

raisins" here are clearly associated with the worship of idols, presumably playing some role in pagan ceremonies.

We conclude from this, firstly, that *ashishah* on its own refers to cakes of some sort but not necessarily raisin cakes, and secondly, that, if raisin cakes

were associated with idolatry, then David would not have been giving them out at a ceremony to mark the entering of the ark of the presence of the God of Israel into Jerusalem.

No doubt with this in mind the *Jerusalem Talmud*, a fourth-century-A.D. compilation of the

sayings of earlier rabbis, said that the term *ashishim* refers to cakes made of lentil flour, which would be very nutritious. What justification there is for this is not known, however, and the real meaning of *ashishah* remains a mystery.

Tony Benson

The alphabets of the Bible: Hebrew

John Carder

HEBREW WAS, and still is, written from right to left, the opposite to European languages. Some find that hard to believe, but it is so. When you study Hebrew, it is amazing how quickly you become used to it and how few problems it presents.

Perhaps less widely known is that Hebrew books and dictionaries are printed from right to left, so that, in a two-language dictionary, the Hebrew-to-English starts from the right-hand cover and the English-to-Hebrew starts from the left cover, and they meet in the middle of the book. So it is rather confusing when you pick up some concordances or lexicons, such as Strong's or Gesenius, which are designed for readers who speak English, and find that the Hebrew starts from the wrong end, that is the left end.

Modern Hebrew writings, such as newspapers or letters, may include numerals in the European or international style. Examples are the date by the Roman calendar, telephone numbers and calculations. These are written or printed as we write them, from left to right, even though they may come in the middle of a sentence in Hebrew which reads from right to left.

Letter forms

The Hebrew letters many of us have in our Bibles heading the sections of Psalm 119 are the printed forms, naturally enough. In modern Hebrew there is also a handwriting style for everyday use. Some of the letters are just simplified forms of the printed letters, while others look rather different. The letters are not joined up, unlike most of our handwriting styles.

The printed letters are closely based on the alphabet developed by Ezra and the schools of scribes he set up after the return from the exile.

That handwritten alphabet, used long before printing was invented, of course, is termed the 'book hand'. It is found on the earliest Hebrew scrolls known to exist, the Biblical and sectarian writings commonly referred to as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The oldest known copy of the scroll of Isaiah is dated to about 300 B.C. It (or a replica) is on display in the Shrine of the Book museum in Jerusalem. The writing on it is still beautifully clear, except where the actual material of the scroll, the leather, is damaged.

But the writing on those scrolls is not the earliest style of Hebrew writing. There was an earlier one in use before the exile. In the [chart](#) opposite the left-hand column shows the letter forms used before the exile while the next column shows the modern printed forms. (The English names try to indicate in the simplest way the modern official pronunciation in Israel.) As you can see, the older letters are very different from the later ones. There are no complete scrolls known that are written in the ancient script. Only short inscriptions have survived. Of these, by far the most important is the tablet found in Hezekiah's tunnel in Jerusalem. That described how the teams digging the tunnel from opposite ends met in the middle. In some of the Dead Sea Scrolls the Divine Name was specially written in the ancient script, and on some later coins the old lettering was deliberately used.

Vowels

The English alphabet has, as we know, twenty-six letters, of which five are vowels (a, e, i, o, u), the rest being consonants. The Hebrew alphabet has twenty-two letters, all consonants. The earliest scrolls do not have any indication of the vowel

HEBREW							
Before exile	Printed form			End forms			
𐤀	א	1	Aleph	𐤁	ך	ט	20 KHaf
𐤂	ב	2	Bet/Vet	ל	ם	מ	30 Lamed
𐤃	ג	3	Gimel	נ	ן	מ	40 Mem
𐤄	ד	4	Dalet	ו	ו	נ	50 Nun
𐤅	ה	5	Hé	ז	ז	ס	60 Samekh
𐤆	ו	6	Vav	ח	ך	ט	70 ʿAyin
𐤇	ז	7	Zayin	צ	ץ	מ	80 Pé/Fé
𐤈	ח	8	KHet	כ	כ	מ	90 Tsadè
𐤉	ט	9	Tet	ק	ק	מ	100 Kof
𐤊	י	10	Yod	ר	ר	מ	200 Resh
				ש	ש	מ	300 Shin/Sin
				ת	ת	מ	400 Tav

sounds. Neither do modern Hebrew books and newspapers, except Bibles, dictionaries and a few publications designed for learners.

There is a system of dots and tiny symbols, called vowel points, which are placed under or behind the consonants to indicate the vowel sounds. The system was invented by the scribes some centuries after the time of Christ to ensure the correct pronunciation and understanding of the Scriptures when Hebrew was no longer in everyday use. Modern printed Hebrew Bibles have these same points for the same purpose.

