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A-dventure-Z'

The Story of the Alphabet



Introduction

Before loudspeakers were invented, people could not converse with each other from a distance greater than that carried by the human voice. The search for an efficient method of communication was one of the factors in the invention of the script. We still are amazed at this wonderful invention, which has been one of the basic factors in the development of human culture, and its faithful servant for thousands of years.

Various writing systems evolved through the ages in different places, and there are languages which until a short while ago used thousands of script-signs for their writing. The alphabetic system, which contains a relative small number of signs, is one of the most efficient writing systems and was gradually adopted for the writing of many languages. It serves most of the nations in the world, except for the large group in the Far East and certain small groups in remote places.

Although it constitutes a single system, the alphabet has had many different manifestations, perhaps due to the use of different writing materials and implements in various times and places. The linear alphabetic scripts evolved from a pictographic script of approximately 30 signs. In the course of time, the forms of the signs changed and many different forms emerged, but the connections between these forms became unrecognizable.

The tracing of the consecutive phases in this formal evolution, from the common ancient signs to their forms in the different scripts, is possible

thanks to the large number of ancient inscriptions and manuscripts discovered in the last two centuries, when archaeology became a recognized science. Palaeography and epigraphy became the basis for the decipherment and interpretation of ancient writings. A number of scholars in various countries devoted their time and energy to the study of the ancient languages and scripts in order to reveal the secrets of these ancient writings to the modern world.

The study of the letter-forms can be a real entertainment when we understand the logic of their formal development, i.e., the natural connection between a certain form and the immediately preceding and succeeding forms. Deciphering inscriptions in ancient scripts can be a thrilling experience resembling the cracking of a secret code. The examination of the formal changes which occurred in the alphabetic signs is an experience which may also be compared to listening to a musical work and enjoying the elaborations and variations on a theme.

The resemblance between the Hebrew and Arabic languages is observable in their lexicography and grammar, but it is quite difficult to recognize a similarity in the forms of the letters in the Arabic, Hebrew and Latin scripts. However, if we examine the changes which occurred in the letter-forms of the alphabet, it will be easier for us to discover the links between them.

Hebrew and Arabic, belonging to the 'Semitic' family of languages, differ in lexicography and grammar from the languages of other families, including the 'Indo-European' family. Nevertheless, the alphabetic letter-signs are used in the writing of the languages of these two families, although the resemblance between the letter-signs of the different alphabetic scripts can hardly be discerned.

In this book, we will reveal the secrets of the common origin of the alphabetic letter-forms and trace their evolution in various scripts.

In the beginning,
people were ignorant of writing.

Instead of writing they drew on rocks or stones. But they drew only what they saw and could not draw their thoughts.

For example, they could draw  a foot,  a hand,  an eye,  a head,  a house,  a snake and all that is concrete.

But they could not draw the words 'I love you', or 'The weather is fine', or people's names like Jonathan or Hagith.

This was the situation until the alphabet was born.

The alphabet was not invented in a single day; the time and the place of its invention are unknown. However, on the basis of ancient inscriptions that have been discovered, scholars have reconstructed the phases in the evolution of the letters.

The following tale is meant to illustrate the miracle of the invention of the alphabet.

Tale

Once upon a time, there was a great and noble king in the land of Canaan. The king loved to sing. Every morning, after rising from his large, golden bed, he would take his golden harp and sing of the trees and the sun, the flowing stream and the eyes of the beautiful maiden he loved. The songs were so beautiful that they captured everyone's heart and the rhymes and verses made magical sounds. Each day the king composed new verses and the birds accompanied his singing with their chirpings. The people were enchanted by the beauty of the songs and praised their talented king.

Then a thought crossed the king's mind: "What a pity that my songs are forgotten. If only I could preserve the songs so that I could sing them over and over again, and other people could sing my songs as well." The king became very unhappy and his songs were sadder and sadder.

The people in the court wondered what had happened to their beloved king and wanted to console him. So they sent to the king the wisest and oldest counsellor to discover the reason for the king's unhappiness.

And this is what the king told the counsellor: "The reason for my sorrow is that my beautiful songs perish and pass into oblivion and I know of no way to preserve them."

To this the counsellor replied:

"Let the king send posts all over the country to find a wise person who could help our Majesty the King in this matter."

Following the king's order, messengers went out in haste and ran towards the borders of the kingdom. When they reached the border of Egypt, the residents told them that in Egypt there were skilled people who knew how to draw poems and stories. The messengers hurried back to tell the king the wonderful news. On hearing this, the king ordered a messenger to be sent immediately to Egypt to acquire the skills of drawing poems and stories.

