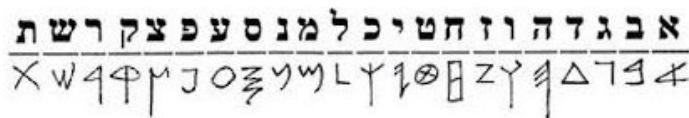


How to Misread the Bible in the Name of Paleo-Hebrew

Leong Tien Fock (4 Sept 2018)

In 1994 Frank T. Seekins published a book entitled *Hebrew Word Pictures: How Does the Hebrew Alphabet Reveal Prophetic Truths?* It unleashed a phenomenon involving a method of reading the Hebrew Bible based on an assumption about the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Since the term “Paleo-Hebrew” is associated with it, we will call it the Paleo-Hebrew phenomenon, and it involves the Paleo-Hebrew method, which is based on the Paleo-Hebrew assumption. If the claims of the proponents of this phenomenon are correct, it changes significantly how we understand not only the Old Testament but also the New Testament.

According to Seekins, “When Hebrew was first written, each letter represented both a sound and a picture.” Let us consider the first two letters of the Hebrew alphabet (in the Aramaic “square” script): א (Aleph) and ב (Bet), which eventually became “a” and “b” respectively in the Roman alphabet. There is no dispute that א and ב each represents a sound just as “a” and “b” each represents a sound. But neither א nor ב (nor any of the other letters of the Hebrew alphabet) seems to represent a picture. Seekins’ claim is that “When Hebrew was first written” the letters did represent pictures as well. Hebrew scholars generally agree that the Hebrew Bible (until the time of the Babylonian exile) was originally written using a script called Paleo-Hebrew, which is similar to the Phoenician script. The first two Paleo-Hebrew letters looked like this: א (Aleph) and ב (Bet). This script was changed to the Aramaic script that we have today during the Babylonian exile. But both these (as well as the other) letters in this script still do not seem to represent pictures:



Actually the claim that the Hebrew letters originally represented pictures in addition to sounds is based not on the Paleo-Hebrew script but a precursor of this script, known as the [Proto-Sinaitic](#) script:

| Name | Pictograph | Meaning | Name | Pictograph | Meaning |
|--------|------------|--------------------------------|--------|------------|-----------------------------------|
| Aleph | | Ox / strength / leader | Lamed | | Staff / goad / control / "toward" |
| Bet | | House / "in" | Mem | | Water / chaos |
| Gimmel | | Foot / camel / pride | Nun | | Seed / fish / activity / life |
| Dalet | | Tent door / pathway | Samekh | | Hand on staff / support / prop |
| Hey | | Lo! Behold! "The" | Ayin | | Eye / to see / experience |
| Vav | | Nail / peg / add / "And" | Pey | | Mouth / word / speak |
| Zayin | | Plow / weapon / cut off | Tsade | | Man on side / desire / need |
| Chet | | Tent wall / fence / separation | Qof | | Sun on horizon / behind |
| Tet | | Basket / snake / surround | Resh | | Head / person / first |
| Yod | | Arm and hand / work / deed | Shin | | Eat / consume / destroy |
| Kaf | | Palm of hand / to open | Tav | | Mark / sign / covenant |

As shown in the [chart](#), each of the Hebrew letters is in a form that depicts a picture when written in this script. As indicated in the chart, according to Seekins and other proponents of this phenomenon, each of the Hebrew letters has meanings based on the picture it depicts. Hence when these letters are combined to form words, the pictorial meaning(s) of the individual letters combine to form pictorial meanings of the words, in addition to the literal meanings of the words based on their sounds as defined in our dictionaries. In this way we can see “deeper meanings” in Hebrew words in addition to their ordinary meanings. The claim that the Hebrew letters represent meaning in addition to sound is the Paleo-Hebrew assumption; reading Hebrew words based on this assumption is the Paleo-Hebrew method.

For instance, consider the word אב (Aleph-Bet 'āb; Hebrew is written from right to left), which means “father” when read based on the sound of the word indicated by the letters. But according to the Paleo-Hebrew method (using the chart above), this word has a deeper meaning when read based on the pictures they represent (ox-head + house): strength/leader + house. In other words the “father” (ordinary meaning) is the “strength or leader of the house” (deeper meaning).

