

05 Tarot and Qabbalah: Part C, The 22 Trumps

A major aspect of the Qabbalah's Tree of Life tradition is that the Tree has 22 Pathways. The Pathways interconnect the various Fruits on the Tree of Life and represent archetypes of human life. Because the Tree of Life is an essential part of the Qabbalah tradition, and the ancient Hebrew alphabet of 22 letters is also an essential part of the Qabbalah tradition people suspected that there was a connection between the Tarot Trumps and the Qabbalah tradition.

There were 22 letters in the original Phoenician/Hebrew alphabet, so the Qabbalists associated an alphabet letter to each of the 22 Pathways on the Tree of Life. That meant the Tree of Life was a sort of handy Sesame Street from which you could memorize the numbers from 1 to 10 and the 22 letters of the alphabet. At the same time you could also become familiar with the most important "Fruits" of human life.

This became a very important educational tool, because in ancient times there was no public school system, so most of the population was illiterate. There was no printing and publishing industry, so books had to be laboriously copied by hand and only the wealthy elite could possess private libraries. The first step to literacy was to learn to read numbers and to memorize the letters of the alphabet.

The invention of writing brought mankind a major technology for recording information and passing it on from generation to generation in a reliable manner. But there was no means as yet for learning to become widely available through a mass media that enabled general public literacy.

So the 22 Pathways on the Tree of Life also became very important along with the 10 Fruits. We do not know for sure whether there was a standard arrangement for the letters on the Pathways, but there definitely was a standard sequence for the letters of the Phoenician/Hebrew alphabet. On the Tree of Life diagram of the last lesson I arranged the letters from the top downward in their traditional sequence. Even the modern English alphabet we use today follows that sequence, although we dropped a few letters and added a few along the way.

The ancient letters also were given names, and the names had meaning in the Semitic language. Each letter name began with the letter that belonged to that name, and these names were derived from basic aspects of everyday life, so they were mnemonic aids like in our kindergarten books: A is for apple, B is for ball, C is for cat, and so on.

For the ancients “Aleph” was a bull*, “Bet” was a house, “Gimel” was a camel, and so on.

[* Some say that Aleph was for an ox, but an ox was a bull that had been castrated so it could be used as a work animal on a farm. The bull was a symbol of the sun’s creative energy and the source of life on our planet because it was the largest, most powerful of the domesticated animals. So the secret meaning of the letter A was a powerful bull and a symbol of the sun. If you turn the modern capital letter A upside down, you will see a simple drawing of a bull’s head with horns. The camel was the second largest and most powerful domesticated animal and was vital for people who had to travel long distances in desert lands.]

According to the theory of Qabbalistic Tarot each of the 22 Trump cards of the Tarot represented one of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The alphabet letters were very simple stick figures so that anyone could draw them. But they each represented an object, an animal, a part of the body, or a common household item or tool. The Tarot image was drawn in more detail as a picture and usually had a person associated with it.

From ancient times people who used the Tarot knew that there was this connection of the Tarot with the alphabet, so we find that some decks put Hebrew letters on the cards and some also put numbers on the cards. Sometimes the numbers were Arabic style and sometimes they were Roman numerals. So you have to know how to read Roman numerals for some cards.

When I started to study the cards, I found that different designers arranged the letters differently on the cards. There was no standard for which letter went with which card. They also sometimes changed the order of the numbers, although there was something of a tradition regarding the numbers. By the Middle Ages they already had an order that was commonly used.

An unusual aspect of the ordering is that the first Trump card often is the Fool. We could say the Fool is someone who does not understand proper behavior, or a student who has not yet started to learn a course of study. It could even represent an idiot or a crazy person. In many Tarot systems they gave the Fool the number 0, apparently to symbolize that he is a “know nothing”. His mind is empty. But then the second card in the sequence would be the Magician with the number 1. He represents someone who knows everything and can solve problems with a wave of his magic wand. The Fool knows nothing and the Magician knows everything, so they put them at the beginning. But some others put the Fool at the end of the Trumps.

Studying these arrangements I realized that the people who designed Tarot cards in later times did not really know any Hebrew nor did they even understand the way the ancients managed their numbers. Another aspect that added to the confusion was that the Tarot was often suppressed as a tool for gambling and fortune telling, both of which were frowned upon by authorities. So the Tarot tradition became somewhat of an esoteric tradition that was carried on secretly in certain societies.

Nevertheless, when the Tarot emerged into popularity in the Middle Ages, it already had a pretty well standardized set of Trump cards that merely varied in certain artistic details but maintained a fixed identity for each Trump. Looking at different decks you could still recognize the Magician, the Emperor, the Tower, the Devil, the Lovers, and so on.

