

The alphabets of the Bible: Latin and English

John Carder

IN A PREVIOUS article we looked at the transformation of the Hebrew *aleph-bet* into the Greek alphabet ([Apr. 2004, p. 130](#)). In turn the Greek was used as a basis for writing down many other languages. Always the spoken language came first and writing later. We complete our look at the alphabets of the Bible by briefly considering Latin, then our English alphabet in which we normally read the Bible.

From Greek to Latin

The Greek alphabet spread to the Romans from the Greek colonies on the coast of Italy, especially Naples and district. (Naples, 'Napoli' in Italian, is from the Greek 'Neapolis', meaning 'new city'). There is evidence that the Etruscans were also involved in an intermediate stage. (The Etruscans were a widespread group in Italy before the Romans expanded. It was not until 396 B.C. that the Romans finally defeated them, then dispersed or absorbed them.) The Etruscans wrote from right to left like the Hebrews, while the Romans at first used the Greek system of *boustrophedon* (writing alternate lines left-to-right and right-to-left mirror image).

The adaptation of the Greek symbols to the Latin language involved changes which brought the alphabet more into line with what we are used to. The chart at [Figure 1](#) shows only the capital letters. The earliest Greek manuscripts of the Bible were written in capitals only, as were the early Latin versions and all inscriptions on public monuments then.

The inscription at the base of the statue of the Emperor Trajan, erected in A.D. 114, is regarded as setting the standard of good lettering, not only for Latin but also for English fonts still in use. An example is the 'Times Roman' style, so named from its use by *The Times* newspaper. The use of small letters in Biblical and other manuscripts did not develop until the 800s A.D.

We will now take a look at how Latin compares with Greek, and it would be best to read what follows in conjunction with the chart at [Figure 1](#). The following points come out of the comparison:

- The first major change is in the third letter, originally the Hebrew *gimal* and then the Greek *gamma*. The Etruscan language had no G sound, so they changed that place in the alphabet to a K sound.
The Greek symbol was rotated slightly by the Romans and then rounded, like the B and D symbols. It became the Latin letter C and, incidentally, created the confusion which still exists in English. Our C can have a hard 'k' sound, as in 'cold', or a soft sound, as in 'city'.
- In the sixth place, either the Etruscans or the Romans revived the old Greek symbol *digamma*, which had been dropped as a letter but retained as a numeral. They gave it an 'f' sound.
- The seventh place resolved a complication. Unlike the Etruscans, the Romans did use a 'g' sound. So they put a 'tail' on the Etruscan C to make a G. As early Latin had no 'z' sound, that symbol dropped out of the alphabet for several centuries and the new G symbol took its place. Later, as we shall see, the Z was reintroduced.
- The eighth letter, which was the long E, *eta*, in Greek, retained its H shape but became a new letter with a 'huh' sound. In considering Greek we noted that the 'huh' or 'h' sound was not part of the Greek alphabet but was represented by a small symbol like an inverted comma.
- The Greek *theta*, for the 'th' sound, was dropped.
- The Greek *iota* was retained as the vowel I. There was no letter J.
- The letter K tended to drop out of use, the new letter C being favoured. However, the K persisted enough to be included later in the Western European languages.
- *Lamda*, *mu* and *nu* were retained as L, M and N, though the L letter was rotated to become the shape familiar to us.
- The Greek *xi* retained its 'x' sound but its shape was simplified and it was dropped to the end of the alphabet.

	Greek	Latin		Greek	Latin
Alpha	Α	A		Ξ	↓
Beta	Β	B		Ο	Ο
Gamma	Γ	(Κ) C *		Π	P
Delta	Δ	D		Ϟ	Q
Epsilon	Ε	E		Ρ	R
di-gamma	ς	F *		Σ	S
Zeta	Ζ	↓ G *		Τ	T
Eta	Η	≠ H *		Υ	V
Theta	Θ	-		Φ	-
Iota	Ι	I		Χ	-
Kappa	Κ	K		Ψ	-
Lamda	Λ	L		Ω	-
Mu	Μ	M			
Nu	Ν	N			
				→	X
				24	21
					Y
					Z
					23

* (NEW SOUND)

