

Reply to Three Questions Arising from the Paleo-Hebrew Article

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1. In terms of the historical progression of language development from Proto-Sinaitic to Paleo Hebrew to Aramaic square script, are you suggesting that when paleo Hebrew was used, the original pictographic meaning of the letters was lost to users? i.e. was the use of paleo Hebrew only phonetic, with no progressive overlap from the old (Proto-Sinaitic) to the new (Paleo script) in the understanding of users?

The article is quite comprehensive in showing that all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet EVEN in the Proto-Sinaitic script were originally ONLY phonetic. Thus when this script was changed to the Paleo-Hebrew script, there was no change from pictographic meaning + phonetic meaning to phonetic meaning only. It has always been phonetic ONLY. Hence the question of "progressive overlap" or the "original pictographic meaning" being lost does not arise.

In fact, if the letters in the Proto-Sinaitic script originally had pictographic meaning as well, they would not have adopted the Paleo-Hebrew script since it would no longer preserve the pictographic meaning. Actually it is misleading to say "adopt," for what actually happened was that the Proto-Sinaitic script was *deliberately* simplified into the Paleo-Hebrew script just like how Chinese characters which were initially pictorial were gradually simplified until the original "picture" cannot be recognized. Why would they deliberately not preserve the supposed pictographic meaning?

And we must not assume that the transition from the Proto-Sinaitic to the Paleo-Hebrew script happened within Hebrew culture. It happened before the Hebrew Bible was written. And the Proto-Sinaitic script is attested in inscriptions in non-Hebrew cultures. Also the Paleo-Hebrew script is used by other cultures and is found in non-Hebrew writings such as the Mesha inscription on the Moabite stone (discussed in the article). So Paleo-Hebrew proponents must accept that if pictorial meaning is found in the Hebrew Bible, it is also found in non-biblical and non-Hebrew writings like the Mesha inscription.

2. Is the notion of "finding deeper meanings" the incorrect term for a natural etymological process? In other words, could what we regard as hidden have been quite plain to people in the communities where the scripts was used? In this view, the "hiddenness" is a factor of abstracted phonetic meaning vs. the the original functional meaning of the word. For example, the idea of a father as strength (aleph) of the house (beit) is a functional description, whereas the word av is the abstracted phonetic representation, kind of like saying "would you like some H2O?", where the abstracted symbol is well understood form cultural context. If the the abstraction is rooted in a concrete picture, the whole process then is no more than investigating the etymology of words based on their historical and cultural context. This would not be the case in English, for example, where fat+her has no culturally relevant root connection to the role of father. One would need to dig into the "hidden" meaning in the same way by referring to Latin or other source languages. Each language would have its own etymological framework due to cultural and other factors.

The "natural etymological process" involving an "abstraction" theory as described here, still assumes that the letters of the alphabet can represent both meanings and

sounds. Hence the idea of the father being the strength (Aleph) of the house (Bet) comes from the combination of the supposed meanings of the individual letters—this is the “original functional meaning” of the word. And this meaning becomes “hidden” to us when we consider only meaning based on the sound of the word as a whole (av)—this is the “abstracted phonetic meaning.” I hope I have not misread the question.

We must remember that on the whole the words of a language were originally spoken only; writing was invented later. So before writing was invented, there were NO written words. In fact even after writing was invented, most people were illiterate and so even personal letters written to them had to be read to them—they only heard the sounds of the words. Now, was the idea of the father as the strength of the house already in the spoken word for “father” (av) before writing was invented? And after writing was invented, did an illiterate person who had his letters read to him missed the “original functional meanings” of the words in his letter?

Actually, when Paleo-Hebrew proponents claim that they discovered the “deeper meaning” of father being the strength in the house based on the pictures they see in the written word for father in the Proto-Sinaitic script, they are assuming that this “deeper meaning” was already there in the spoken word for “father” before writing was invented. And they also assume that letters of the alphabet in the Proto-Sinaitic script were designed specifically to capture the “deeper meaning” as well. Otherwise, they are saying the “deeper meaning” was invented and added to the word only when it became written down, which is preposterous.

