

Hebrew, Letter Pictures

Is there any academic validity with Hebrew letter pictures, i.e., interpreting various Hebrew words through the representations of each letter in its spelling?

The idea that the ancient Hebrew language contains pictograms, which communicate certain spiritual and theological messages, has been largely popularized by the widespread circulation of the publication *Hebrew Word Pictures: How Does the Hebrew Alphabet Reveal Prophetic Truths?* (Phoenix: Living Word Pictures, 1994) by Frank T. Seekins. There is hardly a Messianic congregation that has not been touched, to some degree, by Seekins' book. Its author makes the claim, "You don't have to read Hebrew to understand this book! When Hebrew was first written, each letter represented both a sound and a picture. Even if you don't understand the sounds in the Hebrew language, the pictures inside of the Hebrew words will still be clear." He further details, "What is a word picture? In Chinese and ancient Egyptian every word is formed by adding pictures together to 'paint' the meaning of a word. In Hebrew this is also done; a word picture is a word that is described by pictures."¹

According to Seekins, Bible readers do not at all have to actually learn Biblical Hebrew in order to know the meanings of Hebrew words used in the Tanach. All people have to do instead, is: identify a Hebrew word, know what the Hebrew letters are, and then they can use his workbook to decode the true meaning of the Hebrew word via the letter pictures.

Is Seekins' method of employing Hebrew letter pictures, in order to find the real meaning of words in the Tanach Scriptures—at all something that is credible? His proposed method of using so-called letter pictures in Ancient Hebrew is something that few in today's Messianic movement, who encounter it, are willing to seriously challenge. The most scholastic reference tool he provides in his publication is the *Gesenius' Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament*.²

Where are the meanings of the different letter pictures for Ancient Hebrew to be found in firsthand sources? Who else has discovered this? Where is substantial documentation and verification about the Hebrew letter pictures to be found from actual Hebrew and Ancient Near Eastern specialists? These are only a few of the critical questions that not enough people have been asking.

The *Gesenius* lexicon, even if a little dated from the mid-Nineteenth Century, is still a valuable tool to have in one's library. One finds a brief introduction to the origin of each Hebrew letter, as one flips through its alphabetized entries. The *Gesenius* lexicon does provide a brief statement or two on the development of Hebrew letters from a Phoenician or paleo-Hebrew script, to the later block script used after the Babylonian exile. Included in the opening pages of the *Gesenius* lexicon is "A Comparative Table of Ancient Alphabets" (Hebrew, Rabbinic Hebrew, Arabic, Samaritan, Syriac, Phoenician, Ancient Hebrew, Ancient Greek), and a "Table of Alphabets" (Aramaic, Ethiopic, Armenian, Coptic, Greek, German). When familiarizing oneself with the *Gesenius* lexicon, no one can historically deny that the block Hebrew script employed in the post-exilic era and up until today, was preceded by a paleo-Hebrew or Phoenician-derived alphabet, which was much more pictorial. Yet, nowhere in the *Gesenius* lexicon is it at all endorsed, or even implied, that the "real meaning" of a Biblical Hebrew word, can be deduced by determining what its individual letters pictorially communicate. The *Gesenius* lexicon, just like others which have followed it, bases its definitions of Hebrew words on how terms appear in the Biblical text, and associated literature from the Biblical period.

¹ Frank T. Seekins, *Hebrew Word Pictures: How Does the Hebrew Alphabet Reveal Prophetic Truths?* (Phoenix: Living Word Pictures, 1994), 1.

² Another one of Seekins' reference sources is Dick Mills and David Michael, *Messiah And His Hebrew Alphabet* (Orange, CA: Dick Mills Ministries, 1994), which itself only has the Gesenius lexicon as its most scholastic reference (p 142).

On first glance, the claim that deriving theological and spiritual messages from Ancient Hebrew letter pictures, sounds good. After all, did not the Ancient Egyptians use a language that used pictographs as well? Those who are completely unfamiliar with how Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics really worked, are those who are easily swayed by the premise of Hebrew letter pictures.

Other than artistic wall scenes common to many ancient cultures, which usually depict something like a monarch in battle or being anointed by the gods, Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics did not possess the kind of spiritual or theological value as some have thought that they possess. Many of the Egyptian hieroglyphics are not actual pictures of what they represented. In the publication *How to Read Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphs*, produced by the British Museum Press, we see how on the whole, “hieroglyphic picture-signs are used to convey the *sound* (and meaning) of the ancient Egyptian language, just as the letters of our own alphabet convey the sounds of English.”³ Most of the Egyptian hieroglyphics that are studied by scholars employed symbols in nature to represent sounds common to human speech. “This is termed the *rebus principle*; it is as if we were to write the English word *belief* with a picture of a bee and a leaf as . On this basis hieroglyphics can be used to indicate *sounds* rather than things and can thus be used in words quite unrelated in meaning to the objects they depict.”⁴ (This is important to keep in mind, as human language develops orally before being composed in some written form.)

