



The Glory of the Alphabet

Most people take the alphabet for granted. It has been a part of our culture and civilization for so long that most of us haven't the faintest idea of how or where it originated. Yet the idea of using abstract symbols — which we call letters — to stand for the speech sounds of a language is one of the greatest intellectual inventions in all of human history.



Prior to the widespread use of the alphabet, the earliest known form of writing was pictography. Ancient scribes drew pictures on the walls of their caves, and in that primitive way they were able to communicate some simple stories. The pictures looked like the things they represented. An animal looked like an animal. A human being looked like a human being. A tree looked like a tree. You didn't have to go to school to be able to "read" these pictographs.

But as civilization became more complex, the scribes had to create graphic symbols that did not look like the ideas they were representing. For example, how could you draw pictures of such ideas as "system," or "determine," or "intuition"? You couldn't. So you drew a symbol and said that this symbol stands for "intuition." It didn't look like "intuition," but it was "intuition." The scribes created thousands of such symbols, and now you did have to go to school to be able to "read" these symbols. Somebody had to tell you what each of these symbols meant.

The Chinese people today still use such a writing system. A child in a Chinese school must memorize several thousand of these symbols in order to be able to read a Chinese newspaper. Each one of these symbols stands for a Chinese word. As a result, the development of the Chinese language has been somewhat handicapped by their writing system. We know that the Chinese people are highly intelligent, yet they lagged far behind the West until recently when thousands of them have attended Western universities and learned English.

Which brings us to the origin of the alphabet. According to Stanislas Dehaene, author of *The Reading Brain*:

The first traces of an alphabetic system, called Proto-Sinaitic, date from 1700 B.C. and were uncovered in the Sinai peninsula, close to the turquoise mines first worked by the Pharaohs of the Middle and New Kingdom. The writing system borrowed the shapes of several Egyptian characters, but used them to represent a Semitic language. Signs no longer referred to meaning, but to speech sounds alone, and in fact solely to consonants. In this way, the inventory of written symbols [was] dramatically reduced: two dozen signs were enough to represent all the existing



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speech sounds with perfect regularity.

If you believe, as I do, in the divine origin of the alphabet, all of this makes sense. For the Israelites were given a new form of written language based on symbols standing for sounds. The Egyptians had used some of their symbols to stand for speech sounds in the context of a largely ideographic system. But the Israelites used a writing system composed of only symbols standing for sounds. This great invention permitted human beings to do much more with much less.

But what is most curious about alphabetic writing is that it was first used in the Sinai where Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses, as we know, was raised by an Egyptian princess and undoubtedly learned to read Egyptian hieroglyphics. But what is remarkable is that when he went up Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, they were written in alphabetic writing. Is it possible that Moses invented the alphabet and applied it to the language spoken by the Hebrews? If not, who taught Moses the alphabet?

There is no doubt that the alphabet was a gift of God whether it came to us directly from Him or through a human being. In any case, the alphabet made the Hebrews the People of the Book. It permitted the Hebrew scribes to write the Holy Scripture so that anyone who mastered the alphabet could read the Word of God.

The impact of the alphabet on ancient culture was revolutionary. It did for the ancient world what the computer has done for the modern world. One could now do so much more with so much less. Literacy was now so easy to achieve. All you had to do was learn the letter sounds and with some drill and practice become a fluent reader.

The alphabet spread to Greece and Rome, and as a result we have a huge legacy of ancient classics that are still read today. The alphabet permitted the rapid expansion of vocabulary. New words representing new ideas and inventions were easy to create. Even today young people invent new words such as “geek” and “nerd.” Computer technology has required the creation of thousands of new words that enable us to describe all the facets of computer use.

Different nations created their own alphabets: the Russians the Cyrillic alphabet, the Armenians the Armenian alphabet, etc. But the one alphabet that is on its way to achieving universal use is the English alphabet. And that is not because our alphabet is simple. Indeed, the problem with the English alphabet is that it uses 26 letters to stand for 44 sounds. How did it get that way? When the Romans conquered Britain they imposed the Latin alphabet on the language being spoken there. The result is that some English letters stand for more than one sound, and some sounds are spelled in a number of different ways.

Nevertheless, learning to read by the English alphabetic system is based mainly on the method used by the ancient Romans. First you must learn to recognize the letters, then you must learn the sounds the letters stand for. In the old days, children were drilled in the consonant-vowel combinations — ba, be, bi, bo, bu — in learning the long vowels, and in vowel-consonant combinations — ab, eb, ib, ob, ub — in learning the short vowels. That drill permitted the child to develop the needed phonetic reflex.

If we want to restore high literacy in the United States, what the schools have to do is return to the teaching method that worked so well in the past.

One of the miracles of the 20th century is the revival of ancient Hebrew as a modern language spoken by everyday people in modern Israel. Its ancient alphabet permits Israelis to easily invent many new words that can be spoken with a modern Israeli accent. Indeed, the language of the Bible is as vibrant



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among its speakers today as it was in the days of the prophets. Language carries the culture of a people through the ages to its present. That's why knowing the history of the alphabet may lead us to unraveling the many mysteries related to Holy Scripture.



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