

03 Tarot and Qabbalah

What is the Qabbalah? This is a Hebrew word. It means “oral transmission”. In ancient times the media was not advanced and many people could not read or write. There was no paper or printing. The Jewish communities lived in many different countries where they spoke the local languages of the cultural region, but they used the Hebrew language as their cultural foundation and had a few literate scribes who specialized in carefully transcribing in Hebrew the Torah and other biblical writings and teachings of their tradition. The leader in a Jewish community was called a Rabbi. The word “rabbi” means “a great one”, “a master”. He was the person responsible for preserving and transmitting the written and oral traditions of the community. He was also a spiritual and often also administrative leader.

In ancient times the Jewish leaders needed a writing system suitable to record information they considered important for the community to carry on their traditions. Certain Semitic people such as the Canaanite and Phoenician merchants and Jewish tribes are thought to be the first people who developed a writing system that exclusively used an alphabet to record their transactions and traditions. This original alphabet system they devised has become the basis of written languages all over the world with the exception of a few cultures that continue to write in graphic systems such as those used by the Chinese and Japanese. Alphabets have been adapted to the sounds and customs of languages and peoples, but all stem from the original Semitic alphabet. So let us take a little time to understand how the alphabet system evolved. First let’s understand the writing that evolved before alphabets were invented.

The earliest writing systems we know of are ancient Sumerian and ancient Egyptian. From my research I found that these Semitic tribes mainly based their invention of an alphabet on a system of writing used by the ancient Egyptians. Ancient Egyptians very early developed a writing system in which they began by drawing simple pictographs and ideographs.

A pictograph is a drawing that graphically represents a physical object. An ideograph is a more abstract drawing that represents an action or an idea. For example, a simple drawing of a hand, eye, or a house is a

pictograph. A drawing of a person walking or just of feet and legs in the posture of walking demonstrates an action and is thus an ideograph. These graphic drawings could then be used in ways that extended their meanings. For example a pictograph of the sun could in some contexts represent a time period when the sun shines (a day). A pictograph of the moon in some contexts could represent a month or even a woman's monthly menstrual period. Sometimes two or more signs were combined to express a more complex idea as a compound sign.

Another development was that signs were associated with words spoken in the language, so the signs became connected to sounds. Eventually certain signs were regularly read by convention with a certain pronunciation. Then these signs could be linked to pictographs and ideograms that indicated objects and concepts and the phonetic component would tell the reader how to pronounce the graphic sign. As a result many different words related to a similar object or idea could be distinguished for subtle differences in meaning.

Eventually certain phonetic signs began to be borrowed and used for expressing ideas totally unrelated to their original meaning. They became purely conventional abstract signs. These phonetic signs could represent whole words, single syllables, or only basic phonemes -- what we call letters. The Egyptians (like the Chinese, who followed the same linguistic evolutionary steps) developed all six of these writing methods.

1. Pictographs
2. Ideographs
3. Compound Signs
4. Extended Signs
5. Phono-Semantic Compounds
6. Borrowed Signs (alphabet letters come from this type of signs)

The systems of writing developed in Egypt and Sumeria were quite complicated, but they had an advantage in that they were very rich visually as well as fully expressing the thoughts people spoke in their language in a permanent recorded form. Later writing conventions made the signs more and more abstract until the original visual impact was lost.

The Phoenician and Hebrew tribes were semi-nomadic, moving about with flocks of domesticated animals, traveling as traders in caravans, or sailing long distances in boats. The writing system developed in the Mesopotamian region by the Sumerians and other early Semitic peoples used cuneiform, a system of impressing wedge-like symbols into clay tablets with a stylus. Such records, while excellent for storing archives in a library, were very cumbersome for people who traveled because of the weight of the tablets. The Egyptians from very early times developed a system of writing on papyrus, a paper-like material made from a reed that grew along the Nile. This medium was light-weight and easy to transport rolled up as scrolls. The Egyptians already had many symbols in their writing system that effectively functioned as alphabet letters. So the Semitic people chose to develop their system from the Egyptians.

Now what does all this have to do with the Tarot? We will see that the alphabet is intimately related to the structure and function of the Tarot in civilization. The first major clue that the Tarot is related to the alphabet was noticing that the set of 22 Trump cards matches the number of letters in the original Hebrew Alphabet.

We mentioned that the Hebrew people spread to many regions and also often traveled on business or to move large flocks of animals as part of their livelihood. The rabbis would establish a local temple or synagogue wherever a community gathered, and would train pupils in the reading and writing of the Hebrew script. This practice went back to the ancient traditions of Sumeria and Egypt and continues today.

In addition to the written records the rabbis developed another more secret tradition that was only passed on orally from a master to his disciple. This was the Qabalah. This included practical information and technology that not only assisted in survival, but also could make life very comfortable, enjoyable, and stable. It gave members of a tribe or community a competitive advantage in eras that were often characterized by uncertainty and conflict. What we now call Tarot was an integral part of this oral transmission. Of course, over time, some of this oral tradition was also transferred into written form or expressed with certain symbols and became less of a "secret". This had to happen if the "secret" tradition was to maintain its practical application in society and not just be an exclusive club insulated from the world.