When one sees various kinds of birds depicted in Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, each ancient bird represented a particular sound in antiquity, that the Egyptians could use to represent a sound in their written communications.⁵ The principal exception to these symbols not representing sounds, are “writing words...sometimes written with meaning-signs, or *determinatives*, placed at the end of the word after the sound-signs.”⁶ These determinatives would have represented common things such as a “man and his occupations,” “god, king,” “sun, light, time,” “town, village,” or “day.”⁷ Such determinatives could perhaps have been the ancient equivalent of our common symbols like: @ or the at sign, # or the pound sign, * or an asterisk, or perhaps some kind of arrow sign. About as far as one can push the uniqueness with Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, is in recognizing that while frequently read from left to right, “hieroglyphs were used in a more decorative manner than letters in our writing system; in particular, they often formed a fundamental part of the aesthetic scheme of a monument.”⁸ It is invalid to offer Ancient Egyptian as a corroborating example to justify the usage of so-called Hebrew letter pictures.

How are we to properly understand the Hebrew Scriptures and words of the Tanach? Obviously, in order to properly and legitimately understand Hebrew words, Bible readers need to have a working knowledge of the Hebrew language. They must know Hebrew from a *linguistic standpoint*, inasmuch that they know how to read Hebrew, form simple sentences in Hebrew, know what Hebrew nouns, verbs, and adjectives are, and know what the linguistic meanings of these words are as used in passages of Scripture. Readers must be able to identify what the tense of a verb is in a sentence, and its relationship to other terms or clauses. Readers need to be able to look at a Hebrew term or clause in passages of Scripture, and see how it may be used in other passages of Scripture, to determine its best meaning and application. At times, it may be useful to consult ancient Bible translations like the Greek Septuagint, the Aramaic Targums, or the Latin Vulgate, to see how various Hebrew words (particularly those which are imprecise) were rendered into other languages, to gain a fuller theological perspective. And perhaps most importantly, as it relates to this subject matter, there are at Bible readers’ disposal an entire array of scholarly Hebrew dictionaries and lexicons, produced at universities and by scholars whose mastery of the Hebrew language and related subjects, has enabled them to produce the needed theological resources that today’s Bible students need for proper examination and interpretation of the Tanach or Old Testament. (Various Bible software programs like BibleWorks or Accordance, particularly with their parsing tools, can also streamline things significantly for those who need a little help.)

Those who employ so-called Hebrew letter pictures, seem to forget how language actually works. They are often content with a relatively sub-standard resource like *Strong’s Concordance*, they will look up a Hebrew word in *Strong’s Concordance*, and then finding out how it is spelled in Hebrew, they will proceed to determine its

³ Mark Collier and Bill Manley, *How to Read Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphs*, revised edition (London: British Museum Press, 1998), 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp 6-7.

theological meaning on the basis of Hebrew letter pictures—often using a publication like Frank T. Seekins' *Hebrew Word Pictures* to guide them. It seems that more complete Hebrew language tools used by Bible students today, which includes things like the *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* or the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*—widely available and relatively inexpensive—based on Hebrew lexicography and how the Hebrew language is used in Biblical and related texts, are cast aside in favor of this “new interpretation.” Why are such standard Hebrew language tools often dismissed by those who favor so-called Hebrew letter pictures? Because to use an actual Hebrew lexicon is something that is a bit too hard. *One may have to actually learn Hebrew and read it, in the same way as other people have learned it for centuries.* Those who have championed Hebrew letter pictures have **marketed their technique** on the premise that anyone can understand the “true meaning” of a Hebrew word, without having to put in the same time and effort as other students of the Bible had to do in gaining Hebrew language skills.

But where does the hermeneutic of interpreting the “real meaning” of Hebrew words via pictograms really come from? If we cast aside the premise of interpreting the Hebrew language (or any language for that matter) from the basis of how its words are used linguistically in Biblical documents and associated literature, then where are we to get the meanings of the Hebrew letters? Do the meanings come from the Scriptures themselves, legitimate Biblical-period history, *or* do they come from outside sources?