However I discovered that the symbols that were put on the cards were very unreliable. For example, the 0 was wrong, because in ancient times there was no 0 in our number system. Our numbers began with 1. The “number” 0 was invented in India around the 5th and 6th century AD. During the 11th to 13th centuries it was gradually introduced into Europe via the Moorish muslims in Spain. The use of zero was not common until the 16th century. So the zero on a Tarot card was almost certainly an anachronistic later addition.



Looking at this example of the Fool in my B.O.T.A. deck with which I began my Tarot studies, I noticed another major confusion. In the lower left corner is a 0, and in the lower right corner is the Hebrew letter Aleph, which is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet and therefore was also assigned the number “1”. The problem here is that the ancient Hebrew letters were not only letters, they were also numbers, and the number associated with Aleph was 1. So the card has the “number” 0 on one side and the number 1 on the other side. (I put “number” in quotes because some people still do not believe 0 is a number, but only consider it as a place holder in mathematical calculations, which was what it was when it first appeared in ancient books.)

Furthermore, the Aleph also has another value: 1000, which adds even more confusion. Aleph was the lowest number and also the highest number for the Hebrews. In their lives they mostly did not get to numbers greater than 1000. The number 1000 really just meant very many items of something. Larger numbers were a big problem for ancient Hebrew semi-nomadic tribes, and they rarely had any use for them.



When we look at the Magician in the same deck, we find he is given the number 1, and the Hebrew letter is Beit, which means house and has the numerical value of 2. So the Magician magically can turn 1 into 2. The whole deck then suffers from not knowing that the ancient letters were also numbers, so it was not necessary to add a number to the card.

But the problem is even more complicated. The Hebrew numbers are like Arabic numbers from 1 to 10 (the numbers for the Fruits on the Tree of Life). But there is no number 11. The next number in the Hebrew system is 20. Then the numbers go by 10's up to 100. Then the next number is 200, 300, and so on up to 1000. At 1000 we are back to Aleph. So the last of the Tarot Trumps would have the number 20 + 2 rather than 22.

The numerical values of the letters came to have great importance in Qabalah, because every word in Hebrew could also be considered a number. Thus the books of the Old Testament could be considered to be elaborate mathematical codes, the study of which became a branch of Qabalah known as *gematria*. None of this makes any sense to an average person who encounters the modern Tarot decks, nor is the numerical and alphabetical information on the cards reliable.

However, the basic principle is correct. The Tarot is intimately bound up with alphabet letters and numbers. It is an ancient Sesame Street, an ancient entry point into literacy. Also the Tarot is intimately connected to the Tree of Life symbolism and the Qabalah. The question is to figure out which letters and which numbers go with which cards and what does it all mean?

There is another important secret to the Tarot relation with letters. The ancient Phoenician/Hebrew alphabet only had 22 letters. Each letter was a pictograph or ideograph representing an object or an idea. Later the rabbis added 5 more "letters" to their alphabet. The five new letters were not really "new". They were modifications of the calligraphy to indicate the end of a word (the five "finals") and to complete the "system" of gematria. Since ancient manuscripts had no punctuation or word boundaries, this means they took the purely numerical grids of the Old Testament texts and collapsed them into a given prescribed interpretation, thereby hiding some potential

interpretations. The new “system” also completed the alphabetical number system.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9

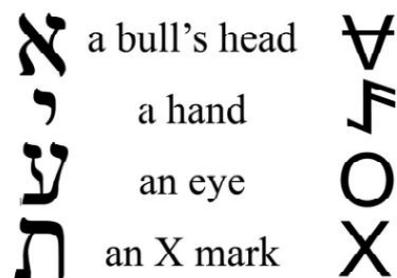
10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90

100, 200, 300, 400, 500, 600, 700, 800, 900

1000

The 27 letters now perfectly matched the numbering system. This also tells us that such a development came after the archaic period and was part of the later addition of gematria to the Qabalah.

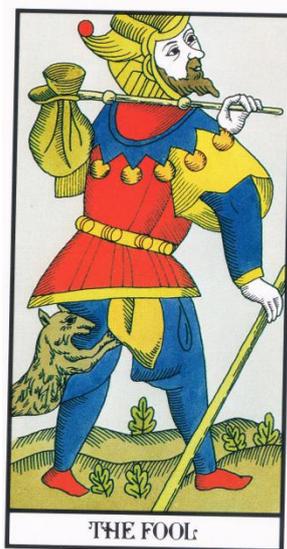
They also radically changed the calligraphy of the letters so that many of the modern Hebrew letters are unrecognizable as descendants of their original pictographs and ideographs.



