

THE ALPHABET'S ORIGIN

From *Writing Made Easy: Just the Basics*
by Timothy Sharkey

The English language today uses Roman letters from the Roman alphabet. It also uses Arabic numbers from the Arab world. Most of the different languages of Europe – Italian, Spanish, French and German, *etc.* – use the Roman letters from the Roman alphabet.

However, the original Roman alphabet in ancient Rome had only 23 letters. Today's alphabet has 26 letters. The Greek alphabet before the Roman alphabet (which the Romans copied for their own use) had only 21 letters. Roman numerals use capitalized letters as numbers such as I, II, III, IV, V, VI, MXDLX and Arabic numerals use the same numbers we use today: 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9.

The ancient Egyptians, before the Greeks and Romans, used 10,000 hieroglyphs to write with. (Hieroglyphs were pictures of objects in the world.) However, since there were so many hieroglyphs to remember in the ancient Egyptian world, it became practically impossible for the average Egyptian to be able to write effectively. It made the ancient Egyptian way of writing extremely difficult.

In c.1,000 BC the ancient Phoenicians (now located in Lebanon) started a shift in writing away from the pictures of the Egyptian hieroglyphs to the pictures of the shape of the human mouth made while talking. They wrote with the sounds of the human mouth that we hear with our ears as opposed to the objects in the world that we see with our eyes. The ancient Greeks later perfected the Phoenician alphabet in about 500 BC by making each letter drawn consistently with the same kind of straight and curved lines found in the circle, the square, and the triangle. This made the letters of the alphabet fit together perfectly in words and in lines of text, and reading, as a result, became easy to do. Everything was neatly organized and communication flourished.

Since every Greek child could memorize the 21 letters of the Greek alphabet – unlike Egyptian children memorizing 10,000 hieroglyphs – the Greeks, over time, could write down the important things in life effectively. They started to capture the store of knowledge that had been built up by human beings from centuries before and they produced a body of knowledge that was available for all to read for centuries thereafter. In fact, the perfection of the alphabet may be the chief reason the Greek civilization became the first civilization in history to have so many great intellectual achievements compared to other civilizations

before it. They were the first civilization with an alphabet of only 21 letters that allowed them to easily write everything down.

While the Egyptian hieroglyphs represented objects in the world, the letters in the alphabet represented of the shape of the human mouth made while talking. The letters of the alphabet were based upon the sounds of speech, heard by our ears, as opposed to the objects of the world that were seen with our eyes. This seems to have made all the difference in the world. The alphabet gave us 21 letters to memorize instead of 10,000 hieroglyphs, and the rest, as we know, is history.

The sound of the letter *T*, for example, is produced by the human mouth when the tongue touches the roof of the mouth, as in the shape of the letter *T*, and air is exhaled. The sound of the letter *O* is produced by the human mouth when the lips of the mouth form a hole (resembling the letter *O*) and air is exhaled. This is the only way that the sound of the letter *O* can be produced by the human mouth. Try it yourself. The sound of the letter *F* is produced by the human mouth when the front teeth of the mouth hang over the bottom lip (as in the over-hanging shape of the letter *f*) and air is exhaled. Vowel sounds (*a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *u*) are produced with an open air passage in the throat when air is exhaled and consonant sounds (*b*, *d*, *k*, *m*, *p*, *etc.*) are produced with a closed air passage in the throat (or lips) when air is exhaled. The human mouth is a musical instrument like a trumpet or saxophone – it is excellent for singing and speaking with – and the alphabet tried to map some of it out.