The Canaanite Innovation

During the 14th century B.C., in the country of Canaan (Phoenicia to the Greeks, Byblos to be precise) there appeared an alphabet that was distinct from cuneiform. Its letters would come to be used, with some modifications, by the Hellenics, the Etruscans, the Oscs, the Umbrians, the Latins, and other cultures. With respect to writing systems, Canaan was certainly a privileged area in the whole Middle Eastern region. Two relatively simple writing systems were in use there, unfortunately still undeciphered today: the “pseudo-hieroglyphic” of Byblos, which had 114 characters, and the Proto-Sinaic of Palestine which had 35 (Cohen, 1958). In addition, there were the 22 signs used in the funerary inscription of Ahiram in Byblos. These characters had a long history behind them, and gave rise to the letters of our alphabet.

We must however comprehend the full meaning of the term “alphabet.” The manner in which this Canaanite invention was eventually used by the Indo-European Greeks may prevent us from understanding the nature of the invention itself. Canaanite, Hebrew, Moabite, and Samarian were very close dialects, part of the broad family of Semitic languages. All of these, within a short period of time, came to use the new phonography. In this family, the lexemes – the roots of individual words – consist of consonants: i.e., consonantal characters alone are sufficient for the production of meaning. Vocalic sounds are essentially used only for verbal or nominal derivation, i.e., to create grammatical variables. Indo-European languages also used this convention to a certain extent: we find it in classical Greek, for instance, with three degrees of vocalic alternation: naught, ε, and ο, as they are expressed, for example, in “gignomai,” “egenomen,” and “gégona.” However, what was only an occasional occurrence in Indo-European languages was and still is a living function, perfectly understood and practiced, within the entire lexical inventory of present-day Semitic languages. It must be added that a general constraint exists in these languages, prohibiting vowels in the initial position: there are only glottal occlusions which are treated as phonemes, such as the

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laryngeal occlusive *alef*. It is precisely this phoneme that traditionally opens the alphabetic order.

Thus, the principle of acrophonic symbolization, originally developed by the Akkadians (and also practiced by the Egyptians to specify the reading of some of their hieroglyphs with phonological determinants), led to the establishment of a system of notation not of isolated consonants, as had been believed, but of a kind of syllabary made up of characters consisting of a syllable implying an undifferentiated vowel. For the sake of precision, the Phoenician letters should be transcribed not as: 𐤋, 𐤁, 𐤊, 𐤇, etc., but as 𐤋 ... 𐤁 ... 𐤊 ... 𐤇 ... , etc.

The true significance of the Canaanite invention was not the leap from syllabic to phonemic representation, but from a fully syllabic system to one in which the vocalic part was not differentiated within the syllable. Thus, this writing did not completely reflect vocalizations: it did not transcribe orality. Rather, it noted the elements that produce meaning itself. It was a kind of stenography that consisted of specifying the words by their lexical markings alone. This explains why Semitic languages to this day have been reluctant to adopt the use of vowels. What is valuable to them is not a complete phonography, as exists for example in special instances of vocalized Arabic or dotted Hebrew scripts, but the simplest system that can produce the desired meaning.

The Egyptians, whose language was of the same type, did not reflect vocalic articulation in writing (which is why we are not able to orally reconstitute their language). They took the same step forward, but did not make the new syllabic system autonomous — instead, they forced it back within pictographic symbolics. The true Canaanite breakthrough, grafted onto the invention of the consonantic syllable, was that the new system was adaptable for every Semitic language. Along with putting to rest the enormous and unwieldy tinkering with cuneiform, it escaped its cultural limitations. It also enabled language to escape the ideological binding that was characteristic of hieroglyphics. Paradoxically, one might say that once language was relieved from the sacredness of its own representation, writing could become universally available, and the power vested in scribes was abolished. This revolution was generally associated with the functioning of a commerce-based civilization; one not yet completely secular of course, but mobile. The kings of Persia appear to have been mindful of the merits of this innovation, as they came to administer their empire using Aramaic functionaries and Semitic script.

**The Hellenic Innovation**

In the fifth century B.C., in the same general region, more changes took place. A new wave of Semitic peoples were becoming urbanized and im-