However, at best, one can claim that the Hebrew letters represent both sound and picture only when read in the Proto-Sinaitic and not in the Paleo-Hebrew script. This is where Seekins’ qualification comes in: the letters represent both sound and picture “When Hebrew was first written,” which thus assumes that the Proto-Sinaitic script was used when Hebrew was “first” written. Let us for the sake of discussion accept this assumption. A key proponent of this phenomenon, Jeff Benner, though he assumes that at first the Proto-Sinaitic (which he calls “[early Hebrew](#)”) script was used to write Hebrew, acknowledges that it was the later Paleo-Hebrew (which he also calls “[middle Hebrew](#)”) script that was actually used to write the Hebrew Bible (until the Babylonian captivity). Hence even if we assume that Hebrew was first written in the Proto-Sinaitic script, the Hebrew Bible was not written in this script but in the Paleo-Hebrew script, which has no real advantage over the Aramaic script in terms of seeing the letters as pictures. This means any statement that claims or implies that unless we read the Hebrew Bible in the Paleo-Hebrew script, we will misread it or at least miss its deeper meanings, is at best misleading.

Why then draw our attention to the Paleo-Hebrew script at all since it really makes no difference whether the Hebrew Bible is read in this or the Aramaic script? It does help to connect the Aramaic script to the Proto-Sinaitic script, thereby giving a visual basis to claim that the Hebrew letters, even when written in the Aramaic script, represent both sound and picture because originally they did. But it gives the impression that the understanding of Bible scholars and theologians, who study the Hebrew Bible in the Aramaic script, is somehow inadequate if not incorrect just because they do not study it in the script the Hebrew Bible was originally written.

Since this phenomenon actually depends on the Proto-Sinaitic script and not the Paleo-Hebrew script to make its case, some questions arise. When Moses wrote in the Paleo-Hebrew script, was he even aware that Aleph was originally א and not א? Did he think that א, which by itself does not depict a picture, represented both a sound and a picture? And can the Hebrew Aleph, whether written as א or א, represent a sound and a pictorial idea (meaning) at the same time to begin with? Proponents of the Paleo-Hebrew phenomenon are saying “Yes” to at least the last two questions. This is the Paleo-Hebrew assumption, and it needs to be proven. For if true, Biblical Hebrew would

be the only language with an alphabetic writing system where the letters of the alphabet can represent both sound and meaning.


[Benner](#) himself has shown so graphically that the Greek and Roman alphabets also originated from the same source as the Paleo-Hebrew alphabet. Yet the letters of the Greek alphabet used to write the New Testament represent only sound and not meaning. The same is true for the letters of the English (Roman) alphabet used to write this article. What then makes Paleo-Hebrew so special? Is it because the Hebrew Bible is inspired by God? But what about the Greek alphabet in the Greek New Testament, which is also inspired by God?

The Paleo-Hebrew assumption, though far-fetched, has been taken for granted by an increasing number of Bible believers. Thus there is a need to take this assumption seriously and consider whether it can stand scrutiny linguistically and biblically.

Is there a linguistic basis for assuming that the letters of the Paleo-Hebrew alphabet represent meaning in addition to sound? Seekins claims that “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.” In other words, he claims that just as every Chinese (character) and ancient Egyptian word is formed by picture-signs that each represents meaning, every Hebrew word is formed by picture-signs—letters of the Hebrew alphabet—that each represents meaning. This claim concerning Hebrew is evidently needed to support the Paleo-Hebrew assumption that the Hebrew letters each represents meaning in addition to sound.

Let us evaluate this claim by considering ancient Egyptian, which is written using picture-signs known as hieroglyphs. Seekins seems to have a case as Jewish Egyptologist Orly Goldwasser (2010: 38-50) has demonstrated that even the letters of the Proto-Sinaitic alphabet are derived from Egyptian hieroglyphs. In fact someone who signed off as “[Peter](#)” uploaded Goldwasser’s article with this added remark:

A fascinating account of the origin of the aleph-bet, from Egyptian Hieroglyphics to the first sound-pictures, Hebrew, and now all languages. This article lends credibility to Frank T. Seekins’ book, *Hebrew Word Pictures: How does the Hebrew Alphabet Reveal Prophetic Truths?*

Does the article really lend credibility to Seekins’ book? It is true that there are ancient Egyptian picture-signs that represent meaning as they do “represent the object they depict.” For instance the picture of a mouth is actually the word for mouth. “However, very few words are actually written in this way. Instead, 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.” Hence most of the picture-signs function as sound-signs to indicate how a word is pronounced; “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 hieroglyphs 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” (Collier and Manley 1998: 1-2).

