

Letters of the Hebrew Alphabet: As Sound Notation

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While Bronze Age Proto-Sinaic and Proto-Canaanite syllabic inscriptions were found engraved on fragments of pottery and stone, evidence of early alphabetic script was also inscribed in ink onto a massive parchment scroll, known as the Torah. Albeit the contours of those original characters transformed over time, it took the clairvoyant genius of Moses, and later the scribes of Ancient Israel, to configure and adapt ancient semitic prototypes into phonetic letters, producing the greatest literary document in the history of the world, the Bible. This article summarizes the acoustic properties of that alphabet, with further historical considerations.

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Introduction

The unique aspect of Western music is that it is *literate*, that is, it is notated on a staff, note for note. This particular kind of notation—pitch and rhythm—permitted the horizontal development line as *melodic elaboration* and its vertical expansion into *harmony*. All other musical systems are confined, either to Oral Tradition, to approximate pitches through hand signs (*i.e.*, *chironomy*), or represent pitch groups, but do not notate specific pitches, rhythms, or the simultaneous sounding of multiple voices.

This model of music notation is generally credited to the medieval monk, Guido d'Arezzo (10th C. Italy).

Notating Words as Sound

But the idea of *notating words as sound itself* goes back to the Torah, or rather, the alphabet that was used to write the sounds of words visually. Surely, there were earlier systems of notation: (1). *Pictures* (that served as *pneumonic* reminders of words, objects, and ideas); (2). *Pictograms* (representing specific objects); (3). *Ideograms* (representing specific ideas); or (4). *Phonetic Logograms* (representing individual sounds, syllables, and words).

All these forms of notation are visual reminders, connected to sight and specific physical objects. But the letters of the—*alphabet*—mark the beginning of the notation of language as sound.

This system derives from one scroll—the *Torah*. It is an *aural* document. It is the creation of Judaism, an oral culture, not a visual one. Its message is religious. Its essence is perceived in sound: *Shema Yisrael*. It is not to see with the eye, but to hear with the ear. We listen to the *Voice of God*.

Sound the Link from Heaven to Earth

Moses, the clairvoyant leader, listened to the Divine voice projected through the sound of the shofar: *When the voice of the horn waxed louder, and louder Moses spoke, and God answered him by a voice* (Ex. 19:19). The relation between word and tone is a unity. It was the *voice on high* that Moses heard and attempted to transcribe in letters and words.

But, not only man listens, rather all of creation is linked to this voice: *By the Word of God the heavens were made* (Ps. 33:6). There is, by inference, power, too, in the *letters* from which the Word is formed. It is the basis for Jewish mysticism—*Kabala*.

Talmudic Responses

A Talmudic reference illuminates this fundamental principle: *Bezalel [who was instrumental in the construction of the Tabernacle and its objects in the wilderness] knew how to combine the letters by which heaven and earth were created* (Berachot 55a).

This relationship is attested to in the Talmud: *The Holy One blessed be He dictated, and Moses repeated and wrote* (Menachot 30a). But there is also a meaning within this voice. It is not just an abstract sound. It has content, which can be understood, and interpreted when articulated as word.

Second Temple Period and Sound Notation

These ideas were later substantiated and elaborated in the early Second Temple period by the prophet Ezra: *And they read in the book, in the Law of God distinctly and gave sense so that they understood the reading* (Neh. 8:8). Here *distinct* indicates *enunciation, inflection, and emphasis*; while *sense* refers, not only, to the reading of words, but also, to *accentuation and division into clauses, phrases, and sentences*.

Notating Vowel Sounds

So much for the letters. But, what of the vowels? The vowels are, in fact, the breath that connects the letters or consonants. They give color, rest, and articulated pause between the notated letters; they enable us to make sense of sound. Such concepts find Scriptural expression: *And the spirit [or ruach or breath] of God hovered over the deep* (Gn. 1:2).

All of these insights are, in fact, particular dimensions of musical expression and interpretation, which, later, find grammatical expression in the various articulations or *Te'amim*, above, below and around the vowels and their specific visual signs.

