

The Letters

“And the Jews were wondering, saying, 'How hath this one known letters--not having learned?’”

The Gospel of John, Chapter seven, verse 15ⁱ

- There are twenty-two letters in the Hebrew language, all of which are consonants.
- Vowel sounds will be discussed later in this grammar
- Hebrew does not have lower and upper case letters.
- The names of the Hebrew letters are actual Hebrew words. The letter *Beth*, for instance means house. This is known as *akrophony*.

The Names of the Hebrew Letters

The names of the letters are actual words in the Hebrew language, and thus learning the Hebrew letters will give you a vocabulary of twenty-two words. This section will introduce the letters by name, as well as the meaning and pronunciation of the names. The names of the Hebrew letters have been *transliterated* from the Hebrew into English below. Transliterate means to ‘*write words in the characters of another alphabet.*’ Writers employ various spellings in transliterating the Hebrew letter names. The transliterated names of the Hebrew Letters accompanied by the representative characters are as follows:

Alef	א
Bayth	ב
Gimel	ג
Daleth	ד
Hey	ה
Waw	ו
Zayin	ז
Cheth	ח
Teth	ט
Yode	י
Kaph	כ
Lamed	ל
Mem	מ

ⁱ The charge here by the opponents of Jesus is actually that he is an untrained person, but the temptation to use this passage as an introduction to the teaching of the Hebrew Letters was irresistible.

Noon	נ
Samek	ס
Ayin	ע
Pey	פ
Tsadee	צ
Kofe	ק
Raysh	ר
Sheen	ש
Taw	ת

Early Attestation to the Number and Arrangement of Letters/ Acrostic Psalms

Our earliest records confirm the present enumeration of 22 letters. Aside from the number of Hebrew letters being 22, the original arrangement of the books of the Old Testament caused it to be counted as 22 books, rather than 39 as it is counted in Standard English Bibles today. This gave rise to the belief that the number 22 represented completion and perfection.

The author of the book of Jubilees (circa 150 BCE), portions of which were found at Qumran, is among the first to go on record as extolling the number 22 in this sense. In that work, the author mentions the enumeration of the 22 generations from Adam to Jacob, 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, the number of Biblical books as 22, and Adam as the 22nd and final creative act in the Genesis account of creation.

“Accordingly, the twenty-two works of the six days of Creation are enumerated (ch. ii. 2–22): On the first day—heaven, earth, water, the spirits, the abyss, darkness, and light; on the second—the firmament; on the third—the land, the seas, vegetation, and paradise; on the fourth—sun, moon, and stars; on the fifth—the sea-monsters (Behemoth and Leviathan, “the first things of flesh created by His hands”), the fish, and the birds; on the sixth—the wild and the tame animals, the creeping things, and man; these twenty-two works correspond to the twenty-two generations from Adam to Jacob, as well as to the twenty-two letters of the alphabet and the twenty-two books of Holy Scripture.” (Jewish Encyclopedia, *Jubilees, Book of* – www.jewishencyclopedia.com)

Notice what other ancient authorities had to say about the number of 22 in this regard.

Origen, 210 AD: “It should be stated that the canonical books, as the Hebrews have handed them down, are twenty-two; corresponding with the number of their letters.” Quoted by Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.26.14.

Athanasius, 365 AD: “There are then of the Old Testament, twenty-two books in number....this is the number of the letters of the Hebrews.” Letter 39.4

Jerome, 391 AD: “As then, there are twenty-two elementary characters by means of which we write in Hebrew all we say, and the compass of the human voice is contained within their limits; so we reckon twenty-two books, by which, as by the alphabet of the doctrine of God, a righteous man is instructed in tender infancy, and as it were, while still at the breast.” (Preface to Samuel and Kings)

As to the order of the Hebrew letters, we have very early evidence that verifies the present order as authentic and very ancient indeed. One such piece of evidence is the use of acrostics by Biblical writers. An acrostic is a literary device whereby a writer uses the first letter of an alphabet to begin the first sentence, the second letter to begin the second sentence, and so on until all the letters have been used. In this way, the author produces a work that displays symmetry and reflects a special style in his work. The Hebrew Bible employs this style in Psalms 37; 111; 112; and 119. Psalm 119 deserves special attention in this regard. Psalm 119 is the longest ‘chapter’ in the Bible. The writer divided his composition into twenty-two sections of eight stanzas each. In each of the first eight stanzas, the initial word begins with the Hebrew letter ALEPH (א), the first letter of the alphabet. In each of the second eight stanzas, the initial word begins with the letter BETH (ב), the second Hebrew letter. This process continues throughout the Psalm, using all the Hebrew letters in this way, producing a remarkable literary creation, the beauty of which is only realized in its original language. The translators of the Authorized Version sought to preserve some evidence of this style, and even in some modern versions, the letters of the alphabet are listed at the head of every eight verses.