Figure 1. Greek and Latin alphabets

- The O was unchanged but the P changed shape to the one more familiar to us.
- The Hebrew *kof* had become the Greek *koppa*, which was retained in the Greek numeral system after it was dropped from their alphabet. It was revived for Latin writing as the letter Q. It had to be followed by a letter U and another vowel, as it still is in English.
- The next, R, had in the Greek alphabet a shape like our present letter P. As that shape had been adopted by the Romans for their 'p' sound, they added a 'tail' to distinguish the R.
- The shape of S was simplified and rounded. The letter T was unchanged.
- The way the Romans dealt with the vowel U caused lasting complications. The Greek capital letter which the Romans borrowed had a shape which we read as Y. (That is the reason for some English words which came to us from Greek via Latin having a letter Y where the Greek had a U: words such as 'dynamo', from Greek *dunamis*, power; 'psychology', from the Greek *psuche*, spirit; and 'hymn' from *humnos*. The Romans dropped the 'tail' of the Y shape, making what we would call a V shape for the 'u' sound. Thus the famous dedication tablet from the time of Christ, found at Caesarea, which mentions Pontius Pilate and the Emperor Tiberius, shows their

	Greek	Roman
1	I : II, III, IIII	I : II, III, IIII or IV
5	Π : ΠI <small>pen-te</small>	V : VI to IX
10	Δ : ΔI <small>deka</small> ΔΔI	X : XI XX to XL
50	ΠΔ : <small>pen-tekonta</small>	L : LI LX to XC
100	Η : <small>he-katon</small>	C :
500	ΠΗ : <small>pen-takosioi</small>	D :
1000	Χ : <small>chilioi</small>	M :
Arabic		
	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0	• OR ○

Figure 2. Numerals

names with the V-shaped letters. That style came down to English and lasted a long time. The early editions of the AV had that style of font. Then, to make matters worse, the Romans later added a letter Y, as we shall see presently.

- The Romans had no use for the last four letters of the Greek alphabet, and dropped them. As mentioned earlier, the letter X was moved from the middle to the end of the list. Thus the early Roman alphabet ran from A to X and had a total of twenty-one letters.
- After the Romans conquered mainland Greece in 146 B.C. they developed a tremendous respect for Greek culture, and increasingly borrowed Greek words. They then found a need to add two more letters to their alphabet, Y and Z. These were added some little time before the beginning of the Christian era. The Y was intended as a consonan-

tal 'yuh' sound, but some confusion with the vowel 'u' remained.

Thus the Roman alphabet ended up very similar to the one we use, but with a total of twenty-three letters in contrast to our twenty-six letters, the letters J, V and W being missing and the V-shaped letter denoting the U vowel.

Numerals

With their many changes to the Greek alphabet, the Romans did not adopt the system of each letter having a numerical value. If they wanted to calculate the numeric value of a name, for political or superstitious purposes, the Greek styles of the names and numbers were used.

For everyday purposes the Romans devised a numbering or tallying system similar to the old Greek commercial system. Both systems were based originally on counting fingers, so there were letters for the fives and then the tens and hundreds. Figure 2 shows both systems side by side.

To make bigger numbers, the Romans usually added extra symbols to the right. To avoid making the larger numbers too clumsy

they hit on the idea of putting symbols to the left to signify subtraction. Thus on old-fashioned clock faces or documents you can see for the number 4 either four strokes or IV, signifying five minus one, the two methods being about equally common. For the number 9 a V and four strokes, that is, five plus four, is far less common than IX, ten minus one. For the larger numbers, such as 19, 49, 90 and 99, the subtraction system was virtually always used.

The ancients had many clever ways of calculating, in spite of their clumsy numerals. They could use fractions. They had various calculation tables, and later the abacus. They had methods of using the fingers for quite complex calculations, especially multiplication.

However, further advances in mathematics depended on a system which needed symbols for only the numbers 1 to 9, and which had a zero. The value of the symbols would depend on

their place in a number, thus identifying the decimals, units, tens, hundreds and so on. The necessary symbols, which we now regard as normal, were invented in India and came to the West via Arab scholars in Baghdad and Spain. It was not until the 1500s that written calculations using the 'new' symbols were widely used in Europe. The Hindu-Arabic symbols are shown at the bottom of [Figure 2](#). It takes little imagination to see how our modern numbers were derived. The zero sign, crucial to modern mathematics, was originally a dot or a small circle. Its Arabic name was *sifr*, the origin of our word 'cypher'.

