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The Origin of the Alphabet

F. F. Bruce, Esq., M.A.

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In order to proceed from the known to the unknown—or at any rate from the well known to the less well known—let us take as our starting point the English alphabet as we know it to-day: A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z.¹ (The lower case letters are, of course, simply modifications of the capitals.) This English alphabet of 26 letters is derived from the Latin alphabet of 23 letters. I and J are by origin variants of one and the same Roman letter; the same is true of U and V; while W is exactly what we call it, a double U.

Y and Z were appended to the Roman alphabet in the 1st century B.C. for the more accurate transliteration of Greek words in Latin, Y representing the modified *ü* sound of Greek *upsilon*, and Z the double *dz* or *zd* sound of Greek *zeta*, neither of these sounds being found in native Latin words. The Roman alphabet was derived through the Etruscans from a West Greek alphabet, such as was used in the early Greek colonies of southern Italy. It is due to Etruscan influence that the Roman letter C had not the "voiced" quality of its Greek counterpart *gamma*; Etruscan had no such "voiced" stop, and therefore in the alphabet which the Romans acquired through Etruscan intermediation the letters C, K, Q had all the same "unvoiced" quality. Later, when the Romans wished to distinguish the "voiced" guttural stop from the "unvoiced," they employed G, a variant form of C, for this purpose, and inserted it in the alphabet in the place formerly occupied by Greek *zeta*, which the Romans jettisoned in those early days because it represented no Latin sound. Five other letters of the West Greek alphabet were similarly jettisoned.

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There were numerous varieties of alphabets in use in the Greek world. One was the West Greek alphabet from which the Roman alphabet was derived; another was the East Greek or Ionic alphabet, which was officially introduced at Athens in 403 B.C., and not long afterwards replaced the local varieties in other parts of Greece. This is the alphabet of 24 letters which we commonly know as the Greek alphabet. One of the main differences between it and the West Greek form is that in the latter, H represents the aspirate sound, while in the former (since most of the Ionic Greeks dropped all their *aitches*) there was no need of a letter to indicate the aspirate, and so H (*eta*) was used to represent a long open *e*, like *e* in French *père*.² In this, as in some other respects, however (*e.g.*, in its retention of the letters F and Q), the West Greek alphabet, and hence the Roman alphabet, kept nearer to the original Greek alphabet than did the Ionic alphabet. The earliest inscriptions in the Greek alphabet occur in the islands of Thera, Melos and Crete; they cannot be dated with exactitude, but belong to the 8th or 9th century B.C.

Greek tradition derives the alphabet from the Phœnicians. Cadmus, the founder of Thebes, and legendary inventor of the alphabet, was the son of Agenor, king of Phœnicia. Not only

¹ The article "Alphabet" in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 14th ed., Vol. 1 (1929), pp. 677 ff., should be consulted; it was written by a Member of the Victoria Institute, Dr. B. F. C. Atkinson.

² By the end of the B.C. era the sound of this letter had become that of *ee* in English *see*—the sound which it retains in Modern Greek.

does he bear a Phœnician name (from *qadmu*, possibly meaning "first"), but several features of his legend have marked Phœnician affinities, and the legend itself reflects an historical situation several generations before the Trojan War.³ It is quite likely, however, that the legend confuses the introduction of a syllabic form of writing on the Greek mainland before the Trojan War and the introduction of the Phœnician alphabet to the Greek world several generations after the Trojan War.⁴

In any case, the Phœnician derivation of the Greek alphabet is a matter of plain fact. The early Greek alphabet is the Phœnician alphabet, with some adaptations to the necessities of the Greek language which, being an Indo-European tongue,

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was totally different from the Semitic tongue of the Phœnicians. The most important of these adaptations was the use of five Phœnician letters (representing three Phœnician gutturals and two semi-vowels) to indicate vowels.⁵ All 22 letters of the Phœnician alphabet represented consonants. One of the letters used by the Greeks as a vowel, Phœnician *waw*, used as Greek *üpsilon*, was also required by the Greeks as a semi-vowel with the sound *w* (its original value in Phœnician), and so it was used, in two variant forms, twice over in the Greek alphabet—once in its Phœnician position (No. 6), in its old semi-vocalic character,⁶ and again at the end of the alphabet (No. 23) in its new character as a vowel-letter. (The letters which follow *üpsilon* in the Greek alphabet were added subsequently and do not concern us here.)