On arriving in Egypt, the messenger was brought to the king's court and shown the king's scribe sitting on the ground and drawing various pictures with a reed pen on a papyrus scroll stretched out on his skirt.

The messenger sat down near the scribe and watched him drawing the pictures, trying to understand their meanings. Then the scribe said to the messenger:

"The work of the scribe is an ancient profession, as ancient as the sphinx. It is a difficult and exalted craft, and only a few people are capable of acquiring the skills of a professional scribe."

To his amazement, the messenger learned that the pictures told long and wonderful tales and each picture described not only objects one can see but also thoughts and feelings.

Then the messenger said to himself:

"Now I have learned something excellent. I'll come to my king and tell him thus: 'Let the king draw a picture of a sun when he wants to draw the words 'heat', 'light', 'day', or an eye when he wants to draw the idea 'to see', or a foot when he wants to draw the words 'to go', and in that way he will be able to draw his poems and his thoughts'."

The messenger hurried back to the land of Canaan to bring the good news to the king.

The king was thrilled with joy hearing the messenger's news and appointed him to be his scribe.

The next morning the king awoke from his sleep happy and enthusiastic; he took his harp and started to sing while the scribe sat at his feet ready to begin his work.

And this was the song the king sang:

"The loveliness of your beauty is a song that is sung,
making all hearts rejoice.
How pleasant are you in my eyes, O graceful maiden!"

And in his language it sounded as follows:

*No^cam yoffiekh zemer mitnagen, marnyn kol lev.
Ma na^camt li bat khen.*

The scribe dipped his reed pen into the ink and tried to draw the Canaanite word for loveliness, but he had completely forgotten how one draws the word *No^cam*. In the meantime the king continued to sing and the scribe sat with the reed pen in his hand, bending his head in sorrow and shame. The king saw the misery of the scribe, and his song died away and the gleam faded from his eyes.

The scribe confessed to the king that he was unable to remember how to draw the word *No^cam*.

The king was very sad and disappointed; the following night he could not sleep, troubled by his thoughts and uncertain what to do.

The next morning he gathered the council of elders and ordered them to put their heads together to solve the question of how the scribe could draw all the words.

The council met for a hundred days and a hundred nights, endeavouring to find an answer to the question, and at the end of that time they arrived at a very important decision. And since the problem was so difficult to solve, the solution they reached was extremely sophisticated and somewhat complicated, but wonderful like the solution to some very complicated riddle. And this is what they decided:

"When the scribe wants to draw the first sound in the word *No^cam*, he should draw the creature which is called *nun* in the Canaanite language , since both words begin with the same sound, /n/. Then he should draw an eye called *ayin* in Canaanite , since it begins with the sound that appears next in the word *No^cam*. Then only one sound will be left, and that is the sound /m/. The scribe should draw water  which is *maym* in Canaanite and which begins with the sound /m/, and thus he will have three pictures which together form the main sounds of the word *No^cam* since this word has no picture of its own."

"In the same way he will draw a hand , which in Canaanite is *yad*, and a mouth , which in Canaanite is *pe*, and other pictures of various objects, combining the first sounds of their names to form all the words appearing in the song which have no pictures of their own and which represent thoughts and ideas."

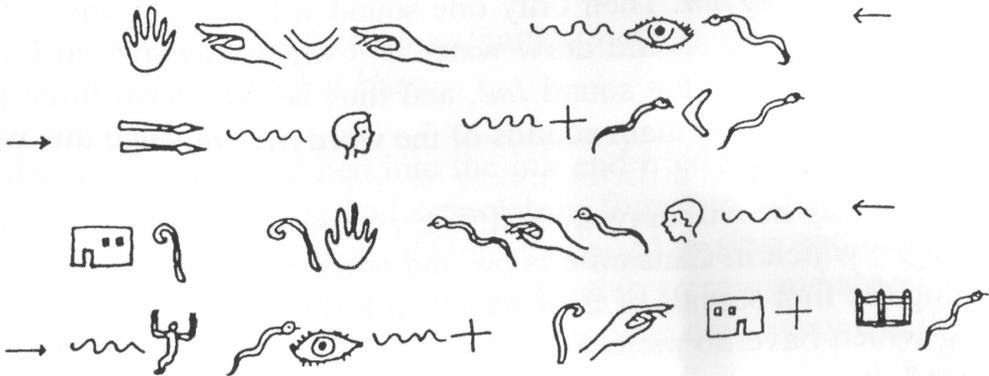
Then the members of the council chose a number of pictures, discovering to their amazement that they needed less than thirty pictures for the composition of all the words in the Canaanite language.

They immediately sent a messenger to the king to announce this wonderful and thrilling discovery.

