

The Origin of the Semitic Alphabet¹

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IN the *Journal of Egyptian Archæology* for January, 1916, a conjoint article was published by Dr. Gardiner, Dr. Cowley, and myself on the origin of the Semitic alphabet, starting from Dr. Gardiner's decipherment of the name of the Semitic goddess, Ba'alath, in certain non-Egyptian inscriptions or "scribings" discovered by Professor Petrie in Sinai. The characters are Egyptian, but are not used with Egyptian values; they are usually written in vertical columns, and like the Meroitic hieroglyphs are read from the back and not from the front. Unfortunately the inscriptions are not numerous; they are badly written and in many cases effaced. However, we succeeded in determining the phonetic values of the majority of the letters—for letters they are—and in adding one or two more words (על נעם, רב, תנה) to Dr. Gardiner's בעלת. One of the inscriptions which is on the base of a sphinx is "bilingual", that is to say, there is an Egyptian text as well as what I will call a Semitic text.

A year later (in 1917) Professor Sethe published a valuable article on Dr. Gardiner's discovery in the *Proceedings of the Göttingen Academy* (pp. 437–75), correcting and supplementing many points in the light of his exceptional knowledge of ancient Egyptian. Among other things he showed that the character which Dr. Cowley and myself had identified with a camel's nose-ring, and accordingly read as *gimel*, is really a trap, and corresponds accordingly with *zaddi*. This discovery gives us the reading of the word נצב "he set up", a common formula on Semitic stelæ of all periods.

¹ *Die Kenitischen Weihinschriften der Hyksoszeit im Bergbaugebiet der Sinaihalbinsel und einige andere unerkannte Alphabetdenkmäler aus der Zeit der XII bis XVIII Dynastie*, by Robert Eisler; Freiburg in Breisgau, Herder, 1919.

Dr. Robert Eisler has now followed Professor Sethe, and has presented us with a remarkably stimulating and interesting book on the subject. He is both learned and ingenious—indeed, too ingenious, for with the natural enthusiasm of the pioneer he wants to explain everything, in spite of the defective character of our materials. His restoration of lost or mutilated letters is, therefore, by no means always convincing; for the present, at any rate, we must be content with what we can clearly read. The name which he would assign to the authors of the monuments is an example in point; there is no trace of the final *n* of the name of the Kenite either in the photograph or in the Egypt Exploration Fund copy of the inscription in which he wishes to read it; there is, moreover, a fatal objection to supplying it, the word as Dr. Eisler reads it being כִּךְ with *kaph* instead of קִךְ with *qoph*. At the same time I am quite willing to allow that the Kenites were employed in the mines of the Sinaitic Peninsula. I was the first to point out (in the *Academy* of January 27, 1886) that they were the “travelling tinkers” of Western Asia; they had their “nest” in Sinai, and before the introduction of iron, about 1600 B.C., would have been specially interested in the working of the copper-mines.

One of the most important contributions made by Dr. Eisler to the decipherment of the inscriptions is his recognition of the fact, pointed out by Professor Sethe, that the fish represents *samek*. About this there can no longer be any doubt. The discovery throws light upon certain words besides clearing up a difficulty in the history of the Semitic alphabet which has a particular interest for myself. In a paper I contributed to the Proceedings of the Society of Biblical Archaeology for November, 1910, I endeavoured to show (1) that in order to make the forms of the letters harmonize with their names we must tilt them over to one side, which proves that they were once written vertically, and (2) that the names, and therefore, presumably, the objects denoted are arranged in couplets. I went wrong, however, in thinking that the couplets begin with *aleph*; they really begin with *béth* (*béth* and *gimel*, *daleth* and *hé*, etc.), *aleph*, i.e. *alûph*

“the leader”, being the “head-piece”, and *tau*, the mark branded by the owner upon the ox (Ass. *tû*), being the “tail-piece”.

One of these couplets is *nun* and *samek*. We now know from the Sinaitic inscriptions that *n* was denoted by the Egyptian hieroglyph of “serpent” (Egyptian *z*). When it became cursive the serpentine form was obscured, and as the word for “fish” in certain of the Semitic languages was *nûn* and not *samek* we must conclude that the teacher’s “*samek* or *nun*” became “*samek* and *nun*”, causing *nun* to be transferred to what was originally the picture of a snake.