In other words, ancient Egyptian picture-signs mostly represent sound and not meaning. So it is not true that “every” ancient Egyptian word is written by adding picture-signs that each represents meaning to convey the meaning of the word. It is also not true that “every” Chinese character is formed by picture-signs that each represents meaning to convey the meaning of the character.

Many if not most [Chinese characters](#) have a component picture-sign that represents only sound and not meaning. Evidently Seekins made his claim about Hebrew based on an uninformed guess concerning the Chinese and ancient Egyptian writing systems, which are non-alphabetic to begin with (though ancient Egyptian has an [alphabetic element](#)).

Since Biblical Hebrew, like the majority of languages, uses the alphabetic writing system, we will focus on how this system works. Now a language is first spoken before it is written. Thus the spoken word comes before the written word (except for words coined after the language already has a written form). So we will consider how the letters of an alphabet, even when they are in the form of picture-signs as in the case of the Proto-Sinaitic script, actually work to form written words to represent spoken words.

In an alphabetic writing system, each of the letters, even when written as a picture-sign, does not function in the same way as a picture-sign in a non-alphabetic writing system like Chinese or ancient Egyptian. Take for instance the Hebrew letter Bet (ב or פ), which is named after the Semitic word for house (bêt) and was originally the Proto-Sinaitic picture-sign depicting a house (𐤁). But as a letter of the alphabet, “The picture stands not for the depicted *word* [bêt in this case] but only for its *initial sound*. Thus the pictograph bêt,—house, drawn as the four walls of a dwelling ... represents only the initial consonant b” (Goldwasser 2010: 42).

To elaborate, and for convenience, let us imagine that the letters of the English alphabet happen to be picture-signs like those of the Proto-Sinaitic alphabet, and that the letters “a,” “c” and “t” are in the form of picture-signs depicting an apple, a cat and a tree respectively. The English word for “cat” will then be spelled as: 🐱🍏🌳 (“cat” + “apple” + “tree”). So the picture-signs represent only the initial sounds of each of the objects that they depict and not the objects themselves. In fact if 🐱 already represents the idea “cat,” there is no need for the other two picture-signs. This is how the letters of an alphabet work. Similarly, the Hebrew word “bêt” as in “bêt-’ēl” (“house of God”) is written as פאב or בית (Bet-Yod-Tav). And if the letter Bet (a picture-sign depicting a house in the Proto-Sinaitic script) already represents the meaning “house,” there is no need for the letters Yod and the Tav.

And the whole point of the alphabetic writing system is the advantage of being able to represent all the spoken words of a language with just a short list of letters that represent only sound. When one has learned the sound represented by each of the letters and how they combine in a word to represent the sound of the word, which is not difficult as it is only a short list, one can read virtually every word in that language (even when one does not know the meaning of the word).

And it is precisely because the letters represent only sound that the list can be short (22 letters in the case of Hebrew), as long as the list can cover all the spoken words of the language. For when the letters carry the extra baggage of meaning, they will not be adequately versatile. Consider again 🐱🍏🌳 (cat). If 🐱 represents both sound (“c”) and meaning (“cat”), when we use it to form a written word, we need to juggle not only its sound component but also its meaning component to ensure that both can fit in forming the written word to represent the spoken word adequately, both in terms of the sound and meaning of the spoken word. This means, the sound component of each of the letters 🐱🍏🌳 (cat, apple, tree) together must adequately represent the pronunciation of the word cat, which is easily done. But then the meaning component of each of the letters (“cat,” “apple,” “tree”) when taken together must also make sense in a way consistent with the meaning of

the word “cat” (what has apple and tree got to do with cat?). Now even if both the sound and the meaning of these letters somehow fit in forming this particular written word, they must also fit in forming other written words that use these picture-signs, say in 🍏 🌳 🐈 (act; what has apple, cat and tree got to do with the meaning of the word “act”?).