The names of most of the Greek letters are simply the Phœnician names taken over into Greek along with the letters. *Alpha*, *beta*, *gamma*, *delta* are meaningless in Greek, except as they serve to denote letters of the alphabet; but their original Phœnician forms, *aleph*, *beth*, *gimel*, *daleth* and so on (practically identical with the Hebrew names of the letters) are not only the names of letters but have a meaning of their own.

The Phœnician alphabet was written from right to left, as four of its derivatives, the Hebrew, Samaritan, Syriac and Arabic alphabets, are written to the present day. The earliest Greek writing also ran from right to left. When Herodotus (*Hist.* v, 59) says that he saw "Cadmeian characters" engraved on tripods in a temple in the Boeotian Thebes, he may be referring to right-to-left writing. The next stage in Greek writing was the writing of alternate lines right to left and left to right; this practice was known as writing *boustrophedon* ("ox-turning-wise"), as it resembled the alternate directions followed in ploughing, up one furrow and down the next. Then came the third stage, in which the left-to-right direction was standardized, and this has remained the direction in which the Greek alphabet and its derivative, the Roman alphabet, are written to this day. This matter of the direction of writing has no such metaphysical significance as

³ See J. L. Myres, *Who were the Greeks?* (1930), pp. 321 f., 347 ff.

⁴ If the Cadmus-legend reflects the historical situation of *c.* 1400 B.C., it was chronologically just possible for the Phœnician alphabet to be imported into Greece at that time. But there is no evidence of its presence in the Greek world for five or six centuries after that date. Traces of writing of the period 1400-1200 B.C., found when the site of the Cadmeia (the citadel of Thebes) was excavated in 1907, were of non-Semitic origin.

⁵ The three gutturals were *aleph*, *he* and *'ayin* (used by the Greeks as *alpha*, *epsilon* and *omicron* respectively); the two semi-vowels were *waw* and *yod* (used as *üpsilon* and *iota*).

⁶ The letter digamma, pronounced *w*, which occupied the sixth place in the West Greek and other local Greek alphabets, but was lacking in the Ionic alphabet.

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some people like to read into it; it is a matter of pure convention.⁷

How old is the Phœnician alphabet? The sarcophagus of Ahiiram, king of Gebal (Byblos) in Phœnicia, discovered by Pierre Montet in 1922, has an inscription of some length in this alphabet which is usually dated in the 13th century B.C.⁸ But there is earlier evidence than this. A vessel found in the same town of Gebal, belonging to the time of Amenemhet IV of Egypt (early 18th century B.C.), has marked on it two signs which are pretty certainly the Phœnician letters, 'ayin and kaph.⁹ And a date round about this time is probable on various grounds for the origin of the Phœnician alphabet.

The origin of writing, of course, long antedates the origin of the alphabet. Simple and convenient as alphabetic writing appears to us, it was reached at a late stage in the development of writing. This was inevitable, in view of the fact that writing developed out of drawing. A picture, say, of an old man, so long as it represents an old man and nothing else, remains a picture (or pictogram) only. Some of our traffic signs are of this character—those for cross-roads and various other types of road junction, for example. But when the picture of an old man is intended to convey the general idea of old age, we have moved a step—and a long step—in the direction of writing; the pictogram has become an ideogram. Thus, in our system of traffic signs, a torch does not denote a literal torch but the torch of learning, which by a further extension of meaning is (in this particular

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context) intended to indicate the presence of a school. Again, the picture of a bear, so long as it denotes that animal only—whether the species or an individual—remains a pictogram. But let the use of the picture be extended to cover other words which happen to have the same sound—the verb "bear" and the adjective "bare"—and another very important step forward has been taken; the pictogram has become a phonogram, a sign indicating a sound, or rather, in this case, a group of sounds, forming one syllable. And this phonogram may further be used to denote the same syllable when it forms part of a longer word, as if, for example (in charade fashion), we expressed the word "forbear" by writing a sign for the numeral "four" (4, IV or IIII)¹⁰ followed by the picture of a bear. The representation of every syllable by a distinct sign

