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The Alphabet: The Heritage of the Canaanites
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When Christians think about the Canaanites, it is usually to recall their supposed disappearance after the Israelites conquered their land in the 13th century B.C. The Canaanites were supposedly one of the many small peoples of the Mediterranean world who vanished without a trace during the great movements of peoples at that time. There are two things wrong with this picture. First, the Canaanites did not disappear, but instead became one of the dominant nations of the time. Second, when they did become amalgamated into the Roman Empire many centuries later, they left a legacy which remains with us today, namely, the alphabet.

The Canaanites lived along the eastern Mediterranean shore for most of the second millennium B.C. The strip of land they occupied extended about 25 miles inland, to the northern end of the Great Rift Valley through which the Jordan River runs. The territory's southern end reached nearly to Egypt while its northern end stretched across the land today known as Lebanon. The Israelites and the Philistines occupied only the southern end of this territory in the 13th century.

The Canaanites that remained in the area of Lebanon became expert seafarers and traders. The great East-West trade route of the age ran through their land. This group of mobile Canaanites became known by another name: the Phoenicians. They traded along the Mediterranean coast and sailed out into the islands, where they came into contact with Greek civilization, and to the west where they established Carthage -- Rome's first major opponent. It was through this trading empire that the Phoenicians spread their greatest intellectual achievement, namely, the alphabet.

The Canaanites invented the alphabet sometime in the second half of the second millennium B.C., probably before the appearance of the Israelites in their territory. The importance of this achievement lies not merely in the creation of a writing system of 22 letters, but in the idea of an alphabet as a way to represent speech in a written form.

For prior to the Phoenicians, all writing had been done by syllabaries. A syllabary is a collection of signs that represent each different syllable of a language. For

example, to represent English syllabically, imagine a sign (i.e., a letter) for each combination of consonant plus vowel. This would result in different signs for ba, be, bo, ca, ce, co, etc. In the end, there would be hundreds of different letter signs that writers and readers would need to memorize. This kind of awkward writing system was in use by the great empires up to this time: Sumer and Akkad in Mesopotamia (i.e., modern Iraq) and Egypt along the Nile.

The Canaanites realized that it was possible to divide speech into sound units smaller than syllables. They identified 22 sounds, nearly all of them consonants, for their language.

The Canaanite/Phoenician alphabet spread initially in two directions. First, it was adopted by the peoples in and near Canaanite territory, both present and past. So the Israelites, the Philistines, the Moabites, the Ammonites, and so on all had adopted the Phoenician alphabet by the time of their earliest written remains--from the early first millennium B.C.

Second, the alphabet was adopted by the Aramaic-speaking tribes from the north. Since Aramaic became the language of empire for the Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian empires, the alphabet spread across them and even into Egypt. Centuries later, a cursive form of Aramaic script became the basis for written Arabic, while other forms spread even further east to India.

As the Phoenicians traveled west, they passed their alphabet on to the Greeks. Greek writers adopted it and adapted it for their language, adding a few more signs to indicate vowels left out in the Phoenician version. The Greeks then passed it on to the Etruscans, the first major power in the Italian peninsula, who in turn passed it on to the Romans who adapted it for Latin.

So despite the disappearance of the Canaanites and the Phoenicians many centuries ago, their legacy lives on in their simple yet powerful invention, the alphabet. That alphabet became the basis for writing languages across the world.