Does it then mean the spoken word (sound alone) in itself could have carried the “deeper meaning”? According to the “abstraction” theory here, No. That is why it is “hidden” to us who depend on the sound (abstraction) of the word only. But just as we know the “functional meaning” of the “abstraction” H₂O from our “cultural context” whether we read it or hear it (H-2-O), the people then could associate the sound of the word “father” (av) with the “deeper meaning” from their cultural context. Thus the “abstraction” had already happened before writing was invented! It did not need to wait for the “concrete picture” provided by the writing system. So the “deeper meaning” was “quite plain” to the people then even before writing was invented, what more after. However, just as the “functional meaning” of H₂O is quite plain to us but may be hidden to people 1000 years in the future, the “deeper meaning” of the word “father” is hidden to us who have access to only the sound (“abstraction”) of the word through the Aramaic script. Hence we need the Paleo-Hebrew proponents to recover it for us by studying the word in the Proto-Sinaitic script, which “remembers” the “deeper meaning” in the pictures.

However, all this assumes that the letters of an alphabet can represent both meanings and sounds. And the “abstraction” theory is an after-thought needed to back the assumption, which cannot stand linguistic scrutiny. The article has painstakingly shown how impossible it would be to invent an alphabetic writing system to represent both sounds and meanings. Even non-alphabetic (and supposed “pictorial”) writing systems like Ancient Egyptian and Chinese, which Seekins claims to be the basis for this theory, were invented to represent sounds only. This is why even the Chinese characters could be simplified. Seekins is grossly misinformed.

By the way, James Barr in his 1961 book *The Semantics of Biblical Language* chastised biblical scholars, among other things, for using etymology to determine the meaning of words. The meaning of a word is determined by its current usage, and something unintended and undesirable can happen when we bring in its etymology. Take for instance the English word “nice,” as in this comment made in good faith: “It is so nice of you to say that.” Look up its etymology here: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/nice>. Then apply its “hidden meaning” to the comment. You will turn a nice comment into a nasty one. Is this not the kind of “hidden meaning” Paleo-Hebrew proponents want to see in Biblical Hebrew words?

However the method they use to find “hidden meaning” can actually do that—turning the established meaning of a word upside down based on the supposed pictorial meanings of the letters. Take for example the word טְהוֹר (Tet-Hey-Waw-Resh), which means “clean, pure” (BDB). According to Benner’s chart (<https://www.ancient-hebrew.org/alphabet/hebrew-alphabet-chart.htm>) these are the meanings of the respective letters:

Tet: surround, contain, mud
Hey: look, reveal, breath
Waw: add, secure, hook
Resh: head, top, first, beginning

So based on this list of meanings, the word טְהוֹר actually describes a person who is neither clean nor pure—it reveals that his head has mud (“hidden meaning”). Note that based on the meanings of the letters in Benner’s chart, it is difficult to find a “deeper meaning” that fits “clean, pure” (before finding this example, I tested many words and found that the whole list of meanings in Benner’s chart does not work for most words). A chart from another proponent may list different meanings for these letters and may have meanings that make it fit. In fact, as we see below, for words that “fit” nicely, either they have only 2 letters or only 2 of the letters are considered. Some words with 3 letters may happen to fit, but it would be very difficult for words with 4 or more letters to fit if we take all the letters into consideration. We need to view examples that “fit” in this light.

3. Does inductive reasoning play any role in this area of study? If there is a consistent pattern of finding “deeper” meanings in words that validate the function of the words by known cultural references, does this strengthen the basis of the assumption that combine pictures formed word meanings? From my own reading of the Seekins/Benner sources, there seems to be an emergent pattern of consistency, which makes it easy to understand how people accept their interpretation e.g Seekins’ systematic study has several thousand words that seem to support the assumption. Or is this all coincidence, with a risk of entering the forbidden realm of divination, or at least wasting time on groundless conjecture.

I do not have Seekins’ book (in the article, all citations from his book are taken from secondary sources) and so cannot comment on his “1000s of examples” of “deeper meanings” in Biblical Hebrew words. I have access to Benner’s materials. So I can evaluate his examples. Benner should not be inferior to Seekins in finding examples as he seems to be the most sophisticated linguistically.