⁷ The cuneiform writing was originally in columns read downward, and from right to left; but after *c.* 2500 B.C. it regularly runs from left to right. The Egyptian hieroglyphs were usually written from right to left (as the derived hieratic and demotic scripts always were), but sometimes from left to right, and sometimes in vertical columns. The Sinaitic alphabetic script was written indifferently in any of the three directions. The Indian *nāgari* script, probably derived from the Semitic alphabet, is written from left to right. The oldest extant piece of Latin writing (the inscription MANIOS MED FHEFHAKED NVMASIOI on the Prænentine fibula of *c.* 600 B.C.) runs from right to left. The earliest extant Latin inscription in stone (not later than 400 B.C.) has its letters written in vertical columns, from bottom to top and from top to bottom alternately. For right-handed writers the left-to-right direction has the advantage that one is less likely to smear or deface the words already written.

⁸ The Ahiiram inscription runs as follows in translation: "Etbbaal, son of Ahiiram, king of Gebal, made this coffin for Ahiiram his father as an everlasting abode. And if any king among kings or governor among governors besiege Gebal and uncover this coffin, may the sceptre of his authority be broken and the throne of his kingdom overthrown, but let peace rule over Gebal. If any man efface this inscription, may his seed perish."

⁹ C. F. A. Schaeffer, *The Cuneiform Texts of Ras Shamra-Ugarit* (1939), p. 36.

¹⁰ The numeral-signs are modern ideograms. The sign 4, for example, has exactly the same meaning for a reader speaking English, French, German or any other language, though they pronounce it quite differently from each other four—*quatre*, *vier* and so on.

is a great advance on the primitive stage when ideograms or logograms were the only written symbols. The number of possible syllables in any language, though large; is limited; with a syllabary (a set of syllabic signs), therefore, we are on the way to a more convenient system of writing. The number of signs in a syllabary can be further reduced if, instead of having a sign for every syllable of the consonant-vowel-consonant type (*e.g.*, *cat*, *dog*), we use only signs which represent either the consonant-vowel or the vowel-consonant type of syllable (*ba*, *ab*), and so instead of using signs which represent *cat*, *dog*, use signs which represent *ca-at*, *do-og*.

In point of fact, it was seldom that one of these improvements was adopted to the complete exclusion of the earlier stages. Thus, in the cuneiform writing of the Euphrates-Tigris valley and adjacent lands we find intermingled the simpler syllabic writing, the more complicated syllabic writing, and the still more primitive ideograms. There were several independent syllabaries in use in the Middle East in the second millennium B.C. There was the cuneiform script already mentioned, first used for writing Sumerian.¹¹ and later for Elamite and Akkadian and many other languages of

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Western Asia; there was the hieroglyphic script of Egypt; there were other hieroglyphic scripts in Syria and Anatolia, including that in which one dialect of Indo-European Hittite was written and that *printed*¹² on the Phaistos disc (which, though found in Crete, must have been carried there from Asia Minor); there was the linear script of Minoan Crete, which was carried thence to the Greek mainland and to Cyprus.¹³

While these syllabaries were in official use in the great Empires of the second millennium, the first experiments were being made in alphabetic writing. The Egyptians, as early as 3000 B.C., developed out of their hieroglyphic writing a sort of alphabet of 24 signs, representing all the consonants current in their language; this alphabet, however, never became independent of the cumbersome hieroglyphic system, but served only to supplement it. The bold step of detaching the alphabetic system completely from its unwieldy parent was taken by a people in close contact with the Egyptians. The Egyptian origin of the Phœnician alphabet has been generally accepted for quite a long time, but the absence of any connecting link between the Egyptian and Phœnician alphabets led from time to time to the propounding of other theories to account for the Phœnician alphabet; Sir Arthur Evans, for example, thought that the Phœnicians were to some extent at least indebted to the Cretan linear script, and he envisaged the Philistines as the intermediaries. But we now know that the Phœnicians had their alphabet before the advent of the Philistines in those parts.