Professor Sethe has made it clear that the figure of a man with uplifted arms is not the determinative of deity, as Dr. Cowley and I supposed, but represents the letters *h* and *ḥ* in their South Arabian forms. Dr. Eisler is consequently justified in reading *מאהבעלת* *me'ahub-Ba'alath*, “beloved of Ba'alath,” on the sphinx, and regarding it as a literal translation of the accompanying Egyptian text, *mrî Hathor*, “beloved of Hathor,” the single for the double *ב* not being a serious difficulty. At the same time I can find no certain instance of the use of the character before the name of the goddess, and in the case of one, at least, of the inscriptions (No. 348) I should prefer to translate the letters *הבעלת* “O Ba'alath”. But it is also possible, though not probable, that it is the article, in which case *מא* would be a transcription of the Egyptian *mrî* (as in the Boghaz Keui tablets, where it is written *mâi*), the goddess being entitled “the Lady”. It must, however, be remembered that in Assyrian we have the verb *mâû*, “to be mighty,” so that we could translate *מאה בעלת* “mighty is Ba'alath”.

The difficulty I find in accepting Dr. Eisler's translation is that *מאהב* would be written *plene*, which is hard to believe could have been the case at so early a date. The same objection lies against his ingenious explanation of another Sinaitic inscription on the sphinx. This he makes *יוד*, *yôd*, “a monument.” His identification of the *daleth* is, I believe, correct; the character is the picture of a door. But the pronunciation

yôd for *yâd*, "hand" or "monument", is confined to its use as the name of a letter; in all the early Semitic dialects known to us we find no trace of it. The Assyrian form is *idu*, and that the Canaanite pronunciation was *yâd* is shown by the Tel el-Amarna gloss *badiu*, "in his hand." How could we have *yôd* written *plene* in the age of the Eighteenth Egyptian dynasty? Moreover, one letter, if not more, is broken away before the *yôd*, and the *daleth* seems to be on a different edge of the base of the monument from that on which the two preceding letters are incised.

Dr. Eisler's determination of the letter *gimel* is certainly right, though I question his identification of it in its original form with the boomerang. It is really a reproduction of the Egyptian *geneb*, "the corner" or "side" of a house, the Arabic *janb*. Its change of form in the Phœnician alphabet, and perhaps also the absence of a word *ganab* in the sense of "side" in Canaanite, caused it to be identified with the boomerang, which, as Dr. Eisler points out, was called *gamlu* in Assyrian.

I should also accept Dr. Eisler's identification of the letter supposed by Dr. Cowley and myself to be a bow, and accordingly to represent the Hebrew *qoph*, with the tooth, the Hebrew *shin*. I am more doubtful about Sethe's identification of the *teth*, which, however, may be the representative of the South Arabian *ḏ*, but is certainly not either the South Arabian or the Phœnician *teth*. The latter is a picture of the sacred cake, Assyrian *tentu*, *tettu*.

Lamed is usually a picture of a roll of thread or rather a fishing-line, and Sethe has shown that its name in Samaritan, *labad*, the Arabic *labad*, "wool," is the original one of which *lamed* was a corruption. But instead of the fishing-line we find in No. 352 a picture of what resembles the Egyptian hieroglyph of a boat (*uḥa*). Perhaps it is intended for a sort of "lobster-basket".

Zayin is a difficulty. That Sethe and Eisler are right in their identification of the letter admits of little doubt; Dr. Gardiner had already suggested it; but what the letter depicts is a puzzle.


The "spear", which Dr. Eisler would also identify with *zayin*, seems to me in the photograph to be a flower rather than a weapon.

Hé, the man with uplifted arms, is replaced by another picture altogether in the Phœnician alphabet, where it has the form of a fringe. As I stated in the paper referred to above, it must be the *éa* of Assyrian, which the lexical tablets explain by *kuruššu sa dalti*, "the leathern fastening of a door"; *kuruššu* is the Hebrew *qeres* (Exod. xxvi, 6), which is borrowed from it.

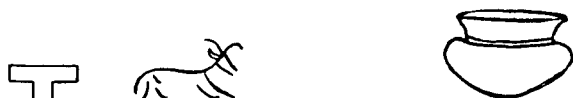
Dr. Eisler has displayed remarkable ingenuity in his interpretation of the texts, scanty, badly written, and terribly injured as they are. His reading of No. 351: צת בנש[מש נצב קשר]... ח[ח]טת, "This has B[en-she]mesh erected, offering incense [to . . . as a sin-]offering," is especially clever. So, too, are his readings of No. 349, line 2: רבן אבנם, "chief of the stones," or, rather, "stone-cutters," and of No. 346: רבן רבנום, "chief of the overseers." In the first line of the last inscription he has been equally happy in his reading: על סן מרעת "for the protection of the flocks", as also in his explanation of the initial אן for *ana* or *ani*, "I."

