

Torah Resource Radio
Rob and Caleb Show Ep12
Q & A with Dr. Michael Brown
Transcribed by A. Smith

Questions start at 05:12

This is a partial transcript of the interview.

All questions asked by Caleb Hegg

All attempts have been made by the transcriber for consistency with the original broadcast. Additions, where found, are for readability only, and will be distinguished by *italics*.

Topic: Paleo Hebrew Validity As a Hermeneutical Tool For Believers

Q: Dr Brown, as an expert in the ancient Hebrew language can, you talk about the origins of the Aleph-Bet?

A: Surely, and let me just say at the outset that we have no business attaching pictographic meaning to ancient Hebrew than we have attaching those same pictographic meaning to the Greek alphabet or to our English alphabet as I'll explain.

But if you go back to the earliest origins of written languages things were largely pictographic. Sumerian text, Egyptian hieroglyphics and thing like this in their earliest stages, you might have something that looks like a star basically, and that could be a word that could mean sky or heaven or G-d or something like that. Then over a period of many, many centuries these were fine tuned and became what we would call a syllabary. So syllabary would not be an alphabet, where you just have A B C D ect, but a syllabary would be sounds, it would be 'ooh', 'aah', 'vee'. You of course have many more characters involved. So if you take for example the Sumerian language which began as pictographic then developed further, it then gets developed into neoform, so you use a stylus, a wedge shaped stylus that kind of looks like chicken feet, that many people would be familiar with on ancient tablets, and that would now take the place of the pictographs. Then by the time for example the Sumerian language was adapted by the speaker of the Syrian and Babylonian, which was called Akkadian you had about 600 different signs in the syllabary, and you can have vague images that did still represent a certain picture but for the most part that was now lost in the script in the written form.

When it comes to Hebrew, the Hebrew language of the paleographic script that's used, was borrowed from the Phoenicians. This was not a Hebrew without development or something like that, or something that was specifically given by G-d for certain purposes that were expressly

written out. Isaiah 19 refers to this “*sefat kena’an*” שֵׁפַת כְּנַעַן (Is 19:18) which means the language of Canaan, so this was the language that was spoken by the Canaanites. Hebrew is simply a dialect, a Canaanite dialect. It was not the original language that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob would have spoken. So when they came over to the land and lived in the land they picked up the language of the land, and at a certain point, it’s hard to know exactly when, it could be 1200-1300 B.C.E., certainly by the 11th century B.C.E., the Hebrews, the Israelites had now taken over this script from the Phoenicians. Now they are not the only ones that took it over, the Greeks also borrowed, as the Greeks were sea-farers, the Phoenicians in particular were sea-farers, there was cultural interaction, and the Phoenician alphabet was now taken over by the ancient Greeks as well. Hence in Hebrew you have Aleph, Beit, Gimmel, Dalet, in Greek you have Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta.

And if we just keep going with this, originally the first letter, the Aleph, represented an ox head. If you take like the letter “V” and stand it upside-down, and then just put a little curve across the top of this, what you have is what looks like an ox head, this head, with horns coming out the side of it. Well it got turned on its side at a certain point, and again this is in the early development of the language it got turned on its side, ultimately those letters even got separated in current Hebrew Script. If you write your letters in Israeli script today you have those separated, the curve and a straight line separated for Aleph /c. But that also made it in, as I said, into Greek, and then from Greek into Latin, from Latin into our alphabet that we use in English, German and a host of other languages. If you look at a capital ‘A’ and take the line that runs across it and pull it out a little and curve it, you have the old ox head.

Q: So let me see if I understand what you are saying. Just to try to hash out what you just said, it would be almost the same for me to say that I can insert some kind of meaning into each letter *in the Hebrew*, as it would be for me to say that I can insert meaning into the English letters like an “a” or a “v”?

A: Exactly, our capital ‘B’ looks very much similar to what an ancient paleographic ‘beit’ would have looked like, meaning *beit* or house, so it was a picture that looked like that. Here is what we have to recognize: by the time this was adapted, by the time this was simply an alphabet, it was not a syllabary, it was not pictograph, *and* these were just sounds. The aleph did not represent an ox. There is not a single hint in any ancient Hebrew literature where they referred to this in the pictographic way. Aleph and Beit was just the sound “Buh”, they no longer looked at it and thought that looks like a house. And then as the letters were written over a period of years, they bore almost no resemblance to the original picture that would have been behind it. So it’s a complete myth. Again you can just as well import pictographic meaning into English, *for example*, so we *could* look at that ‘A’ that reminds us of an Oxen, and oxen work hard, so that is what it is at the beginning of the alphabet... It’s just nonsense.

Q: So talking about the progression of this language, can we gauge how long the formation or evolution of this language from a pictographic meaning into the A-B-Cedery. Can we gauge how long it took to progress that much?

A: Well if we use some of the other ancient languages, some of the non-Semitic languages like Sumerian, or Hamitic languages like Egyptian, it seems that you got to go a couple thousand years before this time. At least a thousand if not 1500 years before the time of the Exodus, these things would have been represented in pictographic form. We have for example the Ugaritic language, which was uncovered in the late 1920's in northern Syria in what's called Ras Shamra. And some scholars have claimed that it is actually syllabary, in other words the letter for 'B', the cuneiform letter for 'B' could actually be 'bah' or 'boo' or 'bee' or something like that. But most just take this as an alphabet, and this language is several hundred years older than the Hebrew language as far as being attested in written form. The earliest attestation from the Ugaritic language pre-dates the earliest attestation of Hebrew finds by several hundred years. And that is purely either an alphabet most likely or a syllabary, but is absolutely not a pictographic. You've got to go way back in history, we can't date it. In other words we don't have clear pictographic text in what would ultimately be a Phoenician script. And this was a major development, the develop of the alphabet, or putting things in 22 characters also meant this; it is a slight tangent but is worth bringing up. In the English language today we have different sound, words that have come into English and they are not always clearly represented. So we think of the letter 'G' and we grow up speaking English we don't realize it has 2 different sounds; a hard sound, a soft sound sometimes in the same word like 'garage'. And that can come from French influence for example. Or the letter 'C', the same thing with that, that can have a hard sound and a soft sound, we can have it in the same letter in the same word like 'circus', 'suh and 'kuh. Well, the same way in Hebrew, you have for example a harder 'ch' and a softer 'ha', those were written with the same letter. The letter Ayan ׀, could represent 2 different sounds, 'ayan' or 'ghaiyn', which you have preserved today in Arabic, both of those different sounds. So for example the city called Gaza, the Septuagint transliterates it with a Gamma γ Ghaza, in Hebrew it is spelled with an Ayan ׀, Aaza. So it originally went back to a 'ghaiyn' which meant that in the ancient pronunciation these letters were distinguished even though they were written the same. They were distinguished with different sounds, just like in English we can tell the difference between *the sounds of the letter 'G', 'guh' and 'juh' or for the letter 'C', 'suh' and kuh*. All that to say; it was simple a functioning alphabet. The fact that you can have one letter representing to distinct phonemes indicates that it was just being used for a letter, and to communicate words and there is nothing in terms of the deeper meaning that was found.

Caleb: Well I hope that puts this argument somewhat to rest for our listeners, and for the people who have been e-mailing back and forth with us.