¹¹ About 3000 B.C. we find two distinct forms of writing in Mesopotamia—the semi-pictographic script of Elam and Jemdet Nasr (near Kish), and the proto-cuneiform of Ur and Lagasb. Possibly both were derived from a common pictographic source, but the Sumerians made a more rapid advance from it than did the Elamites.

¹² Yes, *printed* with movable stamps; not written! Sir A. Evans suggested that the inscription was a religious chaunt in honour of the Anatolian Great Mother of the Gods. It shows 45 different signs. See Evans, *Scripts Minoa* i (1909), pp. 22 ff., 273 ff.

¹³ The Cretan linear script, which also goes back to a pictographic stage, remains undeciphered. However, the clue to its decipherment may now be within reach. In 1939 C. W. Blegen found about 600 tablets, written in a variation of Cretan linear script, on the site of Nestor's city of Pylos in S.W. Greece. The script seems to have been used for various languages, including Mycenaean Greek. When the tablets have been published and studied, it should not take long to decipher them. The Cretan linear script was also taken over by the pre-Greek population of Cyprus, and then adapted to Greek by the Achaean colonists in that island. As used for writing the Cyprian dialect of Greek, it was reduced to a syllabary of 54 characters, indicating open syllables only.

The missing link between the two alphabets made its appearance when it was discovered that rough inscriptions in the Sinai peninsula, the work of miners employed in the turquoise mines at Serabit el-Khadem, were written in an alphabet based (at any

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rate to a large extent) on Egyptian hieroglyphics, but nevertheless a real, self-sufficient alphabet.¹⁴ This Sinaitic alphabet now appears to supply the connecting link between the Egyptian writing and the classic Phœnician alphabet. Dr. Alan Gardiner, who played a prominent part in identifying the script of these Serabit *graffiti*,¹⁵ assigns it to the period of the Twelfth Dynasty of Egypt (c. 1989-1776 B.C.), when these turquoise mines were being worked.

It is noteworthy that the alphabet originated as the writing of common men, in contrast to the older systems which were the prerogative of priests and clerks. The alphabet made it possible for all classes to be literate; its invention is therefore a landmark of great importance in the history of civilization.

The excavations at Tell ed-Duweir (the Lachish of Old Testament times), begun in 1933, provided further examples of early alphabetic writing (including a line of writing on what is known as the "Lachish Ewer" belonging to the early 13th century B.C., and four characters on a dagger of the Hyksos period), which provide links between the primitive Sinaitic script and the developed Phœnician alphabet. Other links have been found on ostraca at Beth-shemesh and Gezer.¹⁶

The principle on which the alphabetic system was developed out of the hieroglyphic is generally agreed to have been the acrophonic (or initial-sound) principle. To denote the sound *b*, for example, an ideogram was chosen which represented a word beginning with that sound—the ideogram for both, meaning "house," which in its earliest form shows the outline of a house. Similarly, to denote the sound *y*, the ideogram for *yod*, meaning "hand," was chosen, and here too, in the earliest form of the letter, the outline of a hand with outspread fingers is clear. The close relationship of the Sinaitic symbols with the Phœnician alphabet became plain when it was realized that the names of the Phœnician letters designate the objects depicted by the Sinaitic symbols. The Egyptian alphabet was also based on the

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acrophonic principle, and it was from the Egyptians that the inventors of the Sinaitic alphabet adopted the principle. Many of the pictographs used are common to the Egyptian and Sinaitic alphabets, but in the former they designate the initial sound of the Egyptian word, while in the latter they designate the initial sound of the Semitic word. Thus the pictograph of a house is common to both alphabets, but in the Egyptian one it represents *h* (the initial of an Egyptian

¹⁴ The inscriptions were first discovered by Flinders Petrie in 1905. They are now in the Cairo Museum.

¹⁵ See his articles in *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* ii (1915), pp. 61 ff.; *Pal. Expl. Fund. Quarterly Statement* (1929), pp. 48 ff.