The king was very astonished and said:

"In this way, every person will be able to learn how to write, since it is not difficult to recognize a relatively small number of pictures and to learn by heart the sounds which they represent; and if all the people will be familiar with these pictures they will be able to read my beautiful songs."

The king was so happy that he immediately ordered a large and magnificent banquet for all his court, and he proudly presented to all the song written in large, beautiful pictures :



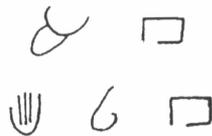
The Alphabet

In ancient times people did not speak Hebrew or Arabic or English or French, because these languages have not yet come into being. But their ancestors and relatives which resembled them, though not precisely, already existed. In the land of Canaan, for example, people spoke the Canaanite language. In this language, the word for 'head' was *ra'sh* and the word for 'water' was *may* or *maym*. An ox was called *alluf* or *alf*, a house was called *bayt* and a kind of boomerang was called *gaml*.

These Canaanite words, with slight variations, have survived in the names of our letters, but this happened so long ago that today we no longer remember the meaning of all the words. Thus, for example, we do not remember the meaning of the word *Tet* but only the form preserved in the letter-sign.

When people realized that they could draw all the words, they began drawing all the things they wished to remember. But this was a long procedure, because it is difficult and tiring to draw a house or an eye or the head of an ox again and again. They therefore decided to draw only the main lines of the pictures. For example:  *alf*,  *bayt*, etc.

In this way they could, for example, write the word *ab* meaning 'father' or the word *kalb* meaning 'dog':



But, even so, the writing took a long time, because people wanted to write many things, such as stories or letters to each other, and sometimes they were in a hurry and wanted to send a quick note to someone. And then a

strange thing happened to the pictures - their forms began to change. This happened because, when written rapidly and spontaneously the letter-forms change; sometimes a stroke moves or gets separated from another stroke; sometimes a stroke becomes longer or shorter or even disappears, and sometimes it makes a curve and joins the following stroke. Thus many changes occurred in the pictures, and various forms of the same sign were created from one picture.

The most ancient inscriptions in the early alphabetic pictographic script date from about the 19th century BCE and were discovered in Egypt. Inscriptions in a similar script, apparently dating one or two centuries later, were discovered in the Sinai peninsula. This script apparently contained 28 or 29 pictographic signs, corresponding to the number of consonants in the proto-Canaanite language, the language which gave birth to the Canaanite languages. In approximately the 13th century BCE, the western Canaanite dialects contained a smaller number of consonants than the Proto-Canaanite mother-language, and accordingly the number of signs for writing these dialects was reduced to 22. The descendants of the Canaanites, the residents of Tyre and Sidon, who are called Phoenicians, used these same 22 signs, which had already become stylized, linear letters, and wrote them exclusively in horizontal lines from right to left.

The Greeks probably adopted the Canaanite alphabet in about 1100 BCE, but the earliest inscriptions in their alphabet, still written from right to left, date from about 800 BCE; in the course of time the direction of writing changed and consequently the positions and forms of the letters. The Romans received the alphabetic script from the Greeks via the Etruscans and transmitted their version, known as the Latin script, to most European nations.

Other peoples who inherited the Phoenician script were the Israelites and later the Aramaeans. The ancient Hebrew script, commonly known as *Da'ats* or *Ra'ats*, evolved from the Phoenician script in about the 9th century BCE, while the Aramaic script broke away from its Phoenician mother script in about the 8th century BCE.

When the Aramaic language prevailed in the vast Persian empire, extending from India to Ethiopia, in the 5th-3rd centuries BCE, the Aramaic script was used throughout this empire and the various nations wrote their languages in this script. Among these nations were the Nabataeans and the Jews (who rejected their ancient script in favour of the new one, occasionally using the former in periods of national revival and for sacred scriptures). In about the 3rd century BCE, when the Persian empire was conquered by the Macedonian ruler Alexander the Great, the Aramaic language and script gradually divided into local dialects and scripts. The script known as the "Jewish script" has changed only slightly since then, while the Nabataean script developed a very cursive form from which the Arabic script evolved. The earliest inscriptions in the Arabic script are from the 6th century CE but certain inscriptions dating from the 4th century already show the early phases of its evolution.

The Latin script, as well as the Hebrew and Arabic, emerged a long time after the letters of the Canaanite alphabet came into being. Therefore, when these letters began to be used for the writing of these languages their forms were already very different from the early pictures. This is the reason for our difficulty in recognizing the common origin of these scripts and their relation to the Canaanite pictures. But by tracing the various phases in the evolution of the letter-forms we may clearly see the connection between the forms.