Concepts from the Middle Ages

Rabbi Judah Hahassid (c.1150-1217) one of the leading figures of the *Hassidei Ashkenaz* movement of Medieval Germany, gives further credence to these ideas in his classic book, *Sefer Hasidim: And with a tone [or neima] that he heard with the same tone [or melos] Moses spoke to Israel*. He continues that *not only the Torah, but also the Prophets and Writings each have their own tone, and these cannot be interchanged* (paragraph 303).

Following this line of reasoning, we note that this concept of tone or Melos, forms the basis for the sanctity of the chanting of the Torah.

Visual Symbolization of Sound

Originally, hand signs only (*i.e.*, chirogony) were employed as *mnemonic devices*, that is. As aids to memory in the reading of the Torah, these hand signs, much later, became standardized, institutionalized as it were, and became the basis for the written trope or accentuation signs we know today. The *taamey hamikra* cantillation signs now found in all printed versions of the Torah or *Chumash* (Five Books of Moses or Pentateuch) were originally memorized and learned by rote tradition.

Critical Response on the History of Writing and the Alphabet

With regard to the origin of writing in the Bronze Age, Wikipedia writes, “It is thought that the first true alphabetic writing was developed around 2000 BC by *Semitic workers* in the Sinai, by giving mostly Egyptian hieroglyphics *Semitic values* [a rather obtuse terminology].” Regarding Early Semitic Alphabets, it continues, “The first pure alphabets emerged around 1800 BC (others say 1700 BC) in Ancient Egypt, as a representation of language developed [again] by *Semitic workers* in Egypt.”

Furthermore in the article “History of the Alphabet,” based on the recent book by Geoffrey Sampson: *Writing Systems a Linguistic Introduction* (California, Stanford University Press, 1985) p. 11, we read “Most or nearly all alphabetic scripts used throughout the world today ultimately go back to this Semitic proto alphabet. Its first origin can be traced back to a proto-Sinaitic script developed in Ancient Egypt to represent the language of *Semitic speaking workers* in Egypt.”

Contributions of “Semitic Workers”

According to the Bible, the Children of Israel were enslaved in Egypt during this period. This was the period of the Exodus and the giving of the Torah. Certainly, *they* were the Semitic workers referred to, laboring under pharaoh as slaves without wage. What other *workers* were there in Egypt at this time? Why is there no reference for them? Something is very strange in all these pseudo-academic accounts.

In my opinion, it is a distortion of history, at best, and, at worst, purely anti-Semitic in nature—a denial of Jewish existence as a fundamental principle of Western Civilization, by deliberately erasing of the role Moses and the Jews in—either adapting and/or creating, through this fledgling alphabetic, at its infancy—the greatest literary document in the history of the world.

Conclusion

The letters of the alphabet—alef-beth-gimmel-dalet, eventually transformed and changed shape into the Greek letters, whose names Alfa-beta-gamma-delta and so forth betray their Hebraic origin. These became the letters of our modern A-B-C-D-E-F-G, and the letter names of the notes in the scale.

The essence of the alphabet, however, is that it notates aural sounds in letters (not pictures) that were originally designed to concretize the revelations in the sound of the *voice* of the invisible God, who knows neither physical image nor dimension. This is their sacred origin.

Appendix

ט	ח	ז	ו	ה	ד	ג	ב	א
Teit (T)	Cheit (Ch)	Zayin (Z)	Vav (V/O/U)	Hei (H)	Dalet (D)	Gimel (G)	Beit (B/V)	Alef (Silent)
ס	נ	נ	מ	מ	ל	ך	כ	י
Samekh (S)	Nun (N)	Nun (N)	Mem (M)	Mem (M)	Lamed (L)	Khaf (Kh)	Kaf (K/Kh)	Yod (Y)
ת	ש	ר	ק	ץ	צ	ף	פ	ע
Tav (T/S)	Shin (Sh/S)	Reish (R)	Qof (Q)	Tzadei (Tz)	Tzadei (Tz)	Fei (F)	Pei (P/F)	Ayin (Silent)

Max Stern—composer, performer, conductor, musicologist, music critic, and educator—is a pioneer figure in Israel’s musical life and has created a rich genre of biblical compositions blending East and West with contemporary idioms and genre.

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