Eventually in Europe the Qabbalah tradition began to influence the dominant Christian religion, which really was an outgrowth of the traditional Jewish religion but presented it in a much less conservative manner so that people of all cultures might accept it. So we have Christian Qabbalah emerging as an esoteric influence in Christian culture.

Scholars consider that Qabbalah began to develop during the 1st century, which was also the beginning of the rise of Christianity under the Roman Empire. At that time Europe, the Middle East, and Egypt had already been dominated for several centuries by Greek culture. The Greeks and Romans adopted the Hebrew alphabet and modified it for their own purposes, but, as we will see, they did not understand much of the cultural foundation of the alphabet and its central role in what became known as the Qabbalah. The establishment of the Hebrew/Phoenician alphabet was a complex and deep cultural process of “Qabbalah” that preceded by centuries what is known as the emergence of Jewish Qabbalah in the early Christian era (Roman Empire).

The Roman Empire dominated Europe, the Middle East, and Egypt during this period, but the Romans even less than the Greeks understood the cultural process that occurred between the Egyptians and the Semitic peoples (Hebrews and Phoenicians). The Romans even fought a series of horrific wars to suppress the Phoenician culture that had been dominating North Africa (the Punic Wars against Carthage) just as the Greeks earlier fought to suppress the Phoenicians of Troy. They also suppressed the Jewish culture and later for several centuries resisted the Christian culture that arose from it. (Celtic culture also was suppressed.) The Romans as an Empire viewed cultures that resisted assimilation as a threat to their assertion of hegemony.

During the transition between the Roman Republic and the Empire, Julius Caesar was assassinated, partly out of fear he would join with Cleopatra of Egypt to create a different form of Empire. The “Republic” was divided among three contenders: Octavius (grand nephew and adopted son of Julius Caesar), Mark Antony (a politician and former general under Julius Caesar), and a general named Lepidus. The triumvirate degenerated into a civil war and Octavius eventually defeated Mark Antony’s alliance with Cleopatra and became the first

Roman Emperor, known as Augustus Caesar. Egypt lost its sovereignty and became only a province of Rome's sprawling hegemony.

Just at this time we have the beginning of Christianity. The story is that Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the Kingdom of Judah, although there is a statement that he at least lived for a time in northern Nazareth. After his birth his mother took him to Egypt, where they lived for some time. So the tradition is that Jesus grew up in Egypt and probably spoke the language, maybe also read Egyptian, and certainly was familiar with the traditional sacred sites in Egypt.

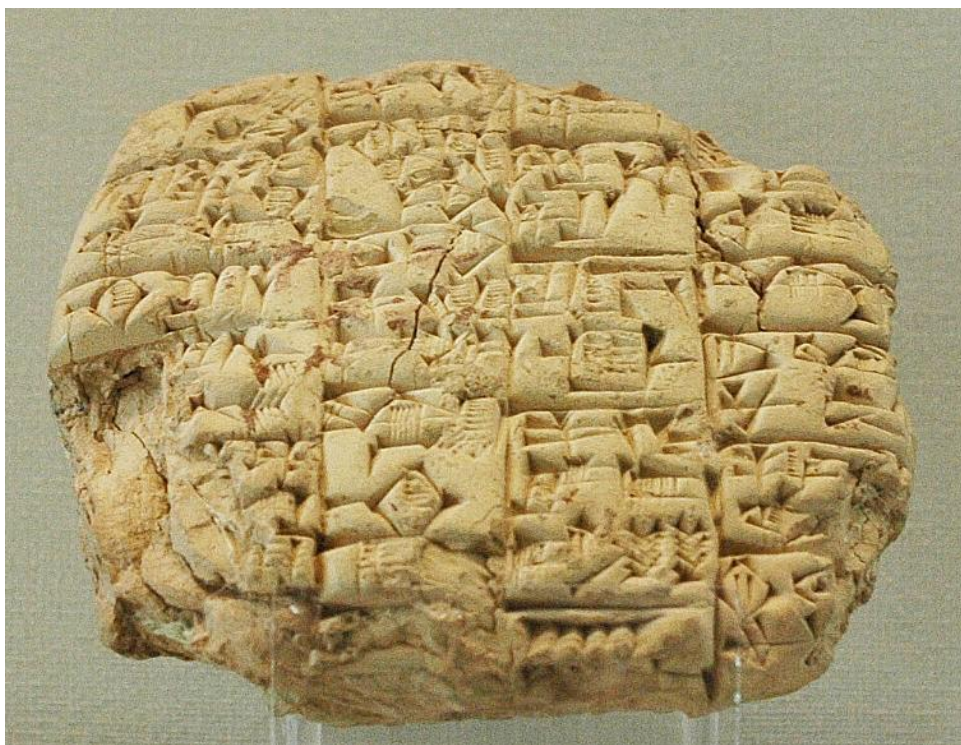
The Roman Empire controlled Egypt and what we now call Israel/Palestine. When the Jewish population revolted against Rome, in 71 A.D. the Roman general Titus conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the Great Temple of Solomon there. From that time the Jewish people were subjugated to Rome's puppet government and had no autonomous administrative center for their culture.

