

Babel and the Alphabet

CHARLES V. TAYLOR

ABSTRACT

Many secular archaeologists completely ignore Biblical history and dating, and many are unskilled in linguistic principles, despite tendencies to make sweeping linguistic statements and associations between names of places and persons in history. It is suggested that a more careful appreciation of linguistic facts would help true Bible students to avoid the pitfalls of hasty associations made by those historians and archaeologists who have overlooked Biblical data and have regarded the Bible as a weak source for historical truth. In particular, the development of information through language since Babel is examined in the light of the later development of the alphabet.

THE VALUE OF THE ALPHABET

Many people whose lives do not involve contact with languages in history are unaware that languages are not static. Sound changes go on all the time. Thus if a Shakespearean were to rise from the dead and recite lines from a Shakespeare play, most people today would be unable to understand, because the pronunciation as well as the meanings have changed. Thus 'trouble' was pronounced something like 'troo-blay', which to a modern ear, in running speech, would give more difficulty in recognition than if an Australian were listening to a highland Scot. Yet Shakespeare wrote less than 400 years ago. As to Chaucer, his original language is completely unintelligible to a modern ear without training in recognising sound-changes and would sound to us like Dutch or German.

The alphabet was a remarkable invention (or, maybe, revelation from God?), because it provided a phonetic bridge which, though imperfect due to continuing language change, at least enabled us to have some idea of the sound changes over time. But even with the alphabet, we still don't know for sure how the Romans pronounced Latin. Most linguists think the name 'Caesar' was pronounced something like, shall we say, 'Kigh-sarrh', where 'kigh' rhymes with 'high' and 'sarrh' is meant to convey to non-linguists that the final 'r' is pronounced as Scots enunciate it today. But in modern English the word is pronounced 'See-zah', with no real final 'r' sound audible, having been dropped in the 'Queen's English' and in Australia and New Zealand.

However, the alphabet does at least ensure that we can make an attempt at tracing old names. Before 1450 BC, all

known scripts were logographic. Egyptian hieroglyphic and hieratic scripts were not phonetic. True, there were so-called phonetic elements in some characters, but even their sounds could not be known until alphabetic Greek shed light on proper names only. All this 'phonetic' element means, is that here and there, groups of a few signs, say seven or so at most, **shared** the same sound, but what that sound was cannot be guessed by just knowing the meaning, of course. All the Greek alphabet could do was to shed light on proper names, and this only because the Greeks heard those names pronounced and tried to imitate the sounds in their own language, sometimes rather unsuccessfully, it seems. Ordinary words couldn't be pronounced in ancient Egyptian until enough proper names could be collected which had corresponding common words, and this doesn't always work.

For these reasons, the **sounds** of all languages which existed prior to 1450 BC cannot be traced at all, even though the meanings can. All we can say is that Egyptian hieroglyphics written in 1450 BC or later may have such and such a pronunciation. Their pronunciation in, say, 1850 BC cannot be guaranteed at all. The reason why most Egyptian hieroglyphics can be assigned sounds today is because the vast majority post-date 1450 BC. AS with evolution itself, it's once more a matter of dating.

BABEL TO MOSES

At Babel, God divided the world into nations, and each began to speak in a different tongue. Yet this judgment was tempered when the alphabet was either 'discovered' or revealed some 750 years later.

The Babel event was a speech event, so why consider

	Modern Hebrew	South Arabic	Se'irite-Sinaitic	Canaanite-Phoenician	Ras Shamra Cuneiform
'	1 א	𐤀	𐤀 𐤁	𐤀 𐤁	𐤀 𐤁
b	2 ב	𐤁	𐤁 𐤂 𐤃	𐤂 𐤃	𐤂 𐤃
g	3 ג	𐤂	𐤂 𐤃	𐤃 𐤄	𐤃 𐤄
d	4 ד	𐤃	𐤃 𐤄 𐤅	𐤄 𐤅	𐤄 𐤅
h	5 ה	𐤄 𐤅	𐤄 𐤅	𐤅 𐤆	𐤅 𐤆
w	6 ו	𐤅	𐤅	𐤆 𐤇	𐤆 𐤇
z	7 ז	𐤆	= (?)	𐤇 𐤈	𐤇 𐤈
h(kh)	8 ח	𐤆 𐤇 𐤈	𐤆 𐤇 𐤈	𐤈 𐤉	𐤈 𐤉
v	9 ט	𐤇	𐤇 𐤈	𐤉 𐤊	𐤉 𐤊
k	10 כ	𐤈	𐤈	𐤊 𐤋	𐤊 𐤋
l	11 ל	𐤈	𐤈 𐤉	𐤋 𐤌	𐤋 𐤌
m	12 מ	𐤉	𐤉	𐤌 𐤍	𐤌 𐤍
n	13 נ	𐤉	𐤉	𐤍 𐤎	𐤍 𐤎
s	14 ס	𐤊	𐤊 𐤋	𐤎 𐤏	𐤎 𐤏
'	15 ע	𐤋	𐤋 𐤌	𐤏 𐤐	𐤏 𐤐
p	16 פ	𐤋	𐤋 𐤌	𐤐 𐤑	𐤐 𐤑
s (ts)	17 צ	𐤌 𐤍	𐤌 𐤍	𐤑 𐤒	𐤑 𐤒
q	18 ק	𐤍	𐤍 𐤎	𐤒 𐤓	𐤒 𐤓
r	19 ר	𐤍 𐤎	𐤍 𐤎	𐤓 𐤔	𐤓 𐤔
sh	20 ש	𐤎 𐤏	𐤎 𐤏	𐤔 𐤕	𐤔 𐤕
t	21 ת	𐤏	𐤏	𐤕 𐤖	𐤕 𐤖

