

Despite its success at the imperial level, the Aramaic script was never contemplated as a medium for depicting Hebrew until around 520 BCE, when the Persian emperor Cyrus allowed Jews to return to Judea from exile in Babylon.

Although they had spent only seventy-five years in exile – a mere walk in the park compared to the Second Exile that was to come – the returning Judeans were almost unseemly in their rush to dump the ancestral Hebrew script in favor of that of its imperial cousin. They were clearly impressed by life in the Babylonian capital, and as descendants of the exiled Judean aristocracy and intelligentsia, they were keenly aware of their social status in relation to “the poor of the land” who had never left (II Kings 25:12) and apparently regarded most things local – ancestral script included – as socially and culturally inferior.

To the modern reader, however – in both Israel and the West – the original Hebrew script is a revelation. Certain characters (*aleph*, *héh*, *ayin*) were co-opted by the Greeks to represent European vowels, while others (*Tet*, *sammeç*, *tzadi*) were dropped altogether by Roman times. The remainder, however, still bear a striking resemblance to the mirror images of their ancient and even modern Greek and Roman counterparts nearly three thousand years later (Fig. 4). The same cannot be said about the Aramaic script that the Jews brought back with them from Babylon.

There followed a process lasting a good two hundred years or more, during which the Old Hebrew script (known as *ctav ivri*) fought valiantly to stand its ground against the new pretender, known as *ctav ashuri* (liter-

ally, Assyrian script). Gradually, under a policy of deliberate neglect by the ruling and rabbinical authorities, the Old Hebrew alphabet died out. The final nail in the coffin came when, in the late third century BCE, it was passed over in favor of the Aramaic script by the Sanhedrin (rabbinical assembly) as its script of choice for the biblical canon then being compiled and transcribed. To downplay the historic significance of what they were doing, its name was changed, too, from *ctav ashuri* to the more neutral *ctav meruba* (Square script), by which name it is still known today.

The decision to replace the Old Hebrew script with the Aramaic one was extraordinary. For the administration of the new Persian province of *Yehud* (Judea), the use of Aramaic language and script in matters of state was to be expected. But that the same script was used to provide the official written record of the biblical canon and of the debates of the Talmudic assemblies in place of the one used by Moses, David, and Solomon is astonishing. Not for nothing is it one of the best kept secrets in history.

Today such a move would be unthinkable. In the 1960s, for example, a public outcry in Israel forced the venerable Academy of the Hebrew Language – the nation’s premier arbiter on all matters relating to Hebrew – to back down from a tentative proposal merely to introduce two new signs – representing the vowels *a* and *e* – into the alphabet to enhance the readability of foreign words and names without the use of dots and dashes normally used for this purpose (more of which later).























<i>vav</i>	<i>héh</i>	<i>dalet</i>	<i>gimmel</i>	<i>bet</i>	<i>aleph</i>
					
Φ F/V	E E	Δ D	Γ G	B B	A A
<i>lamed</i>	<i>caf (kaf)</i>	<i>yod</i>	<i>Tet</i>	<i>Het</i>	<i>zayin</i>
					
Λ L	K K	I I	ϑ -	H H	Z Z
<i>tzadi</i>	<i>péh</i>	<i>ayin</i>	<i>sammeç</i>	<i>nun</i>	<i>mem</i>
					
- -	Π P	O O	Ε -	N N	M M
		<i>tav</i>	<i>shin</i>	<i>resh</i>	<i>quf</i>
					
		T T	Σ S	P R	Θ Q

Fig. 4 The Old Hebrew alphabet of the mid-ninth century BCE – the same in all but name as the Phoenician alphabet adopted by the Greeks a century earlier (after Yardeni, *Sefer Hactav Ha'ivri [The Book of the Hebrew Script]*, p.16). Read right to left, as per the direction of writing.

However, we should remember the historical context of the Sanhedrin's decision: as the official imperial language and the lingua franca of most of the Middle East for nearly five hundred years, Aramaic was the Latin of its time in this part of the world – with all the prestige and

importance that this implies. Furthermore, it could be argued that opting for the Aramaic script did not amount to a complete renunciation of the Old Hebrew: although the forms of its letters had changed considerably from their ancestral Canaanite origins, in name and function they were still the same characters. In addition, since no great body of work had been committed to or at least had survived in the old script, there was nothing much to lose in terms of a written cultural heritage. Finally, since Old Hebrew was essentially the same script used by the Phoenicians and all other Canaanites, it could be argued that there was nothing uniquely Judean about it anyway.

To all this I would add yet another argument, for which there is no explicit evidence in the sources but is compelling nonetheless: the Aramaic script was *graphically* simply more practical and better suited to the task of large-scale documentation. With its clear discipline of forms designed around a square template, it was certainly developed with this in mind by generations of Mesopotamian scribes. By contrast, the Old Hebrew alphabet, which had been typically limited to comparatively short texts on stone or clay, had little “rhythm” or consistency, and suffered from poor or ill-defined distinctions between certain letters.