In our next segment we will discover the details of how the Semitic tribes extracted their alphabet from the Egyptian tradition long before the hegemony of the Greeks and the Romans and then encoded its deep spiritual content into Qabbalah and eventually incorporated it into what evolved as our modern Tarot. This is an almost unknown and unreported story that anyone who uses any form of the modern alphabet system or plays with any of the card games that descended from the ancient Tarot should become aware of and understand.

Study Questions:

- * What does the word "Qabbalah" mean, and what language does it come from?
- * Why did Qabbalah develop?
- * Who or what is a rabbi and what is a rabbi's function?
- * Who developed the first writing system that exclusively wrote in alphabet letters?
- * Who developed the earliest writing systems?

- * Describe the six basic types of writing developed by the ancients.
- * Why did the founders of the alphabet writing system choose to work from the Egyptian system?
- * Why was Qabbalah originally a secretive tradition?
- * Scholars place the emergence of Qabbalah during the 1st century A.D. Why does Dr. White propose that it goes back centuries before then?
- * Why did the Roman Empire suppress certain other cultures?
- * Briefly what does the Qabbalah have to do with alphabets? (A fuller answer must await material presented in the next two essays.)
- * Briefly what was the first clue that the original Hebrew alphabet has something to do with the Tarot? (A fuller answer must await material presented the next two essays.)



A cuneiform clay tablet
(Not very portable)

Types of Glyphs in Ancient Egyptian

Pictograph



House



Eye



Hand

Ideograph



Walk



Bring



Give

Extended Meaning



Sun → Day



Head → Top



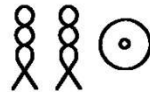
Pillar → Stable

Phono-Ideograph



Pet (Heaven)

Phono-pictograph



Heh (a very long time)

Compound Pictograph



Sunrise/Sunset



Sun +



Hills

Loan Glyph



Basket → Letter K



A statue of Octavian, Augustus Caesar, first Emperor of Rome

Phoenician		Greek		Phoenician		Greek					
𐤀	aleph	/ʔ/	Α Α	alpha	/a/, /aː/	𐤄	samekh	/s/	Ξ Ξ	xi	/ks/
𐤁	beth	/b/	Β Β	beta	/b/	⊖	ayin	/ʕ/	Ο Ο	omicron	/o/, /oː/ [note 1]
𐤂	gimel	/g/	Γ Γ	gamma	/g/	𐤃	pe	/p/	Π Π	pi	/p/
𐤃	daleth	/d/	Δ Δ	delta	/d/	𐤄	šade	/sˤ/	Μ Μ	(san)	/s/
𐤄	he	/h/	Ε Ε	epsilon	/e/, /eː/ [note 1]	𐤅	qoph	/q/	Ϟ Ϟ	(koppa)	/k/
𐤅	waw	/w/	Ϝ Ϝ	(digamma)	/w/	𐤆	reš	/r/	Ρ Ρ	rho	/r/
𐤆	zayin	/z/	Ζ Ζ	zeta	[zd](?)	𐤇	šin	/ʃ/	Σ Σ	sigma	/s/
𐤇	heth	/ħ/	Η Η	eta	/h/, /ɛː/	𐤈	taw	/t/	Τ Τ	tau	/t/
𐤈	teth	/tˤ/	Θ Θ	theta	/tʰ/	𐤉	(waw)	/w/	Υ Υ	upsilon	/u/, /uː/
𐤉	yodh	/j/	Ι Ι	iota	/i/, /iː/	–	–	–	Φ Φ	phi	/pʰ/
𐤊	kaph	/k/	Κ Κ	kappa	/k/	–	–	–	Χ Χ	chi	/kʰ/
𐤋	lamedh	/l/	Λ Λ	lambda	/l/	–	–	–	Ψ Ψ	psi	/ps/
𐤌	mem	/m/	Μ Μ	mu	/m/	–	–	–	Ω Ω	omega	/ɔː/
𐤍	nun	/n/	Ν Ν	nu	/n/	–	–	–	–	–	–

Chart of the original 22 Phoenician letters and the corresponding letters that the Greeks adopted, adding several new letters and modifying the

pronunciation of some letters to fit their own language. Later several of the Phoenician letters dropped out of Greek usage. The Greeks used the old Phoenician names, often mispronounced. See **Wikipedia** article, “Greek alphabet” for details.

Archaic Latin alphabet

As Old Italic	𐌀	𐌁	𐌂	𐌃	𐌄	𐌅	𐌆	𐌇	𐌈	𐌉	𐌊	𐌋	𐌌	𐌍	𐌎	𐌏	𐌐	𐌑	𐌒	𐌓	𐌔	𐌕	𐌖	𐌗	𐌘
As Latin	A	B	C	D	E	F	Z	H	I	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	V	X				

Old Latin alphabet

Letter	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	V	X
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Classical Latin alphabet

Letter	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	V	X	Y	Z
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The Romans adopted the Greek alphabet, but dropped the old Phoenician names. They changed Z to G, but then later added a Z back in as well as a Y. See **Wikipedia** article, “Latin alphabet” for details.