Figure 1. The relation of the Early Sinaitic (Se'irite-Sinaitic) script to the South Semitic (South Arabic), North Semitic (Canaanite-Phoenician) and Ugarit (Ras Shamra) alphabets, according to Prof. Martin Sprengling, 1931.⁹ The third and fifth columns represent the Sinai and Ugarit scripts respectively, the two scripts claiming originality.

writing in association with it? The point is that our only means of understanding what went on at Babel are written documents.

First, of course, is the Bible. It has long been held that the original of the Old Testament was mainly in Hebrew. Hebrew was an alphabetic script. No scholar anywhere that I can discover has ever suggested that Hebrew was at any time non-alphabetic, though it is possible to regard it as quasi-syllabic, since vowels were not represented. This means that the number of symbols is the same as the number of consonants in a word, thus also the same number as the number of simple syllables, because consonant clusters such as are found in the English word 'strength' are not

found in Hebrew. (Many languages, such as Japanese, are similar in this respect.) But in terms of its representation of speech, Hebrew is regarded as alphabetic.

Scholars seem to agree that the alphabet arose in the Middle East, or in the older term, 'the Levant', There are two centres from which it is claimed to have originated: Ugarit (Ras Shamra) and Sinai. Dates vary, ranging from the 18th to about the 12th century BC. One classic book, **The Alphabet**, by Diringier,¹ supports the Ugarit theory of origin, and this view is followed in Gordon's **Forgotten Scripts**.²

I find that both Diringier and Gordon place strong emphasis on extra-Biblical sources, and unreliable dating systems based on traditional Egyptian chronology.³ For example, Diringier, though aware of equivocal dating, gives the 12th dynasty of Egypt as the time of the Sinai alphabetic script's appearance, but then settles for the 18th century, though mentioning other later possibilities, including Albright's support for the 15th century.⁴ He assigns the earlier Ugarit scripts to the 16th century.⁵

Diringier associates Ugarit with Canaanite culture; Dunand thought it was produced for the Phoenician language.⁶ These cultural and linguistic problems are subject to doubtful datings in Middle East archaeology. What we learn from the Bible and the history of its manuscripts is that Hebrew has always been alphabetic, and that Moses would have written the Pentateuch in areas near Sinai and not near Ugarit. Hence, if the alphabet dates back to the time of Moses, it may well have originated in Sinai after all. It was Sinai that gave Flinders Petrie the earliest alphabetic scripts to be discovered in 1903-1904.

Livingston in 1974 indicated that the Sinai theory had since Diringier's time gained some ground. He criticises earlier scholars and says:

*'Scholars who have rejected the biblical witness that God revealed to Moses much of that which is contained in the Pentateuch have tended to stress Hebrew dependence on, and borrowing from, her neighbours. Scholars who have accepted the concept of divine revelation have been more cautious concerning the extent of cultural dependence, yet they have recognized that the Hebrews were not isolated and were influenced by the thought world that surrounded them.'*⁷

I think he could have been bolder still and suggested that, in view of unreliable Egyptian-based datings,³ the Pentateuch must have been written in alphabetic script at an early date. In Exodus 34:28 we read that Moses 'wrote words on tablets', and though the use of 'words' does not necessarily imply an alphabet, the distinction of words is clearer in alphabetic writing than in other scripts.