¹⁶ An article by J. W. Flight, "The Present State of Studies in the History of Writing in the Near East," in *The Haverford Symposium on Archaeology and the Bible*, ed. E. Grant (New Haven, 1938), gives a convenient summary of the data, with bibliography. See also C. C. McCown, *The Ladder of Progress in Palestine* (1943), eh. 8, "The Quest for an Alphabet" (pp. 100-111).

word meaning "house"), whereas in the Sinaitic and Phœnician alphabets it represents *b*, the initial of *beth*.

The chief reason for the absence of vowel-letters from the Semitic alphabets is their absence from the Egyptian alphabet from which these were developed. The Semitic languages in their written form managed to get on quite well without vowel-letters. Though in some of them at a later date some letters were employed in a secondary role to denote important vowels (e.g., in Hebrew, *aleph*, *he*, *waw* and *yod*, the so-called *matres lectionis*) and still later vowel-points were added to the written text, these are helpful adjuncts for the novice, but by no means indispensable for the experienced reader. I am told by expert Hebraists that in reading Hebrew quickly they find the points a positive hindrance; it is such a nuisance to have to stop and decipher them.

It is far otherwise with Indo-European languages. Vowels play so distinctive a part in their roots and inflections that they must be represented in the written language. And so, as we have seen, when the Phœnician alphabet was taken over by the Greeks, certain letters, five in number, were utilized as vowel-signs. Why five? There were seven distinct simple vowel sounds (quite apart from differences of quantity) in classical Greek those represented in the Ionic alphabet by *a*, *ε*, *η*, *ι*, *ο*, *υ* and *ω*. "Whoever adapted the Semitic alphabet to vocalic as well as consonantal notation," it has been remarked, "chose precisely the five vowels used in the Cypriote syllabary, in spite of the fact that a Greek ear heard at least seven vowels in the language."¹⁷ This suggests the possibility that the pre-Greek system of writing which originated in Crete and spread from there north and east may at some stage have influenced the adaptation of the Phœnician alphabet to Greek usage.

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There was one early form of the Semitic alphabet which did to a limited extent express vowel distinctions. This was the cuneiform alphabet of Ras Shamra, which was in use in the 15th century B.C. This cuneiform alphabet is not a development from Babylonian cuneiform; it is the result of trying to write the early Phœnician alphabet with a metal stylus on clay tablets. And the Ras Shamra alphabet is so well advanced that the alphabet from which it developed must be substantially older.¹⁸ This agrees with the evidence we have already noticed for dating the origin of the Semitic alphabet in the Twelfth Egyptian Dynasty. The Ras Shamra alphabet, however, instead of having but one sign for the letter *aleph*, has three, according as *aleph* is followed by *a*, *i* or *u*. Professor O. Eissfeldt¹⁹ connects this fact with the tradition in Sanchuniathon that Eisinus, the brother of Khna (the eponym of Canaan), was "the inventor of 'the three letters'." Eissfeldt suggests that *Eisirios* represents ultimately a corruption of Semitic Ugar, the eponym of Ugarit, the ancient Canaanite city whose site is now known as Ras Shamra. Sanchuniathon ascribes the invention of letters in general (as distinct from these special three) to Taautos, who is obviously the Egyptian Thoth; it is interesting that the Phœnician mythologist and historian should thus preserve a tradition of the Egyptian origin of the alphabet which modern discovery has shown to be securely based.

¹⁷ Quoted by Sir G. Hill, *History of Cyprus*, i (1940), p. 53, with a reference to Rhys Carpenter in *American Journal of Archaeology*, xlii (1938), p. 67.

¹⁸ C. F. A. Schaeffer, *The Cuneiform Texts of Ras Shamra-Ugarit* (1939), p. 36.

¹⁹ *Ras Shamra and Sanchuniathon* (1939), p. 60.

What is the relevance of all this for Biblical studies? The alphabet, as we have seen, brought writing and reading within the reach of ordinary people. In Judges viii, 14, we are told how Gideon laid hands on a youth of Succoth in Transjordan, who, according to the text of the Authorized and Revised Versions, "described" to him the chief men of the city. But the margins of both Versions honestly point out that the word means "wrote" (Heb. *kathab*). But that a chance young man should have been able to write seemed too unlikely, down to the days when the oldest alphabetic autograph known was Mesha's Moabite stone (inscribed c. 850 B.C. and discovered in A.D. 1868). Now, however, it seems perfectly probable that we are to understand the narrative literally, and that the youth wrote down for Gideon a list of the chief men of his city.

