

## Languages of the Age: Ancient Alphabets

At first, the people of Israel used writing systems that were based on the Phoenician alphabet. For example, early inscriptions found by archaeologists show that a writing system called Paleo-Hebrew, a version of the Phoenician writing system, was used in Israel before the kingdom was conquered by the Neo-Babylonian Empire. Then, during the period when the Israelites were forced to live in Babylonia, they learned the Imperial Aramaic writing system. The Hebrew alphabet that is still used today comes from the Imperial Aramaic alphabet.

The following chart compares the Latin (English), Greek, Phoenician, Imperial Aramaic, and Hebrew alphabets. Can you see how all of these writing systems are related? (Hint: Notice how some of the shapes for certain sounds look similar in each language.) Are you surprised that people who lived so many centuries ago made such a tremendous impact on your life today?

**A COMPARISON OF ANCIENT ALPHABETS<sup>15</sup>**

LATIN	GREEK	PHOENICIAN	IMPERIAL ARAMAIC	HEBREW
Aa	Aα Alpha	𐤀 'Aleph (ox)	𐤁 Alaph	א Alef
Bb	Bβ Beta	𐤂 Beth (house)	𐤃 Beth	ב Bet
Cc, Gg	Γγ Gamma	𐤃 Gimel (camel)	𐤄 Gamal	ג Gimel
Dd	Δδ Delta	𐤄 Daleth (door)	𐤅 Dalath	ד Dalet
Ee	Eε Epsilon	𐤅 He (window)	𐤆 He	ה He
Ff, Pp	Ππ Pi, Ψψ Psi	𐤆 Pe (mouth)	𐤇 Pe	פ Pe
Hh	Ηη Eta	𐤇 Heth (wall)	𐤈 Heth	ח Chet
Ii, Jj	Ιι Iota	𐤈 Yodh (hand)	𐤉 Yudh	י Yod
Kk	Κκ Kappa	𐤉 Kaph (palm)	𐤊 Kaph	ך Kaf
Ll	Λλ Lamda	𐤊 Lamedh	𐤋 Lamadh	ל Lamed
Mm	Μμ Mu	𐤋 Mem (water)	𐤌 Mim	מ Mem
Nn	Νν Nu	𐤌 Nun (serpent)	𐤍 Nun	נ Nun
Oo	Οο Omicron, Ωω Omega	𐤍 'Ayin (eye)	𐤎 'Eyin	ע 'Ayin
Qq	Φφ Phi	𐤎 Qoph (eye of needle)	𐤏 Qoph	ק Qof
Rr	Ρρ Rho	𐤏 Res (head)	𐤐 Resh	ר Resh
Ss	Σσ Sigma	𐤐 Shin (tooth)	𐤑 Shin	ש/ׁ Shin
Tt	Ττ Tau	𐤑 Taw (mark)	𐤒 Tau	ת Tav
Uu, Vv, Ww, Yy	Υυ Upsilon	𐤒 Waw (hook)	𐤓 Waw	ו Vav
Xx	Ξξ Xi, Χχ Chi	𐤓 Samekh (fish)	𐤔 Semkath	ז Samech
Zz	Ζζ Zeta	𐤔 Zayin (weapon)	𐤕 Zain	ז Zayin
No modern English letter	No Greek letter	𐤕 Sade (papyrus)	𐤖 Sadhe	צ Tsade
No modern English letter	Θθ Theta	𐤖 Teth (wheel)	𐤗 Teth	ט Tet

If you enjoy studying these foreign alphabets and would like to learn more about the Greek letters, check out *Greek Alphabet Code Cracker*, available at [www.ClassicalAcademicPress.com!](http://www.ClassicalAcademicPress.com!)

15. A downloadable PDF of this chart can be found at [ClassicalAcademicPress.com/Pages/The-Curious-Historian](http://ClassicalAcademicPress.com/Pages/The-Curious-Historian) under the "Support" drop-down (found beneath the product photos). The Phoenician font was designed by Joseph Elias for the Omniglot website and is used courtesy of Simon Ager, Omniglot.com. If you and your students would like to download the Phoenician font and experiment with using it for typed messages, please visit <http://capress.link/tch1b0904>. The Imperial Aramaic font (GNU GPL 2.0) can be found at <http://capress.link/tch1b0905>.