One other fact seems to give a preference for accepting the Sinai script as older than Ugarit, namely that Sinai has 22 letters, whereas Ugarit has 32 (see Figure 1). But although Diringier notes that *'the Hebrew order of the letters seems to be the oldest'*,⁹ he explains the difference in number by suggesting that the surplus symbols are

LATIN	ENGLISH
A	A
B	B
C	C
D	D
E	E
F	F
G	G
H	H
I	I, J
K	K
L	L
M	M
N	N
O	O
P	P
Q	Q
R	R
S	S
T	T
V	U, V, W
X	X
	Y
	Z

Here we see that English added J, U and W in the sequence, and Y and Z on the end, to accommodate additional sounds found in English, in earlier days there was a letter 'thorn' to represent the sound of 'th'. This was not retained, but two Latin letters, T and H, were put together to represent the sound. Also, the sound of 'sh' had to be represented by two Latin letters.

Table 1A. The relationship between alphabets of different lengths — Latin and English.

*'considered as a proof that the Ugarit alphabet was invented before the N. Sem. [sic] alphabet was stabilized'*¹⁰

In my opinion that is poor linguistic reasoning. Surely, if one alphabet has more symbols than another, and if most scholars regard that alphabet as designed for a language other than Semitic (Glueck¹¹), and if most of the additional symbols (7 out of 10) are added on the end, the presumption is that the longer alphabet is the borrowing one. See Table 1 for two examples from more recent times.

What is the connection of all this with Babel? The point is that the oldest alphabet seems to have appeared some 700 years after the Babel event, by Biblical dating, with Babel round about 2200 BC and the Sinai scripts about 1500 BC. Thus scripts available between Babel and the introduction of the alphabet were all non-alphabetic, or, technically speaking, logographic. A logographic script, like Chinese or ancient Egyptian or Chaldean, cannot convey down the ages any changes in pronunciation, and all languages change almost unrecognisably in 700 years. We would not naturally understand Chaucer, especially if spoken. This means that the sounds of languages from Babel to Moses are lost to us with the sole exception of the miraculously provided Biblical record. Thus they cannot be traced in secular sources before 1500 BC.

The fact that the Bible was written in alphabetic script,

and that we believe the Bible to be absolutely reliable, means that God preserved in Genesis the only record of the sounds of the names of nations and individuals in the Table of Nations, a record of the situation between Babel and 1500 BC. But this means that extra-Biblical records do not convey how the names fared during the intervening years, hence any correspondences which appear superficially to link names today with those of the past may be equivocal, as there was no alphabetic link.

We note here

- (a) how important the alphabet is to linguists, and
- (b) how remarkable that God provided an alphabet to help us to see relationships and confirm that the Bible is true.

But we must only use material of an alphabetic kind when seeking to match sounds.

HEBREW	GREEK
<i>Aleph</i>	<i>Alpha</i>
<i>Beth</i>	<i>Beta</i>
<i>Gimel</i>	<i>Gamma</i>
<i>Daleth</i>	<i>Delta</i>
<i>He</i>	<i>(Epsilon)</i>
<i>Vau</i>	—
<i>Zayin</i>	<i>Zeta</i>
—	<i>Eta</i>
<i>Cheth</i>	<i>(Chi placed later)</i>
<i>Teth</i>	<i>Theta</i>
<i>Yod</i>	<i>Iota</i>
<i>Kaph</i>	<i>Kappa</i>
<i>Lamed</i>	<i>Lambda</i>
<i>Mem</i>	<i>Mu</i>
<i>Nun</i>	<i>Nu</i>
—	<i>Xi</i>
—	<i>Omicron</i>
<i>Samech</i>	—
<i>Ayin</i>	—
<i>Pe</i>	<i>Pi</i>
<i>Tsadhe</i>	—
<i>Rosh</i>	<i>Rho</i>
<i>Shin/Sin</i>	<i>Sigma</i>
<i>Tau</i>	<i>Tau</i>
	<i>Phi</i>
	<i>Chi</i>
	<i>Psi</i>
	<i>Omega</i>

In this example, the Greeks omitted three letters for which they had no equivalent, but added vowels *Eta*, *Omicron* and *Omega*, replacing *He* with a vowel *Epsilon* (Hebrew had no vowel sounds), and making one change in the position of *Chi*, which has the same sound in Greek as did the Hebrew *Cheth*, and is therefore its phonetic equivalent. The consonant *Xi* is added after *Nu*, possibly because it sounds somewhat similar to *Samech*. But the significant fact is that quite new consonants *Phi* and *Psi* are added on the end, which really gives the game away as to which alphabet is older. In just such a manner, it can be postulated that the Ugarit alphabet, with seven new sounds, put them on the end of the older Sinai alphabet, the order of which it kept, as indeed almost all alphabets in the world follow the consonant order of the Hebrew alphabet today.

Table 1B. The relationship between alphabets of different lengths — Hebrew and Greek.