The Sinaitic inscriptions probably belong to the age of the Eighteenth Egyptian dynasty, though there is a possibility of their going back to that of the Twelfth. However that may be, Dr. Eisler claims to have discovered an inscription in the same alphabet, but in letters of a more cursive form, upon a wooden instrument discovered by Professor Petrie among the Twelfth Dynasty remains at Kahûn, and it really looks as if he were right. There are four letters which certainly read Ahitob (*A-h-t-b*), the *h* and the *b* having already assumed the cursive shapes which they have in the Phœnician alphabet, while *t* is of the Sinaitic form. If it is not a mere palæographical mirage, this carries back the origin of the alphabet to quite a remote period.

Dr. Eisler now tells me that he has detected similar letters on certain copper ingots found by the Italian expedition in the

Middle Minoan strata at Hagia Triada in Krete. They are described in Paribeni, *R. Acad. Lincei, sc. mor.*, ser. v, vol. xii, p. 317 sq., and Svoronos, *Journ. Internat. d'Archéologie numismatique*, 1906, ix, 167; and Dr. Eisler possesses photographs of the originals. On one is the Kypriote character *si*, which he believes to stand for the Assyrian *siparru*, "upper," on another the two Sinaitic letters *t-m*, which he is fully justified in reading  *tam*, "full-weight," while a third is inscribed with what he read *z-g*, i.e. *zug*, "clarified," though the identification of the second letter does not seem to me to be certain.

To this I can add a further fact. Mr. D. C. Robertson, of Edinburgh, has a bronze bowl which he bought many years ago at Luxor. It is of the age of the Eighteenth Dynasty, but must have been brought to Egypt as it is West Asiatic and not Egyptian in form. On the rim are engraved the two characters :-



Here we have the whole body of the ox in place of the head only, and reading from right to left obtain the Semitic name *Aba*.

And so the problem of the Semitic alphabet, as it has been termed, is at last in large measure solved. The use of the Egyptian hieroglyphs as alphabetic letters suggested to some Semitic genius the employment of them to represent the initial sounds of the Semitic words with which they corresponded. Naturally more than one hieroglyph could be employed for this purpose in the case of each letter, and accordingly we find at Sinai two different pictographs representing the letter *l*, while the South Arabian alphabet when compared with the Phœnician not only shows additional characters needed to express sounds that had been lost further north, but also variant forms of the same letter. Even where the same object is depicted it is not always represented in the same way; the letter *b* is a house at Sinai, in the Phœnician alphabet it is the picture of a tent. The Semites were nomads before they passed under the

influence of Sumerian culture ; as I was the first to point out (in my *Assyrian Grammar for Comparative Purposes*), the Assyrian *ālu*, "city," is the Hebrew *ohel*, "a tent," while *uru*, Hebrew *‘ūr*, was borrowed from Sumer. The pastoral Abel or Seth (cf. Num. xxiv, 17) stood in opposition to the agriculturists and artisans or "Cainites" of Babylonia. Once the alphabet had been formed its development varied in different parts of the Semitic world.

Invention and development alike go back, it is now clear, to the Hyksos age. After the fall of the Babylonian Third Dynasty of Ur the Western Semites spread over the greater part of the civilized world from Babylonia to Upper Egypt. The "Amorite" dynasties of Isin and Babylon ruled Babylonia for 525 years, and at one time their empire included Palestine. The name Mizrâ, "the Egyptian," is found in the contract tablets of the Khammurabi dynasty, and a tablet of the same age in the Amherst Collection is countermarked with the Egyptian character *nefer*, "all right." Even if the invention of the alphabet be older than the Hyksos period, its extension and development belong to that age.

The Sinaitic alphabet is not the only topic treated by Dr. Eisler, and his notes contain a wealth of learned conjectures and suggestions. Some of these demand assent, others dissent. Among the latter is his attempt to show that the Persian loan-word גנז occurs in one of the inscriptions (No. 353). But neither the photograph nor the copy supports his contention. The *gimel* is preceded by a character which in the copy is the picture of a beetle, and the letter which follows *gimel* has the same form as the *‘ayin* of No. 346, while the next letter is the *lamed* of No. 352. After that all is uncertain. I may add in conclusion that I have long since retracted my objection to Dr. Cowley's identification of the goddess Tanit with the תנת of one of the monuments.