Original Order and Arrangement of the Books of the OT

The Babylonian Talmud has the oldest listing of the books of the Old Testament. (Baba Bathra 14b) Although the Septuagint breaks with the Hebrew method of book arrangement, it does maintain the ancient Hebrew enumeration of 22. English Bibles typically follow the organization of the Septuagint, but divide the books so as to come up with 39 books instead of the original 22. Even modern Jewish Bibles have altered the original arrangement so that rather than 22 books, the Hebrew Bible is organized into 24 separate books.

It should also be remarked that the Hebrew Bible was originally arranged into three divisions; (1) The Law, (2) The Prophets, and (3) The Writings or Psalms. The New Testament knows of this arrangement and Jesus mentions it in Luke 24. Modern Jews still follow this threefold division, while most Christian Bibles follow the arrangement set forth by the compilers of the Greek Septuagint. The Law is called the TORAH in Hebrew. It consists of the Five Books of Moses (Genesis-Deuteronomy). The word Torah is typically translated as 'law' but is better represented in English by the word 'instruction'. The Prophets section begins with the book of Joshua and ends with Malachi. In Hebrew, this section is called the Neviim. The word means prophets. The final section is called the Ketuvim. The word means 'writings'. It contains the Book of Psalms, the Wisdom literature, the Book of Daniel, and I and II Chronicles, with which it ends.

The Current Forms of the Hebrew Characters; Their Origin and Date

The current forms of the Hebrew letters are a later developed form of writing. Our Hebrew Bibles are printed in this form today as well as secular material written in Hebrew. It is normally referred to as the *square character or the Assyrian Script*. The character form known as the square character is Aramaic in origin. It appears that the Jews gradually adopted a style similar to the square character during the period ranging from the 6th to 4th century BC, and then the letters evolved to their current style somewhere between the 4th to the middle of the 3rd century BC. Jewish religious materials relate legends on this change in writing style, attributing the switch to divine direction. The Samaritans retained an earlier style of writing, and since Jews and Samaritans were antagonistic one to another, Jewish literature that speaks of the change, belittles the refusal to adapt to the new and sacred style on the part of the Samaritans. By the time of Jesus, the square character had almost completely taken over among the Palestinian populace. Jewish sarcophagus inscriptions dating to the first century display the square character almost exclusively.

Basic Phonetic Values of the Hebrew Letters

One should be careful in assigning exact phonetic value to the Hebrew letters since some of the Hebrew consonants have no equivalent in the English language. Scholars however, have determined with a good deal of certainty the ancient phonetic values of each of the Hebrew letters by studying; (1) Greek transliterations of Hebrew words, (2) Modern Hebrew pronunciation of the letters, and (3) comparisons with kindred Semitic languages. There are nonetheless problems with the aforementioned methods. (a) Greek lacks equivalents for several of the Hebrew letters, (b) Modern Hebrew has been influenced as a result of the long migratory history of the Jewish people, and (c) although kindred Semitic languages share many common elements with ancient Hebrew, there are also differences, many of which may have existed long before the Old Testament took its final form. Keeping this in mind, these are the approximate phonetic values of the Hebrew letters.

ס has no equivalent letter in English. Its pronunciation has been compared to the silent 'h' in words like 'honor'.

ז is like the 'v' in 'vine'.

ג is like the 'g' in 'Galilee'.

ד is like the 'd' in 'door'.

ה is like the 'h' in 'hole'.

ו is like the 'w' in 'wine'.

ז is like the 'z' in 'Zebulon'.

ח is like the 'ch' in 'Zechariah'.

ט is like the 't' in 'twisting'.

י is like the 'y' in 'Yeshua'.

כ is like the 'ch' in 'patriarch'. It is very similar in sound to ח.

ל is like the 'l' in 'Levi'.

מ is like the 'm' in 'Moses'.

נ is like the 'n' in 'noon'.

ס is like the 's' in 'Sinai'.

ע has no equivalent in English. It is given a rough vocalization produced at the back of the throat.

פ is like the 'ph' in 'Pharisee'.

צ is like the 'ts' in 'nets'.

ק is like the 'k' in 'keep'.

ר is like the 'r' in 'Rabbi'.

ש is like the 'sh' in 'sheen'.

ת is like the 'th' in 'Seth'.