How can you possibly understand or read words without vowels? To answer that question, let me use some illustrations from English. How can you possibly tell how to pronounce correctly the various words ending with the letters o-u-g-h? There is 'rough' with a 'u' sound, 'cough' with an 'o' sound, 'bough' with 'ow' sound and 'bought' with an 'or' sound. Again, how do you know when to pronounce 'c' like 'k', as in 'cake', or like 's', as in 'city', or 'g' hard, as in 'gate', or soft, as in 'gentle'? The answer is that you just have to remember, and so it is with

Hebrew vowels. If it is your native language you learn it so early in life that it comes naturally. But if you have to learn it later in life as a foreign language it is harder for most people.

Incidentally, Arabic and other Semitic languages are also read from right to left, their alphabets consist solely of consonants and they have vowel-pointing systems. Even those well-educated in Arabic need the vowel points to be able to read correctly.

The vowel sounds in spoken Hebrew are basically 'a', 'e', 'i', 'o' and 'u' (pronounced 'oo' rather than 'yew'). Only fifteen signs and sounds are needed for the Hebrew vowels. That compares with more than thirty vowel sounds (as distinct from the letters that represent them) needed for so-called 'standard' English.

Pronunciation

In Hebrew, most of the letters have a single sound each. Two of the letters have multiple functions. They have their own sound values (a Y and a V) but they can also serve to indicate vowel sounds. The Y (*yod*) can also indicate a long 'a', a long 'e'

or a long 'i'. The V (*vav*) can also indicate an 'o' sound or an 'oo' sound.

Thus the Hebrew letters for D-V-D can be pronounced 'David' (with the 'a' said as 'ar' and the 'i' with rather an 'e' sound), or it can be 'Dod' (with a long 'o', and meaning 'beloved' and also 'uncle'), or it could be said as 'Da-oud', which is similar to the Arabic pronunciation of the name David.

We cannot be certain of the sound values that were used in Bible times as there is no rhyming poetry in the Bible which could be used as a guide. The official pronunciation of modern Hebrew in Israel, called 'Sephardic', is slightly simplified compared with the pronunciation used by the oriental communities of Jews. But it is probably close enough to the original, or as near as we can get. The pronunciation of the oriental communities retains some ancient features but has also been influenced by Arabic.

The letters of the alphabet

Our word 'alphabet' is derived by joining together the first two letters of the Greek alphabet, *alpha* and *beta*—A and B. In turn, the Greek names are derived from the first two Hebrew letters, *aleph* and *bet*. However, the Hebrew *aleph* is *not* the letter A, it is a consonant, and a very peculiar one by English standards. *Aleph* can take any of the vowel sounds; it can be an 'a', 'e', 'i', 'o', or 'u'. Also, if it comes in the middle of a word it represents a slight pause, like that in the English word 'cooperative'.

Other points about the Hebrew alphabet are:

- There is no division into capital and small letters, but five letters take a different form when they appear at the ends of words, as these letters often do. An example is *mem*, the M, which is the final letter of masculine plural words such as 'cherubim'.
- There are three letters which are sounded one way if they are the first letter of a word but change to a different sound if they come later in a word. They are the letter *bet* (B or V), the letter *kaf* (K or the guttural KH), and the letter *peh* (P at the start of a word or F at the end). For example, the second letter of the 'aleph-bet' is sounded B at the beginning of words such as Bethlehem. But it is usually sounded V in the middle or at the end of a word. An instance is the word *aviv*, meaning 'spring'. The AV ignores this feature, but the month name it spells as 'Abib' in Exodus 13:4; 23:15; 34:18 and Deuteronomy 16:1 is

the same as in the name of the modern city, Tel Aviv.

- There are several pairs of letters which have something in common. There is another letter, the *ayin*, which is like the *aleph* in that it has no sound of its own. It takes any vowel sound and also denotes a slight pause. An example is the word for the false god, 'Baal'. It is not pronounced like the English word 'bale', but as 'Ba-al', that is in two syllables, with both letters 'a' sounded as 'ar'. The plural is 'ba-alim'. The word also means 'lord' (in the earthly sense) and (sisters may be amused to know) 'husband'.
- There are also two letters which sound as if they are double letters, TS and SH (*Tsade* and *Shin*). 'Sin' and 'Shin' have the same symbol, but with a dot over the left-hand side for S (*Sin*) or over the right-hand side for SH (*Shin*). The last reminds us of the account in Judges 12:5,6, in which the Gileadites, warring against the Ephraimites, captured the fords across the River Jordan and stopped any fugitive Ephraimites trying to cross to get home. The Gileadites tested them by making them say the word 'Shibboleth', with the letter *Shin*, but the Ephraimites were able only to pronounce the simple letter S.