Disturbingly, many of today's Messianics who have thought that Hebrew letter pictures might have some kind of validity, have not really wondered *where* such a methodology comes from. (It cannot be found in how Ancient Egyptian worked.) If they did a little more investigation, they might be shocked to see that a considerable bulk of the source material that is employed by those championing Hebrew letter pictures, is from the Jewish mystical tradition and the Kabbalah.

Linguists in Biblical Hebrew and related Ancient Near Eastern languages, recognize how for some letters, visible signs were to represent spoken sounds. They do not, however, think that such signs necessarily contain esoteric and hidden spiritual or theological meanings to them. The major sources of information detailing the significance of Hebrew letters, as having any kind of esoteric value to them, originate in the Middle Ages, from Kabbalistic sources where the letters of the Hebrew alphabet are thought to have some sort of meaning.⁹

One of the primary sources about the significance of Hebrew letters, which one is likely to find employed by some Messianics today, is *The Wisdom in the Hebrew Alphabet* by Rabbi Michael L. Munk, published by ArtScroll.¹⁰ This publication, in no uncertain terms, associates the significance of every Hebrew letter with the Kabbalah:

“The twenty-two sacred letters are profound, primal spiritual forces. They are, in effect, the raw material of Creation. When God combined them into words, phrases, commands, they brought about Creation, translating His will into reality, as it were. There is a Divine science in the Hebrew alphabet. *Sefer Yetzirah* [‘The Book of Creation’], the early Kabbalistic work ascribed to the Patriarch Abraham, describes how the sacred letters were used as the agency of creation. The letters can be ordered in countless combinations, by changing their order within words and interchanging letters in line with the rules of various Kabbalistic letter-systems.”¹¹

To be fair, discussions over the significance of the form of some Hebrew letters, can be seen in the Talmud (b.*Shabbat* 104a). There are speculations over what appear to be odd and irregular forms of Hebrew letters, appearing in various Tanach passages here and there, which would have been inserted into the text by scribes. Such forms were thought to have some possible theological significance.¹² One can see how these handful of forms in the Tanach, inserted by the scribes and discussed by some of the Talmudic Sages, could then be embellished and expanded upon by the Kabbalists of the Medieval period.

Elsewhere in the Talmud, we see the statement made that Bezalel, who was commissioned to construct the Tabernacle, actually used a combination of Hebrew letters to perform his work. This remark, though, actually appears among several Rabbinic opinions about why Bezalel was wise:

Said R. Samuel bar Nahmani said R. Jonathan, “Bezalel was so named because of his wisdom. When the Holy One, blessed be he, said to Moses, ‘Go to Bezalel and say to him, “Make me a tabernacle, an ark, and utensils,”’ Moses went and got things confused and said to him, ‘Make an ark, utensils, and a tabernacle.’ “He

⁹ Alan Unterman, ed. and trans., *The Kabbalistic Tradition: An Anthology of Jewish Mysticism* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), pp 102-104.

¹⁰ Cf. Mills and Michael, 142.

¹¹ Michael L. Munk, *The Wisdom in the Hebrew Alphabet* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1983), 19.

¹² This is addressed a bit further, in the FAQ, “Jots and Tittles.”

said to him, 'Moses, our master, the custom of the world is that a person builds a house and afterward he brings in the utensils. But you say, "Make me an ark and utensils and then a tabernacle." As to the utensils that I am going to make, where shall I bring them? Is it possible, then, that the Holy One, blessed be he, told you to make a tabernacle, and ark, and then utensils!' He said to him, 'Is it possible that you have been in the shadow of God (besel el), that you should know all this?'"

Said R. Judah said Rab, "Bezalel knew how to join together the letters by which the heaven and the earth were made. "Here it is written, 'And he has filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom and in understanding and in knowledge' (Eze. 35:31), and elsewhere it is written, 'The Lord by wisdom founded the earth, by understanding he established the heavens' (Pro. 3:19), and it is written, 'By his knowledge the depths were broken up' (Pro. 3:20)."

Said R. Yohanan, "The Holy One, blessed be he, gives wisdom only to someone who has wisdom. For it is said, 'It is said, 'He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who know understanding' (Dan. 2:21)."

R. Tahalipa, who comes from the West, heard this and stated it before R. Abbahu. He said to him, "You derive the proof-text from that passage, and we derive the proof-text from the following verse of Scripture, 'In the hearts of all that are wise-hearted I have put wisdom' (Exo. 31: 6)" (b.Berachot 55a).¹³

The view of R. Judah in b.Berachot 55a is something that readers are free to disagree with, as R. Samuel bar Nahmani and R. Yohanan, both chose to focus on the wisdom of Bezalel who made the Tabernacle, with wisdom being given to Bezalel by God because he had wisdom. The statement by R. Judah on Hebrew letters being joined together, while reflective of a view that would have significance for later Jewish mysticism, seems to be given in passing.