We suppose no one will claim that if the letters of an alphabet represent both sound and meaning, it can work in English or any other language that uses the alphabetic writing system, except of course Biblical Hebrew as claimed by proponents of the Paleo-Hebrew phenomenon.

This claim amounts to saying that Biblical Hebrew is unlike any other language in the world—not even New Testament Greek—and it somehow (miraculously through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit?) managed to use the 22 Hebrew letters to represent both sound and meaning in writing all the words used in the Hebrew Bible. In fact [Bill Sanford](#), who has written a [Study Bible](#) (now in its second edition) based on this assumption, could not have said it more explicitly: “The fact is there has never been a language like Biblical Paleo-Hebrew. And it was set apart and ordained from the foundation of the world to be the only living and divine language on earth.”

Let us then consider whether there is any “biblical” basis for claiming that the Biblical Hebrew letters represent both sound and meaning, that is, whether this assumption has support from the Hebrew Bible itself. Let us return to the Hebrew word for father: אב (Aleph-Bet, ’āb). The Paleo-Hebrew method works in this case. But what happens when Aleph is found in another word? Interestingly the word for mother is אמ (Aleph-Mem). According to the Proto-Sinaitic alphabet chart above, Mem means “water/chaos.” So “mother” means “strength/leader + water/chaos.” How can we make sense of this? One way is to say, to be a mother one has to be pregnant and give birth to a child. And giving birth begins with the **water**-bag breaking, and when the labor pains kick in, it is **chaos**. But the would-be mother has the **strength** to go through it. So with a bit of imagination the method seems to still work. Aleph-Bet and Aleph-Mem are also the Phoenician words for father and mother respectively (Harris 1936: 73, 78). In fact the Phoenician alphabet and script are very similar to the Paleo-Hebrew alphabet and script. So this method need not be limited to “Biblical Paleo-Hebrew.”

Obvious problems arise when we put the method to scrutiny against the available evidence. For instance let us consider words with the same letters written in the same order but with different vowels (Hebrew was originally written without representing the vowels). Aleph-Mem (’ēm) means “mother,” but Aleph-Mem (’im) means “if.” What then has “ox/strength/leader + water/chaos” got to do with the conjunction “if”? So if we assume that Aleph and Mem represent both sound and meaning, how can Aleph-Mem mean both “mother” and “if” at the same time? How do we juggle both the sound and the meaning of each of the two letters so that the method works in both these two words? It will take a great deal of imagination, if at all possible, to make it work.

We will not multiply examples to belabor this point, which should be convincing enough to conclude that like other languages using the alphabetic writing system, Biblical Hebrew is written using letters that represent only sound and not meaning. Hence the assumption that the Hebrew letters represent both sound and meaning may work in only a selected number of Hebrew words. But it cannot work across the board. However, if the letters do indeed represent both sound and meaning, it should work across the board.

This means when the method works, it is at best coincidental. A specific case may not even be coincidental because the meanings assigned to the letters of the Proto-Sinaitic alphabet can be adjusted or even added to suit one's purpose. Let us consider the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet: ם (Tav), which is written essentially the same way in Proto-Sinaitic (†) as in Paleo-Hebrew (X). This is most likely because the picture-sign in Proto-Sinaitic does not depict an actual object but a mark people make to indicate something, like the mark ("x") we make on the ballot paper to indicate who we want to vote for. In fact the name of this letter (Tav) occurs as a word with the basic meaning "mark" in Ezekiel 9:4, 6 and Job 31:35. In the Ezekiel verses, the mark functions as a sign on the forehead of those who are to be spared from destruction. In the Job verse, the mark functions like a signature, and is in fact often translated as "signature." Thus if the letter Tav in itself indeed has inherent meaning, then the meaning "mark" or "sign" given to it in the chart above is objective. But the additional meaning "covenant" given to it is imagined, though not too far-fetched. For since a "mark" can function as a signature, and we put our signature to a contract, which is a kind of covenant, we can stretch our imagination to associate "covenant" with the mark. However Jeff Benner does not include this meaning in his [chart](#); instead in addition to "mark" and "sign," he has "signal" and "monument." If we can accept "covenant," why not also accept "signal" and even "monument" if it suits our purpose? It just shows how flexible and subjective this method can be.