The Hellenistic Jewish writer Eupolemos, in the 2nd century

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B.C., put forward the view that writing was invented by Moses. This view was repeatedly put forward by Jews and Christians down to the 19th century; but now we know that men were writing at least 2,000 years before the time of Moses. In our own day, however, the belief has been revived in another form; if Moses did not invent writing, may he not at least have been the inventor of alphabetic writing? Sir Charles Marston, in *The Bible Comes Alive* (1937), p. 180, used italics to give emphasis to his conclusion that "the Bible began to be written when, and where, alphabetical writing began to be written." And he went on to suggest that "there may be an even closer relationship than has yet been brought to light." If the "closer relationship" in his mind had anything to do with the idea that Moses invented the alphabet, it is disposed of by the evidence which puts the origin of the alphabet back to the days of Dynasty XII.²⁰

But we do know that Moses may perfectly well have written in Hebrew in an early alphabetical script. There is no necessity now, as there seemed to be 35 years ago when Professor Naville wrote his *Archæology and the Old Testament*, to believe that Moses must have used the cuneiform script on clay tablets like those of the Tell el-Amarna collection. Of course he could have done so, but it is now seen to be equally possible—and perhaps more probable—that he used the alphabet. (I do not touch the question of how his documentary sources were written.) The history of the Bible, at any rate, is closely bound up, right from the start, with the history of the alphabet. And believers in the providence of God may well conclude that it was by that providence that, when "God's Word written" was about to make its first appearance, a form of writing lay ready to hand for the purpose, the understanding of which was not restricted to specially trained scholars, but lay within the capacity of Everyman.

WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS

Brig.-Gen. H. BIDDULPH wrote : Col. C. R. Conder, in *The First Bible* (Blackwood, 1902; esp. chap. 4), produces strong evidence,

²⁰ Some light relief in the progress of research was provided by H. Grimme's attempt to read the names Moses, Hatshepsut, Yabu, Sinai, in the Sinaitic inscriptions—partly through interpreting as significant letters mere cracks and weather-marks in the stone (*Althebräische Inschriften von Sinai* [1923], *Die Lösung des Sinaischriftproblems* [1926]).

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based upon variants in personal names, that the Pentateuch was written originally in cuneiform characters. Conder is not an authority who can lightly be set aside.

AUTHOR'S REPLY

I am indebted to Brig.-Gen. Biddulph for raising the point about Conder. I am aware that Conder, like Naville after him, argued that the Pentateuch was written in cuneiform characters on clay tablets, and therefore presumably in the Akkadian language. The early date of alphabetic writing was unknown to them. Now that we know that its invention ante-dated the time of Moses, it is no longer necessary to think of him as writing in Akkadian cuneiform. This was used by the Egyptian foreign office in the Eighteenth Dynasty for diplomatic correspondence with subjects and allies in Western Asia, but it does not follow that Moses would use it, especially as his reading public would not understand it. We may take it that the Pentateuch (as such) never existed in any earlier form than alphabetically written Hebrew. The variants in personal names (especially divine names) have a much simpler explanation.

Since my paper was communicated to the Institute, Professor W. F. Albright has made a further study of the Sinai alphabetic inscriptions. According to the *New York Times* of January 22nd, 1948, and the *Biblical Archaeologist* for February, 1948, Albright finds that they are written in an alphabet of 28 consonantal characters, and he dates them, on the basis of pottery found near the mines, about 1500 B.C. See also *B. A. S. O. R.*, April, 1948, where Prof. Albright gives his own account. It seems most likely now that the Sinaitic and Phœnician alphabets go back to a common alphabetic ancestor, which originated about 2000 B.C. or shortly after, probably at Gebel, which was in close contact with Egypt.

To my bibliographical notes two very important additions may now be made : D. Diringer, *The Alphabet: A Key to the History of Mankind* (Hutchinson, 1948), and G. R. Driver, *Semitic Writing From Pictograph to Alphabet* (Cumberlege, 1948). The latter work contains the British Academy Schweich Lectures for 1944.

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