Nevertheless, the topic was clearly a sensitive one, and discussions on the subject kept to a minimum. Early Talmudic debates steered a wide berth around it altogether. The unease was clearly never far from the surface, however, and in the late Talmud, in an outburst suggestive of a conscience racked by guilt, Rabbi Yehudah Hanassi (the compiler of the first half of the Talmud and one of its preeminent historical figures) ventured

to excuse the abandonment of the old script on the grounds that the Commandments had in fact been given to Moses in the Aramaic script. Given that Moses preceded the birth of the Aramaic script by at least four hundred years, this well-meaning but blatant attempt at rewriting history must have made his colleagues blanch with embarrassment, for his opinion was politely set aside.³ However, it forced the topic out into the open, and to settle the matter it was decided to adopt the suggestion of an earlier scholar (Rabbi Hisda), namely, that the Old Hebrew script is in fact *ctav libonaah*. The meaning of *libonaah* is a mystery: it isn't Hebrew – its spelling doesn't even comply with Hebrew grammar – but it sounds vaguely pejorative (the Hebrew word *honaah*, for example, means “deception”), and it's possible they deliberately used a Babylonian code word that future generations wouldn't understand. At any rate, the way it was interpreted in the final resolution was that it belonged to the common, i.e., non-Jewish, inhabitants of the land:

Originally the Torah was given to Israel in the Hebrew script and in the sacred language [Hebrew]; in the time of Ezra the Torah was given in the Assyrian [Aramaic] script and the Aramaic language. They selected for Israel the Assyrian script and the Hebrew language, leaving the Hebrew script and the Aramaic language for the ordinary people.⁴

The irony is that not long after this fateful decision, the Judean leadership was found to have backed the wrong horse. Within a few decades of its selection as the official script of the Hebrew Bible, of the Talmud, and virtually of all subsequent Jewish and Hebrew literature – Aramaic vanished everywhere but in Judea as the preferred language and script of

written record. The entire region was conquered by Alexander the Great, and Greek took over as the new language and script of imperial administration for the entire Near East until well into Roman times.

Might the Judeans have changed horses at this point and switched to the Greek script instead? Hardly. Although the Greek alphabet, too, was a descendant of the old Canaanite alphabet and suitable for long texts, Greek culture was entirely alien to Judea and its history. The script had also changed too much since its inception: the function of key characters had changed, others had been dropped altogether, still others had been added, and of course their names had been Hellenized and their forms mirrored as part of the switch of direction to left-to-right. As a result, of all the peoples of the region, only the Judeans and Nabateans (whose version would eventually evolve to become the classical Arabic script) continued to use the Aramaic script.

And so it came to pass that the original Hebrew script was “kicked upstairs” to largely ceremonial roles, such as depicting the name of God in biblical scrolls, coin inscriptions invoking the heroic Israelite kingdoms of old, and so on. In a revival of this practice, some of the coins of modern Israel also boast a word or two in the old script on the back (Fig. 5-a). But today, even educated Israelis cannot read it, nor, oddly enough, are they at all curious as to what it says. The letters on the modern sheqel coin, for example, spell “YHD,” i.e., *Yehud* (the old Persian imperial name for Judea), yet most Israelis have no idea what it says; if pressed, they assume it says *sheqel*.

None of this is taught, or even hinted at, in modern Israeli educa-

tion. Like my friends and everyone else I know, I too assumed, until researching for this book, that the Old Hebrew alphabet was simply an earlier incarnation of the familiar forms of Square Hebrew. Only occasionally did I puzzle at the absence of any intermediate stages to explain the dramatic differences in some cases, or indeed why older texts were sometimes more recognizable than texts from later periods.



Fig. 5 Some modern Israeli coins (a) have revived the practice of Judean administrations of as late as the second century CE (b) of using Old Hebrew for symbolic occasions such as coin inscriptions (Courtesy of J. Naveh).

It is a measure both of the historic sensitivity of the subject and of the recent greater security in the nation's cultural identity that in the past few years the Old Hebrew script has been tentatively introduced into the Israeli school curriculum, albeit still in a very limited and somewhat gimmicky fashion ("At the camp, the children will learn to write their names in ancient Hebrew and come away with a little scroll," to quote a school-teacher in a radio interview in 1995). Even then, however, nary a whisper is made of its unceremonious dumping in favor of a younger and once-glamorous sister script.

One outcome of all this is that – to the bemusement, no doubt, of those seeking divinity in the Square Hebrew characters – the Greek and Roman alphabets bear a far greater resemblance to the inscriptions of

Moses' tablets or of the scribes of King David than does modern Hebrew (Fig. 4). This acute irony has not been lost on some; indeed, in modern times it has been one of the reasons cited by advocates of Romanization of modern Hebrew – the movement for adopting the Roman alphabet outright.⁵

A return to the Old Hebrew alphabet could therefore make life easier for Westerners in learning to read and write the language – but there is little likelihood of this happening. After two and a half millennia, the Square Hebrew alphabet has formed an inseparable weave with the language, and in any event “outranks” its predecessor by around eighteen centuries. In addition, unlike the situation in the sixth century BCE, far too much religious and cultural Hebrew heritage has been invested in the incumbent script for it to be abandoned now in favor of any other – even its predecessor.

However, the good news is no such drastic measure is necessary, as it just so happens that modern Hebrew already has a legitimate and fully accepted form of writing that both looks different from the Square variety and bears a passing if not spooky resemblance to its European counterparts.

It's called the Modern Hebrew Cursive.

◊