Perhaps this is the reason why [John Parsons](#), from whose website we have taken the chart above, has on the same webpage given this

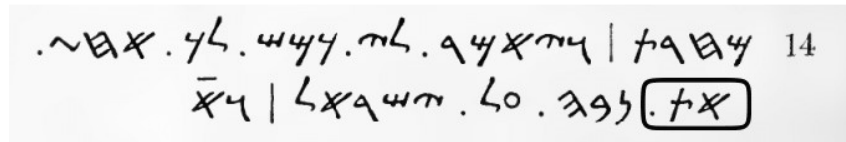
Warning: While the study of the pictographic script can sometimes yield insight into the underlying meaning (etymology) of Biblical Hebrew words, it is generally to be avoided as a stand-alone exegetical principle since this can lead to speculations and doubtful interpretations. For honest interpretation, the rule of thumb is to first master the *p'shat* (plain historical meaning) before moving on to other "levels" of the Scriptures.

It is significant that this warning affirms that Biblical Hebrew words, though supposed to be written with letters that represent sound as well as meaning, can only "sometimes" yield "underlying," that is "deeper," meaning. The "sometimes" qualification means this method of reading Hebrew words cannot be used across the board, and thus effectively denies that each of the Hebrew letters carries intrinsic meaning.

His warning against using this method in a "stand-alone" manner and that one must first master the "plain historical meaning" of the words and sentences is commendable. This warns against seeing "deeper meaning" that is not consistent with the "plain historical meaning." If and when practitioners heed this warning and treat the "deeper meanings" as merely heart-warming "illustrations" of the ordinary meanings and not meanings inherent in the biblical text, this phenomenon is actually not objectional. But if and when practitioners do not heed this warning, they may begin to think that their method of interpreting the Hebrew Bible is superior to that practiced by even Bible scholars, whose understanding of Scripture is therefore considered inadequate if not incorrect.

This danger is very real because "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 [Hebrew Bible]. 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

This use is thus in the context of God’s covenant people though not in God’s covenant language (“Biblical Paleo-Hebrew”). But it is most often used in the context of Mesha accomplishing something (as in lines 9-14). In fact it is even used in the context of Chemosh, the national god of Moab, saying to Mesha to “seize Nebo {direct object} against Israel” (line 14):



All this means Biblical Hebrew is not unlike other languages of the world, and its use of the Aleph-Tav particle is neither unique to God’s covenant language nor to the context of God and His covenant people.

Secondly, even if the assumption that the Aleph and the Tav have inherent meanings works in the Aleph-Tav particle, to be credible it must also work across the board in the Hebrew Bible. [Sanford](#) is apparently aware of this as he seeks to see significance in the co-occurrence of Aleph and Tav not only in the Aleph-Tav particle but also in words where these letters occur with other letters. His study on the Hebrew word for “fear” as in “the fear of God” is rather instructive.

The root word for this “fear” is ירא or יראא (Yod-Resh-Aleph). He says the word derived from this root word, יראא or יראאא (Yod-Resh-Aleph-Tav), which means “fear of,” “is *only* used to describe the *only* fear we should have, and that is, the **fear of Elohim (God),”** which is the beginning of wisdom. People who know Hebrew can tell right away that the Tav added to the end of the root word does not affect the lexical meaning “fear” but is a grammatical marker rendering the word to mean “fear of.” It happens that the Hebrew word in this exact form occurs entirely in the context of fearing God except in one place, where it refers to the “**fear of briars and thorns**” (Isaiah 7:25). So it is not true that the word is “only” used to describe the fear of God.

Now the Bible teaches that we should not only “fear” (Yod-Resh-Aleph) God but also the king (see Proverbs 24:21), that is, the governing authorities because all governing authorities are (supposed to be) servants of God to punish evil and praise good (Romans 13:1-7). Hence the fear of God is like the fear of the police in that we do not feel it until or unless we have done wrong or are about to do wrong. Also children are to “fear” (Yod-Resh-Aleph) their parents (see Leviticus 19:3). So the fear of God is also like the fear of parents. Hence just as a child can fear and love his parents and feel the love of his parents at the same time, we can also fear and love God and feel His love at the same time (Deuteronomy 10:12; 10:20-11:1). Thus we can actually find heart-warming deeper meanings by working with only the “plain historical meaning” of the Hebrew text(s).