On the right you see the ancient Hebrew letters, and on the left you see the same letters as they are printed in books today. In the middle you find the meanings of the letters in Hebrew. The modern letters no longer resemble their ancient forms, but the ancient forms are easy to recognize as simple drawings with the conventional meanings given to them. This means that when we study the Trump cards, we must look at them in terms of the archaic Phoenician/Hebrew pictographs and ideographs rather than guessing at their modern forms that have changed so drastically.

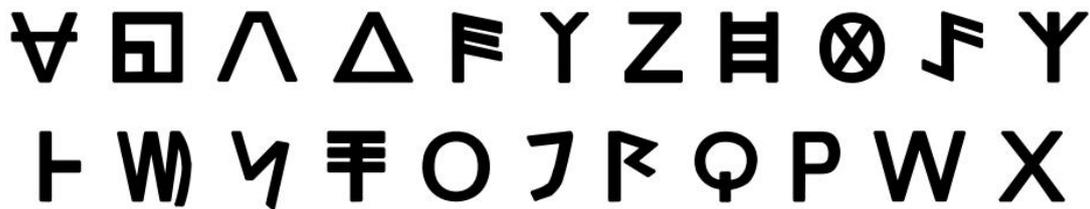
The next secret I discovered is that the Phoenician/Hebrew letters were inspired by the ancient Egyptians. This is a secret in Qabalah that the Jewish Qabbalists are generally not willing to admit exists and that other Qabalah scholars and students for the most part are simply ignorant of or only have some intuitions.

Hebrews and Phoenicians had visited and also lived in Egypt for many centuries. Many settled there for long periods, especially in the northern Delta. There was even a dynasty in northern Egypt ruled for about one century by Semitic tribes called the Hyksos. Although there were many aspects of Hebrew culture that arose in Mesopotamia, the home of the Sumerians, Akkadians, and Babylonians, careful reading of the Bible reveals that ancient Egypt had a major impact on the formation of their culture, not the least of which was the adoption of an alphabet and the creative way that they devised their educational system to both encode the secrets of Egypt and to fit their own culture, lifestyle, and beliefs.



The above two images show the Fool and the Magician in a Tarot deck that is based on the Tarot of Marseilles, one of the earliest printed decks. Notice that the Fool is presented as much more of a vagabond than the rather foppish Fool of the BOTA deck, but he also wears the suit of a professional fool. There is no number or Hebrew letter on the card. The Magician has the number 1 on his card, but also no Hebrew letter. As in the BOTA version he is a magician entertaining a crowd (viewers of the card). In front of him is a table with his magical equipment. He holds a wand and a ball or coin. On the table are cups and knives. These four items represent the four suits of the traditional European Tarot: Cups, Coins, Knives, and Wands. Compare these cards with the BOTA versions and identify all the symbolic items that appear on both sets of cards.

Ancient Hebrew Alphabet



☐ = simplified as ☐

△ occasionally was written ▽

▽ sometimes was tipped on its side.

Traditionally Hebrew letters were written from right to left. The Greeks originally also followed this tradition, but then started going back and forth (boustrophedon = bull plowing). Finally they shifted to writing from left to right. The Romans then followed, and most Western alphabets continue that way. The Arabic systems continue the Semitic tradition of writing from right to left.

I type the ancient Hebrew letters from left to right, because that is convenient for my computer and I mainly just use single letters or words. Readers can easily adapt.

The Modern Hebrew Alphabet of 27 Letters (Includes 22 Original Letters Plus 5 "Finals")

א	ב	ג	ד	ה	ו	ז	ח	ט
י	כ	ל	מ	נ	ס	ע	פ	צ
ק	ר	ש	ת	ך	ם	ן	ף	ץ

Top Row is 1-9; Middle Row is 10-90; Bottom Row is 100-900.

Study Questions

- * What are the 22 Pathways?
- * Why did people suspect the Tarot had a connection with the Qabbalah?
- * Why would this connection be an important aspect of the Qabbalah tradition?
- * What was special about the Hebrew names of the alphabet letters?
- * Can you remember a few of their names?
- * What is a clue on Tarot Trumps showing that Tarot designers knew of the Qabbalah connection?
- * Although this intuition was correct, what was wrong about the way it was expressed on the cards?
- * Why did much of the knowledge about Tarot become secret?
- * What is gematria?
- * Why did the rabbis later add 5 more “letters” to the Hebrew alphabet?
- * Why should we NOT use the modern form of Hebrew letters to study the Tarot Trumps?
- * Where did the Hebrews get the idea for their alphabet, and why is this important? (We will go much deeper into this question in later articles.)
- * OVERVIEW QUESTION: What does the information in this article have to do with the Benty Light Garden and the Series Overview?