Numerical values

Probably all of us know that the Hebrew letters have numerical values. As shown in the [chart](#) on the previous page, the first ten letters, *aleph* to *yod*, have values 1 to 10. The next letter is 20, the next 30, then 40, 50 and so on to 100. The following letters represent the hundreds.

The letters are combined to form the intermediate numbers. Eleven is 10 + 1 (*yod-aleph*), twelve is 10 + 2 (*yod-bet*), then 10 + 3, like our *thirteen*, and 10 + 4, *fourteen*. Then the system changes to 9 + 6 (*tet-vav*) for 15 and 9 + 7 (*tet-zayin*) for 16. This is because 10 + 5 and 10 + 6 would make up elements of the Divine Name, which is not to be used for mundane purposes. *Aleph* is 1, and one thousand is *aluf*, the same letter with an extra mark. An *aluf* in the Bible was the commander of a thousand men. The same word is still used in the Israeli army for a general.

It should be noted that the numbers, as such, have names, as in English: one is *akhat*, two is *shtaim*, three is *shalosh*, one hundred is *me-ah* and so on. In fact, there are two sets of names, masculine and feminine. So the numbers used in the text of the Old Testament are spelled out, not

simply shown as alphabetical letters. The [chart](#) on page 99 shows that the numerical values of the letters of the alphabet stop at 400, except for *aleph* also being 1,000. This presents no problems in the Biblical text. Numbers greater than 400 are spelled out, as are those less than 400. It would have problems only for those interested in gematria (the mystical study of the numeri-

cal value of names and words in the Biblical text), and I do not know how the practitioners dealt with that. In spoken Hebrew the names of the numbers are still in everyday use. In books and letters they use the same (Arabic) figures as we do, though for identifying paragraphs, in reports for example, the letters may be used as we use (a), (b) and so on.

The man who carried the cross of Jesus

Tony Benson

MATTHEW, MARK and Luke all record the fact that a man called Simon was commandeered by the Roman soldiers to carry the cross of Jesus to the place of crucifixion. This is Mark's record: "And they compel one Simon a Cyrenian, who passed by, coming out of the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to bear his cross" (15:21).

Cyrene was the chief city of Cyrenaica, situated in what is now eastern Libya, and a province of the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus. Jews had settled there from Egypt about 300 B.C., and Jews from "the parts of Libya about Cyrene" were amongst the Jews from foreign parts in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost who heard the apostles speak in tongues (Acts 2:10). Later, Jews from Cyrene were amongst those who bitterly opposed the forthright preaching of Stephen (6:9), indicating that there were Jews from there permanently residing in the Jerusalem area, perhaps with their own synagogue. Some of the Jews of Cyrene became believers in Christ, however, and as a result of the persecution which followed Stephen's death preached the gospel in other countries (11:20).

The fact that Mark mentions that Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus suggests that these two sons of his became believers. There was a Jew called Alexander at Ephesus, apparently a believer (19:33), and a believer called Rufus at Rome, whom Paul knew well (Rom. 16:13). There is nothing to suggest that the Alexander at Ephesus was the son of Simon of Cyrene. Regarding Rufus, since he was well known to Paul, and since Paul had never been to Rome when he wrote to the Romans, it is quite possible that he was Simon's son and that Paul got to know him in Jerusalem.

In 1941 two Jewish archaeologists, surveying ancient burial caves in the Kidron Valley east of

Jerusalem, cleared one such cave of various artifacts, which were catalogued and stored away. Little attention was given to them at the time, even when an article was written detailing the finds in the *Israel Exploration Journal* about twenty years later. However, the July/August edition of the magazine *Biblical Archaeology Review* presents the idea that this cave was the burial tomb of the family of Simon of Cyrene.

The tomb contained eleven ossuaries (stone boxes in which people's bones were put after the rest of the body had rotted away), nine of which were inscribed with one or more names, twelve names in all, and mostly in Greek letters. Four were typical Jewish names, the other eight Greek-style names. The remarkable thing about the Greek-style names was that some had not previously been found in Palestine, but were common in Cyrenaica. This indicates that the burial cave was the family tomb of Jews from Cyrenaica who had come to live in Jerusalem.

One ossuary is of particular interest. It bears three inscriptions. Two read, "Alexander of Simon", that is, son of Simon. The third reads, "Alexander Qrnyt". The latter word is a puzzle, and the article suggests it is a misspelling of "Qrnyh", the Greek for Cyrenaica. Although Simon was the commonest Jewish name at the time of Jesus (there are eleven people named Simon or Simeon in the New Testament), Alexander was not a common name. Given the evidence that Jews from Cyrenaica were buried in the tomb, it seems very likely, therefore, that the Alexander referred to on the inscription was the one mentioned in Mark 15:21.

What, then, happened to the remains of Simon and his other son Rufus? In the case of Simon we do not know. In the case of Rufus, if he was the Rufus of Romans 16:13 he presumably died and was buried in Rome.