Sanford’s conclusion that the only fear we should have is the fear of God will keep us from appreciating the true meaning of the fear of God. And it implies that people should fear only God and not the governing authorities, and that children should fear only God and not their parents. Hence Sanford’s use of the Paleo-Hebrew method violates the warning highlighted above in that his “deeper meaning” of a Hebrew word contradicts the “plain historical meaning” of the Bible. This illustrates the danger of using the Paleo-Hebrew method for studying the Hebrew Bible.

Apparently, to further show that the spiritual significance of the Aleph and the Tav combination can work across the board, Sanford presents another form of the word “fear”: יראא or יראאא (Tav-

Yod-Resh-Aleph), which every Hebrew student knows it means either “you (masculine singular) shall/should fear” or “she shall/should fear” depending on the context. Note that the letter Tav, this time added to the front, is again a grammatical marker and does not affect the lexical meaning “fear.” Sanford says that, because the Aleph and the Tav are not only separated but are now in the reverse order (Tav ... Aleph), the word (by itself) is “*always* used to refer to the fear we should not have, the fear of man.” To illustrate his point Sanford provides one example, where God said to Moses: “You should not fear him [Og king of Bashan]” (Numbers 21:34):

| | | |
|-----|-----------------|-----|
| אל | תירא | אתו |
| ⚡ | ⚡אגא | א⚡ |
| not | you should fear | him |

No doubt the word ⚡אגא or תירא is here used in the context of the fear of a man. But the word by itself does not express the idea that Moses “should not fear” this man. The “not” comes from the negating particle ⚡ or אל (Aleph-Lamed) and not the word itself. Consider another example where this same word occurs without any negating particle (Deuteronomy 6:13):

| | | | |
|----------|----------|----------------|------|
| את | יהוה | אלהיך | תירא |
| א⚡ | א⚡אגא | ⚡אגא | ⚡אגא |
| the LORD | your God | you shall fear | |

Note the untranslated Aleph-Tav particle (א⚡ or את) marking “the LORD your God” as the direct object of the verb, which is the word under discussion. If Sanford’s Paleo-Hebrew interpretation of this word is correct (it is “*always* used to refer to the fear we should not have”), we should not fear God! No one who reads Biblical Hebrew should make this glaring error.

How then did Sanford come to his erroneous conclusion about the word in question? In his [Study Bible](#) (page xv), he says: “it is only logical to assume that if you reverse the Aleph Tav, the meaning should become the opposite.” In other words, since the previous word, Yod-Resh-**Aleph-Tav** (“fear of”), is used to refer to the fear we **should** have, this word (**Tav-Yod-Resh-Aleph**), with the order of the Aleph and the Tav reversed, must then be used to refer to the fear we **should not** have (regardless of what the Hebrew sentence actually says). This illustrates the danger of following Seekins’ dictum that one can actually study the Hebrew Bible by just using the Paleo-Hebrew method, without even the need to understand Biblical Hebrew. Now Sanford is neither a fringe nor an “amateur” practitioner of the Paleo-Hebrew method; he has written a Paleo-Hebrew Study Bible covering the entire Hebrew Bible.

It is now clear that Sanford fails to show that the Paleo-Hebrew assumption can be applied across the board even in this limited scope (just one root word) and on this limited scale (not involving every letter of the word). We submit that based on our demonstration above on how the letters of an alphabet work to form written words, there is no way to show that the Paleo-Hebrew method works across the board. Just finding interesting “deeper meaning” in more and more isolated Hebrew words, especially by adjusting the supposed meanings of the Hebrew letters or even adding more meanings to them, does not prove that the Hebrew letters have inherent meanings.