Benner's Ancient Hebrew Dictionary does list 1000 verbs and nouns. But there are only some in this list that he presents the "deeper meaning." Let's begin with no. 419: **אָמ** (Aleph-Mem), which means "mother." He says the Aleph (ox) means "strength" and the Mem (water) means any fluid. So "mother" (strength + water) means the "glue" (strong/thick liquid) of the family—mother *binds* the family together. A nice one. And the word (421) **אָמָה** (Aleph-Mem-Hey), which means "a female slave," fits nicely as it means "One who is *bound* to another." Also amazingly, he is able to make the conjunction "if" **אִם** (also Aleph-Mem) fit his theory: "A desire to *bind* two ideas together." Again the idea of "bind/bound" makes his theory work. I did not see this when I wrote the article and so asked, "What then has "ox/strength/leader + water/chaos" got to do with the conjunction 'if'?" I should not have used this as a counter-example. Hence this "emergent pattern of consistency" does look rather convincing unless one is adequately familiar with how a writing system actually works and thus writes it off. I understand why so many people would fall for it.

Evidently Benner does not present the "deeper meaning" of most of the 1000 words in his dictionary because he needs to derive it based on his linguistic theory + his Paleo-Hebrew method. This he does in his Ancient Hebrew Lexicon, where his "1000s of examples" would be found if he has that many. Benner's linguistic theory is sophisticated and is built on the unproven theory that the Hebrew root is biradical and not triradical. I must admit that Benner's Lexicon is ingenious and it will take a long and technical article to debunk it. Suffice it here to say that even scholars who hold the biradical theory would reject what Benner makes of this theory.

Actually we can already show that Benner's theory does not really work by asking questions like, What about the many other words that also have **אָמ** (strong water = glue) in it? Do ALL of them fit the theory? A good example is **אָמַל** (Aleph-Mem-Lamed), which means "be weak, languish" (BDB). How can "strong water" be weak? I think it is possible for Benner to reply. I should anticipate it after my experience with the conjunction "if," which he takes to mean something that "binds" ideas together.

Let's then look at the next primary root after **אָמ** in Benner's Lexicon (no. 1014): **אָן** (Aleph-Nun)—ox + seed, which Benner gives the root meaning "produce." And based on the word **תְּאֲנִתָּהּ** (note the Aleph-Nun in the middle) in Jeremiah 2:24, which *in that context* means "her occasion or time of copulation" (BDB), Benner annotates on this root: "The male searches out the female and approaches her for reproducing (see Jeremiah 2:24). This can also be a search for the purpose of producing something." So we have the idea of "search" added to "produce." With this Benner can see the "deeper meaning" in the word **תְּאֲנִתָּהּ** (same consonants as the word above but without the suffix "her"), which means "fig" or "fig-tree": "A desirable and prolific fruit that must be searched for as the fruit is green, blending in with the leaves making it difficult to see." Note that the idea of "search," transferred from Benner's annotation on the previous word, is NOT even part of that word. See how "flexible" Benner's Paleo-Hebrew method is in finding "deeper meaning" in Hebrew words.

Actually both the above words (nouns), which have the same consonants, are derived from the same verbal root **אָנָה** (Aleph-Nun-Hey), which means "to be opportune, to meet, encounter opportunely" (BDB). And according to BDB, this is how **תְּאֲנִתָּהּ** (fig or fig-tree) is derived from **אָנָה**: "*meet opportunely*, with ref. to

fructifying of fig by another tree.” In fact another occurrence of the word in Jeremiah 2:24 (with the same consonants but without the suffix “her”) is in Judges 14:4; and it means simply “an occasion” (NIV) or “an opportunity” (ESV). Hence even the idea of “(time of) copulation,” let alone that of “the male searches out the female (to copulate to re-produce),” is specific to the word in the particular context of Jeremiah 2:24, and thus cannot be transferred to the word for fig or fig-tree (Barr also chastised biblical scholars for such a practice). So the “deeper meaning” Benner sees in תַּאֲנִה (fig or fig-tree) is blatantly fanciful.

