

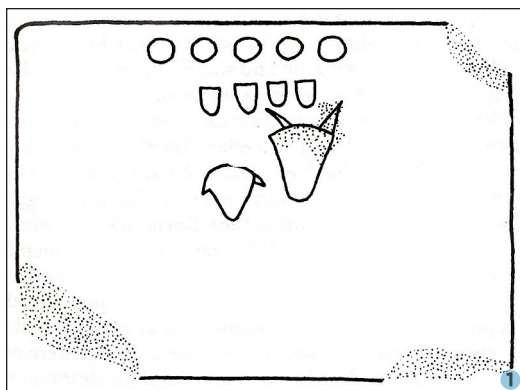
The Hebrew Vowels That Changed the World

by Joel M. Hoffman

Roughly 3,000 years ago, in and around the area now known as Israel, a group of people who may have called themselves Hebrews (Ivrim) or Israelites began an experiment in writing that would change the world.

success by the Egyptians, introduced hundreds or thousands of “icons,” symbolic representations of the meaning of words. For example, a circle around a smaller circle represented “sun.” The system grew in complexity to include icons for abstract nouns, verbs, etc.,

including Moabite, Phoenician, Hebrew, etc.—began to be written entirely in consonants. For example, the common ancient Canaanite word *ram*, meaning “high/exalted,” was written as RM; the word for “god,” *el*, was spelled with the Hebrew letter *aleph* followed by L; and



THE EVOLUTION OF WRITING: 1) THE VERY FIRST WRITING SYSTEM: ANIMAL TRADERS DREW PICTURES OF THEIR ANIMALS, ADDING MARKS TO INDICATE QUANTITY, C. 5TH CENTURY BCE. 2) THE EGYPTIANS INTRODUCED “ICONS” SUCH AS THE HIEROGLYPHS SHOWN HERE, FROM THE TOMB OF SETI I, 13TH CENTURY BCE. 3) THE SUMERIANS DEVISED A SYSTEM TO RECORD THE SOUNDS RATHER THAN THE MEANING OF WORDS, AS SHOWN HERE IN A CLAY TABLET FROM JAMDAT NASR IN IRAQ

Four means of written communication preceded the Israelites’ innovation.

The very first writing system used by humans was barely a system at all. Some 6,000 years ago, animal traders drew pictures of their animals and probably added marks next to them to indicate quantity. So a merchant who wanted to tell his business partner to expect five sheep could draw a sheep along with five marks on a tablet and have it sent on to his partner, rather than meet him face to face or rely on the accuracy of a personal go-between. While this system represented an enormous leap forward, its message options were nonetheless severely limited.

The second system, used with great

allowing for the creation and transmission of more complex messages. Still, literacy remained limited to the professional class of readers and writers known as scribes.

The third way of writing words dates to the third millennium B.C.E., when the Sumerians devised a system to record the sounds rather than the meanings of words. They created a few hundred symbols, one for each syllable of their language, and combined them to represent words. This syllabic system required fewer symbols than the Egyptians’ meaning-based one, but even so, its complexity and the great number of symbols put it beyond the reach of most people. Written communication was still limited to scribes.

The Consonants

Sometime during the second millennium B.C.E. a fourth system arose. A language commonly called “proto-Canaanite”—that is, “the language that would become the languages of Canaan,”

its plural, “gods” (*elim*), was written with the Hebrew letter *aleph* followed by LM. Anyone could learn to write using this system because it consisted of about two dozen symbols. In various combinations, they could spell any word in the language.

The problem, however, was that, without vowels, many people couldn’t read what they had written. For example, while the word RM represented *ram*, it could also be *rama* (height).

The Vowels

Enter the Hebrews. In roughly 1000 B.C.E., around the time of King David, the Hebrews made a seemingly minor improvement to the Phoenician consonantal system. (The Phoenicians probably lived in what is now southern Lebanon and northern Israel.) They doubled up some letters, using them not only as consonants, but also as vowels. The letter H (which we call a *heh*), for example, represented both a consonant and also the vowel A; the

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