This in turn means that any extra-Biblical writing containing names of nations or places of their settlement must be tested against the Table of Nations which, like the creation account, is the oldest record of these names, having been preserved since 1500 BC through an alphabetic script, in respect of consonantal elements, then later through the oral traditions of the Masoretes, who gave at least a broad idea of the vocalic sounds.

Hieroglyphic,¹² logographic, pictographic or ideographic scripts cannot convey sounds and are thus unable through older records to trace phonological connections. All non-alphabetic scripts are based on meaning rather than sound. Names of nations, though they may have had meanings, cannot be linked to names centuries later by those meanings, but only by the sounds, since the whole point of Babel was to confuse the sounds! The centuries between Babel and the invention of the alphabet can only be covered by oral tradition outside Scripture, and oral tradition does not convey sounds in a permanent form, there being no known method of recording voices until last century.

I therefore suggest that in studying the Table of Nations, researchers need to be aware of restrictions on the handing down of names at a time when there was no means of conveying the sounds of the languages involved.

Diringer introduces his book to include a comment that '*An ancient Jewish tradition considered Moses as the inventor of the script*'.¹³ But I am not game at this stage to give Moses the credit of having invented the alphabet, though I see nothing against the idea. The most that can be said is that, if it arose in the Sinai region in the 15th century BC, then Moses was in a good position to take advantage of the invention. He was also '*learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians*'.¹⁴ What we can also believe as possible is that he wrote Genesis, not by direct dictation from God, but by consulting documents handed down from the patriarchs, and that includes the record of the Babel event. He would have to be able to read Mesopotamian languages using non-alphabetic scripts; but his adopted language, Egyptian, was also non-alphabetic, so that would have caused no difficulty.

CONCLUSIONS

The Bible is supernatural, and also reliable. Therefore I understand that Moses was given the sounds of the Table of Nations proper names at the time he was writing, and because he wrote with an alphabet, we can attempt to pronounce them. But as to their actual sounds we have to trust Moses or God, as it were. Did God miraculously preserve the sounds over some 700 years and enable Moses to alphabetise them correctly? Or did God cause people from Noah onwards to preserve them orally? (Note that, when all the world spoke the same language, writing could

be logographic, because everybody knew the sounds.) Or did Moses have some way that God used, of reviving the sounds? At any rate, the problem isn't simple for us, because languages are not static.

I personally believe God caused these names to be accurately recorded, just because I believe God's Word is in every way true and accurate. To speak more 'linguistically', the actual sounds were not recoverable naturally and not recoverable at all through logographic scripts, which are the only ones available outside the Bible.

REFERENCES AND FOOTNOTES

1. Diringer, D., 1949. **The Alphabet**, Hutchinson's Scientific.
2. Gordon, C. H., 1971. **Forgotten Scripts**, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, England.
3. Egyptian chronology since the time of Wallace Budge has continually shrunk from a beginning at about 5000 BC to one at about 2800 BC, and authorities still disagree considerably.
4. Albright, W. F., 1948. **Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research**, pp. 13-15. *Cited in:* Diringer, Ref. 1, p. 222.
5. Diringer, Ref. 1, p. 214.
6. Dunand, M., 1945. *Byblia grammata. Report of Lebanese Ministry of Education*, Vol. II, Beirut. *Cited in:* Diringer, Ref. 1, pp. 158, 205, 220.
7. Livingston, G. H., 1974. **The Pentateuch in its Cultural Environment**, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, p. 182. See also his reference on p. 71 to Diringer.
8. Sprengling, M., 1931. **The Alphabet**, Chicago, illustration used in Diringer, Ref. 1, p. 202.
9. Diringer, Ref. 1, p. 220.
10. Diringer, Ref. 1, p. 204.
11. Glueck, J. J., 1967. Some linguistic problems of the Near East in the Second Millennium BC. *In: Taalfasette: Taalkongresshandlinge III*, Pretoria, pp. 53-56.
12. Logographic scripts, including Egyptian hieroglyphic, may include some phonetic radicles, but without a complete alphabet to refer to it is impossible to guarantee the nature of actual sounds. It wasn't till a Greek (that is, alphabetic) translation was found by Champollion in the Rosetta Stone that hieroglyphics could be deciphered. Even then, the sounds of ordinary words could not be ascertained until enough proper names were discovered.
13. Diringer, Ref. 1, p. 17.
14. Acts 7:22.

Charles V. Taylor has B.A.s in languages, music and theology, an M.A. in applied linguistics and a Ph.D. in a central African language. He is a Fellow of the Institute of Linguists, and for eight years served as Co-ordinator of applied linguistics courses in The University of Sydney. The author of nine Christian books, Dr Taylor now lives in semi-retirement in Gosford, New South Wales, having served on the staff of Garden City School of Ministries and on the Board of Creation Science Foundation Ltd (now Answers in Genesis).