Special Considerations and Characters

Five Final Forms

At first, Hebrew writing was supposedly written without distinct spacing between the words. The division of letters into words was a subject that was taught from teacher to student until gradually the received method of division was incorporated into the sacred text. Prior to the solidification in writing of the proper divisions between words, a system was devised, partly at least to aide in this process of dividing the continuous text. Certain letters began to be written differently when they appeared at the end of a word

than they did when they appeared at the beginning or in the middle of a word. Five letters have this peculiarity, they are; כ, מ, נ, פ, & צ. Their final forms are as follows:

כ at the beginning or in the middle of a word, but ך at the end of a word.

מ at the beginning or in the middle of a word, but ם at the end of a word.

נ at the beginning or in the middle of a word, but ן at the end of a word.

פ at the beginning or in the middle of a word, but ף at the end of a word.

צ at the beginning or in the middle of a word, but ץ at the end of a word.

Notice that in the case of כ, נ, פ, & צ, the final form is made by drawing the bottom shaft of the letter straight down rather than bent towards the left as it is drawn in the medial form. The final mem is completely closed whereas the medial form has a small opening.

Medial Form	Final Form
כ	ך
מ	ם
נ	ן
פ	ף
צ	ץ

With the addition of the five final forms, the total number of characters is brought to 27. Just as the compilers of the OT saw the significance in organizing the Old Testament books into 22, so must those who canonized the NT have seen their organization of the documents into 27 as being significant. The NT is comprised of 27 books, one for each character of the Hebrew alphabet (Medial + Final Forms). The early followers of the messianic movement around and about Jesus saw their message as the ‘Final’ communication from God to man; thus it is interesting that the number of documents accepted in the authorized list of Christian holy books corresponds to the total number of Hebrew characters.ⁱⁱ

One verse in the Old Testament contains every letter in the Hebrew alphabet, both medial and final forms. That verse is Zephaniah 3:8. Look at the verse and identify the letters.

לְכֹן חֲפוּ-לִי נֶאֱמַר-יְהוָה לַיּוֹם קוֹמִי לְעַד כִּי
 מִשְׁפָּטִי לְאַסֵּף גּוֹיִם לְקַבְּצֵי מִמְלָכוֹת לְשַׁפֵּךְ עֲלֵיהֶם זַעֲמִי כֹל

Zephaniah 3:8

ⁱⁱ I am unsure if this was noticed by those responsible for the finalization of the NT canon. It is however interesting and is a good way to illustrate this point.

חֲרוֹן אַפִּי כִּי בָאֵשׁ קִנְאַתִּי תֹאכַל כָּל-הָאָרֶץ:

Once you have identified every letter, it is interesting to note what is said in the very next verse!

^{KJV} **Zephaniah 3:9** For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the LORD, to serve him with one consent.

Dual Capacity of שׁ

The Hebrew letter שׁ can represent two distinct phonetic values depending on the position of a dot placed over either the right or left hand ‘branch’. If the dot is over the left hand branch as in שׂ, then the letter is pronounced as the ‘s’ in ‘seen’. If the dot is placed over the right hand branch as in שׁ, then the letter is pronounced as the ‘sh’ in ‘sheen’.

BeGaD KeFaT and the Dagesh Lene

The Hebrew word ‘*dagesh*’ means ‘piercing’. It is the name of a dot that *pierces* the heart of a Hebrew letter. There are two types of dagesh, we are presently concerned with the one known as ‘weak’ or ‘lene’. Its function is to harden the pronunciation of six Hebrew consonants. Two of the six letters that accept dagesh lene experience such a slight change in pronunciation that it is difficult to recognize any difference before and after the hardening dot is inserted. The six letters that are susceptible to the hardening effect of dagesh lene are; ב ג ד כ פ & ת. These are often referred to as BeGaD KeFaT letters, an artificial word produced by taking the phonetic value of each of these six consonants and forming a mnemonic word with them. The following chart illustrates the effect of dagesh lene.

Without Dagesh Lene		With Dagesh Lene	
ב	v	בֿ	b
ג	g	גֿ	g
ד	d	דֿ	d
כ	ch	כֿ	k
פ	ph	פֿ	p
ת	th	תֿ	t

The Gutturals

Four Hebrew letters are known as ‘gutturals’. They exhibit many peculiarities as will be shown throughout this grammar. The name guttural is derived from the Latin word ‘*guter*’, which means *throat*. These letters are produced in the throat, hence the name. For now it is only necessary to learn which letters are classified as gutturals. They are; א ה ח & ע. The letter ך is sometimes classified as a guttural as well.

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