The English alphabet

It was noted above that, with the addition of the letters Y and Z, the Roman alphabet was complete with a total of twenty-three letters. The order and shapes of the letters were as they are familiar to us in the English and Western European languages.

Between that time and this, the English alphabet went through several stages of development. Letters were added and discarded, or changed their shapes and changed back again. We will look at only a few of these changes, especially as they relate to editions of the Bible.

Some of those changes left curious traces long after they were superseded. Let us start with some non-Biblical items. After the Roman legions withdrew, the British Isles were invaded by many groups from Europe, including the Danes and the Norwegian Vikings. One of the letters the Scandinavians introduced was a single symbol for the 'th' sound. It was called a 'thorn' and it had a Y shape. We still see a trace of it in those restaurants coyly called 'Ye Olde Tea Shoppe'. The word 'Ye' has nothing to do with the old-style form of the word 'you'. Its origin is in the word 'The' spelled with the letter 'thorn'. Another, later, example was the style of the letter S written or printed like a small letter 'f' (but without the crossbar), which gave some words in old editions of the Bible a very curious appearance, such as Saul's father's 'affef' (1 Sam. 9:3).

The last of the Scandinavian invaders of Britain were the Normans, the 'Northmen', who had settled in France only 150 years previously. They reintroduced Latin as the official language, and brought with them the letter W and their version of French, making an alphabet of twenty-four letters.

A later introduction from northern Europe was the complex 'Gothic' lettering, or 'black letter' alphabet. This was originally a handwritten style used in official manuscripts and Bibles. It was used in the earliest printed Bibles produced by Gutenberg and others on the printing presses developed in Germany in the mid-1400s. It was a long time before this hard-to-read lettering was replaced by clearer styles based more directly on the Roman script.

Our alphabet became twenty-six letters in the Middle Ages when J and U were invented. It took a long time for these letters to be accepted, and still longer for printers to sort out the confusion between I, J and Y and between the U and the V shapes. The letter J was invented to take over the hard sounds in English which had been represented previously by I or Y. The hard J sound is purely English, but the confusion between our letters I and Y goes back to the Hebrew. (We have two Israeli friends both with the Hebrew form of the name Isaac. Yet when they write their names in English, one puts a Y and the other an I for exactly the same name.) The English J shape derived from the style of writing Roman numerals. It became the habit when writing the numbers 2 or 3 in small letters (ii or iii) to lengthen the last stroke into a J shape, which later took on a separate identity.

The very name of the letter W suggests that it is a late invention. It does not have a name of its own. In English it is 'double U' (two letters U) while in French it is *doublevai* (two Vs), and for a long time the double letters were written and printed separately.

Early Bible versions

There is a book called *The English Hexapla* which illustrates how long some of those features persisted. It has the Greek of the New Testament set with six early English translations in parallel columns. The earliest English version included is that of John Wiclif (or Wyclif), produced in 1380, and the latest is the first edition of the AV in 1611. Wiclif's work was in Chaucerian English, which reads almost like a foreign language today. It included, incidentally, another letter symbol which came into English for a time and disappeared again, like the 'thorn'. It was a symbol used where we would put a G or GH and was shaped like a modern handwritten letter Z. (Chaucer, most widely known for his narrative poem *The Canterbury Tales*, and Wiclif, with his Bible translation, helped establish the English

language as suitable for literature. Previously it was regarded as the crude dialect of peasants.)

The other versions displayed in the *Hexapla* appeared in a period of less than a century, up till 1611. It was a period like the past century in that it saw a number of new translations published. None of the early versions, including the original AV, use the letter J. In all versions shown in the *Hexapla*, the name of Jesus is spelled with an I, as is the name John. The four earlier versions spell Jerusalem with an I; the two later versions use the Latin spelling, 'Hierusalem'.

On the shape of the letter U there was great confusion. Wiclif, the earliest, used the rounded

shape for both the U and the V. The next earliest, Tyndale, 1534, used the V shape for both U and V. The other four, including the original AV, used the V-shape for their Us and our U-shape for their Vs.

The editions of the AV which we use are the result of a number of revisions over the years. Spellings have been revised and some words dropped which had become completely obsolete. There were quite extensive revisions in 1796 and 1873, and even some minor and unobtrusive changes as late as 1932 and 1962. These did not change the basic translation, but made the language easier to understand.