If this is how Benner finds “deeper meaning,” he will have no problem replying to me above by saying that the word אַמַּל, which means “be weak, languish,” can still carry the sense “strong water” because when we are caught in a strong wave, we become weak. Thus Benner in his Lexicon does show how his linguistic theory together with his Paleo-Hebrew method can produce a “consistent pattern of finding ‘deeper’ meanings in words.” But does this the kind of (manufactured) “consistent pattern” prove the Paleo-Hebrew assumption that the Hebrew letters carry pictorial meanings as well? To prove this assumption, we need to consider all relevant facts, not just selected facts that are convenient, what more when extraneous ideas are added to those of the selected facts.

It does not matter even if Benner found 1000s of examples as fitting and “nice” as אִמָּה (“mother”) or אִם (“if”). What matters is that there are many more examples that do not fit. And since the assumption is that each of the Hebrew letters represents meaning in addition to sound, for an example to fit, the supposed meaning of each of the letters of the word must be accounted for. So to make his example אַמָּה (“female slave, one bound to others”) fit, Benner has to take into account the supposed meaning of the ה (Hey), which we saw means “look, reveal, breath.” So he needs to make sense of “female slave” in terms of strong + water + look/reveal/breath, and not just strong + water. So now a female slave is one who *breathes* and is *bound* to others? Perhaps Benner can make it fit better than this.

But what about the case of אַמַּל (“be weak, languish”)? According Benner’s own chart ל (Lamed) means “teach, yoke, authority [power], bind.” So he needs to make sense of “be weak, languish” in terms of strong + water + teach/yoke/authority/bind. It is then even more astounding that the word as a whole actually means “be weak, languish.” So it turns out that the “hidden meaning” of a word that means “be weak” is actually “powerful like a strong wave” (and that of a word that means “clean” is actually “a head (dirty) with mud”). Without multiplying counter-examples, we can already see how questionable the above “consistent pattern” is.

This reminds me of the comment W. H. Walsh made with regards to the supposed consistent patterns that speculative philosophers claim to find in the flow of history. He says, though these philosophers “claimed that their conclusions rest on fact. . . , it is all too clear that their reading of fact is by no means compulsive. The charge that they pick their facts to suit their thesis is hard to avoid: in their work we are apt to find tremendous emphasis laid on certain happenings which fit in conveniently with their theory, whilst others which are less convenient go unmentioned. . . . The sea of fact is apparently so vast that it is always possible to fish up some fact or other to support no matter how extravagant a view” (“Meaning in History,” page 305 in *Theories of History* edited by Patrick Gardiner, 1959).

So looking for more and more examples that happen to fit is not the way to prove the assumption. The kind of “consistent pattern” needed is like that which Bill Sanford tried to show as discussed in the article—the co-occurrence of Aleph and Tav not only in the Aleph-Tav particle (“strength of the covenant”) but also in words where these letters occur with other letters. After evaluating his effort, I concluded: “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).” Actually the article has shown that the assumption cannot be proven by any means as it is proven that it is impossible for the letters of an alphabet to represent both sounds and meanings.

Postscript:

After having completed writing the above, I found a video of Seekins speaking on Hebrew Word Pictures (<https://vimeo.com/20317945>). I randomly jumped to minute 24:14 and came upon this:



We know the name Caleb means dog (kelev) in Hebrew. Seekins goes on to preach a heart-warming message based on Caleb (dog) = “all heart.” However the idea that dog (klv) = “all heart” does not come from the supposed pictorial meanings of the individual letters, but from two separate Hebrew words kol (“all”) and lev (“heart”). This means, based on what God says of Caleb—he followed God fully—Seekins arbitrarily split the word klv (“dog”) into two words: kl (“all”) and lv (“heart”). Anyone who knows Hebrew can see that this is linguistically atrocious.

In any case this is not an example for supporting the assumption that the Hebrew letters represent both sounds and meanings. So it is misleading if not deceptive for Seekins to use the Proto-Sinaitic script for the Hebrew letters (kl + lv) in the diagram as though “all heart” comes from the pictorial meanings of these letters. It is most likely that most of his audience did not know Hebrew. After seeing how Seekins handles his material, I stopped watching the video. Anyway, I have to stop writing here, so better not tempt myself.