We should not be surprised to see that the Talmud does include some remarks about mystical, esoteric, or at least some kind of mysterious significance, applied by some of the Sages, to the Hebrew alphabet. The Talmud represents a large collection of opinions and debates from the Jewish world after the destruction of the Second Temple. There are Rabbis who disagree with each other, and their points of contention certainly served to allow for there to be various sects of Orthodox Judaism, and today multiple denominations of Judaism. That there would have been some Rabbinic views in the Talmud that would bear significance for later Jewish mysticism, is an indication that the literature of the Talmud is a bit broad and diverse. There will be opinions encountered that Messianic Believers are certainly free to disagree with.

(The idea that the universe was created via the employment of Hebrew letters by God, is something that we should all disregard as entirely implausible. Those Messianics today, who might be tempted to use Kabbalistic literature associated with the Hebrew alphabet—as some kind of defense against an evolutionary model for human origins—are all going to be disregarded as mentally unstable. The creation of the universe by God, goes well beyond the Hebrew alphabet, Greek alphabet, Roman alphabet—or any human known form of physics, mathematics, biology, or chemistry.)¹⁴

The method of using so-called Hebrew letter pictures, to determine the "true meaning" of Biblical Hebrew words, may be considered a form of *mysticism-lite*. While using so-called Hebrew letter pictures is not something directly witnessed in the Jewish mystical tradition, the idea that each letter of the Hebrew alphabet has significant spiritual and theological significance, is something that was developed into an art form in the Kabbalah. So-called Hebrew letter pictures, as seen in publications like Seekins' *Hebrew Word Pictures*, may be considered a grandchild of what Jewish mysticism has done to the Hebrew alphabet. Those who use so-called Hebrew letter pictures cannot get away from Kabbalistic reference sources.¹⁵

The Lord has been gracious to raise up Hebrew linguistic and lexicographic scholars of the past few centuries, to give us the *right tools* to interpret the Hebrew language properly—through examination of words in the Biblical texts themselves! Those who employ interpretations of Hebrew words via so-called letter pictures, have embraced a methodology that has questionable origins, and will ultimately not stand in view of legitimate linguistic scholarship. No reputable Jewish scholar outside the extreme Right fringe of Judaism uses such a method

¹³ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*.

¹⁴ Consult the FAQ, "Creationism."

¹⁵ Perhaps the most well-researched of the Hebraic Roots publications, which gives significance to so-called Hebrew letter pictures, is L. Grant Luton, *In His Own Words: Messianic Insights Into the Hebrew Alphabet* (Akron, OH: Beth Tikkun Publishing, 1999). Luton's bibliography notably references openly Kabbalistic sources like Aryeh Kaplan's translation of the *Sefer Yetzirah* (p 252), or Munk's *The Wisdom in the Hebrew Alphabet* (p 253).

to evaluate a word of Biblical Hebrew. No reputable scholar in Biblical Studies uses so-called letter pictures, as a means to interpret what a passage of the Hebrew Tanach says.

Advocates of so-called Hebrew letter pictures would really do well to engage a bit with fields such as Egyptology, and Hebrew's cognate languages in the Ancient Near East. When these disciplines are consulted, it is clear that any so-called Hebrew letter pictures have little scholastic support.

It is difficult, though, given the widespread, populist influence of so-called Hebrew letter pictures, for many to be willing to speak out against it. There is no doubting the fact that this methodology of trying to interpret Biblical Hebrew words, via the so-called values of what a letter picture means—has its roots within Jewish mysticism. Because of how popular so-called Hebrew letter pictures have become, few Messianic ministries, which know that it has significantly dubious origins, are willing to explain why.

We recommend that if you really want to learn Hebrew, or any language for that matter, that you study it in a classroom setting, employing linguistic tools, lexicons, dictionaries, and even flash cards that have been produced for you to have a basic reading comprehension. If you can commit yourself to the discipline of doing this, then you will be able to engage with Jewish and Christian Bible scholarship on the Tanach/Old Testament—and be the wiser for it!

For around \$25 or so, you can pick up good used copies of Menahem Mansoor, *Biblical Hebrew Step-by-Step*, Volume 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), and William L. Holladay, ed., *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, the Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1988). These two resources are an excellent place for you to start, if you really want to have some basic Hebrew comprehension in reading the Tanach Scriptures.