Yet the Paleo-Hebrew phenomenon is gaining ground, mainly because ordinary Bible believers are so impressed by the exciting “deeper meanings.” Thus to refute the Paleo-Hebrew method and assumption to their satisfaction requires a painstaking technical demonstration of what should already be obvious to them. The ultimate danger of this phenomenon is, if and when the assumption and method are taken for granted by a critical mass of Bible believers, it becomes a powerful channel to spread heresies that most Bible believers would not otherwise accept.

Finally, a discussion of the Aleph-Tav particle in the context of the Paleo-Hebrew phenomenon is incomplete without considering Jesus’ statement: “I am the Alpha and the Omega” (Revelation 1:8, 21:6; 22:13). For the sake of discussion let us accept the assumption of some practitioners of the Paleo-Hebrew method that Jesus originally spoke in Aramaic. Since Alpha and Omega are the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, Jesus would actually be saying, “I am the Aleph and the Tav.” Thus Jesus is “Aleph + Tav.” The Paleo-Hebrew assumption that Hebrew letters have inherent meanings then opens the door for seeing Jesus in the Hebrew particle Aleph-Tav (Aleph + Tav). In fact Jesus can then be seen as the ultimate meaning of the Aleph-Tav particle, for in Jesus the fullest “**strength** of the covenant” is reached in that God kept His covenant promise by even sending His Son to die on the cross. This means we can see Jesus in the Hebrew Bible wherever this particle occurs, including Genesis 1:1, where it says, “In the beginning God created **Aleph-Tav** the heavens and the earth.” This then supports the New Testament teaching that Jesus was not only there when the world was created, He is the Creator Himself (John 1:3; Colossians 1:16). What then can be wrong with this interpretation?

In the context they are used, since Aleph is the first (beginning) letter and Tav is the last (end) letter of the Hebrew alphabet, they are here clearly used figuratively (as metaphors to be exact) to mean “the First and the Last” (Revelation 1:17; 2:8; cf. Isaiah 44:6) or “the Beginning and the End” (Revelation 21:6; 22:13). For this reason Jesus is He “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty” (Revelation 1:8). Since it is the order, and not any supposed meaning, of the letters in the alphabet that provides the figurative meaning, it really makes no difference if Jesus had said “I am the Alpha and the Omega” or “I am the A and the Z.” Just as A (or Alpha) and Z (or Omega) convey the desired figurative meaning without having any inherent meaning in themselves, so Aleph and Tav can do the same without having any supposed inherent meaning in themselves.

Now the meaning of a figure of speech, like a metaphor or a simile, must remain within the context it is used and not be transported to a different context. For example the lion is used figuratively as a metaphor to refer to King Jesus as the “Lion of the tribe of Judah” (Revelation 5:5; echoing Genesis 49:8-10). In this context the metaphor is based on the idea that the lion is the **king** (of the jungle). In a different context, the lion is used figuratively as a simile to describe Satan as a “prowling lion” (1 Peter 5:8). In this context, the simile is based on the idea that the lion is a **predator** (in the jungle). Hence even if we go against the available evidence and accept the assumption that the Aleph-Tav particle in the Hebrew Bible carries meaning beyond being a direct object marker, we still cannot import Jesus into it. Otherwise we may have to equate Jesus with Satan.

If we still insist we can, we need to take note of this verse in 2 Kings 3, which we saw gives an alternative account of what is narrated in the Moabite Stone: “Then he [Mesha the king of Moab] took {transitive verb} **Aleph-Tav** his oldest son who was to reign in his place {direct object}, and offered him as a burnt offering [to Chemosh, the Moabite national god] on the wall” (verse 27

NASB). Now even the Hebrew word for “burnt offering” here is the same as that used to refer to the burnt offering prescribed by God in Leviticus! This verse alone gives seemingly insurmountable problems not only to seeing Jesus in the Aleph-Tav particle in the Hebrew Bible, but also to Sanford’s idea that the Aleph-Tav particle is the “covenant symbol,” which thus can occur only in the context of God and/or His covenant people. We saw the Aleph-Tav particle used in the context of Chemosh and the king of Moab in the Moabite text. Now we see the same thing but in a Biblical Hebrew text!

In conclusion, when we are impressed by the Paleo-Hebrew method because we can see many Hebrew words yield exciting “deeper meanings” by using it, we need to bear in mind that to every example where this method seems to work there are multiple counter-examples that clearly show that this method does not work.

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