

WHY START JACOB AND JOSEPH WITH A "J"?

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The intention of this essay is to explain why the sounds of consonants and vowels in one language are often different in another language, when logic seems to say that they could be the same. This occurs frequently when biblical names are transliterated. For example, in the original Hebrew the names Jacob and Joseph both begin with the consonant "yod," the phonetic equivalent of the English /y/, and are pronounced Ya'akov and Yosef. One might ask that since the sound of /y/ is available in the English alphabet, why is it not used in the transliteration? This question is a frequent challenge to the translator who often has to convey not only the meaning but, if possible, also the sound of a word from one language into another. Answers to these questions may be found in studies of the history of the alphabet as it developed in different languages, and this essay will attempt briefly to explicate this complex topic from the historical perspective.

THE ALPHABET

Since it was much easier to speak and listen than to write and read, oral and written languages have separate lines of development. Since oral language is more immediate and fluid it changes faster than the written word. Written language systems, including spelling and orthography, tend to be more conservative and resistant to change than oral language. Spelling reform¹ has always met with resistance and was usually accomplished after a political upheaval.² Written language standardized many oral traditions by recording the thoughts of the writers and making it possible to communicate over large distances.

The concept of representing a language with a phonetic alphabet is an important development for civilization. While earlier forms of writing appeared in the Near East by the fourth millennium, it took many more centuries to develop a phonetic alphabet. It required a leap of faith to use a consonantal phonetic alphabet over pictographs or cuneiform wedges because the letters require more abstract reasoning than pictographs.

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The Northwest Semitic phonetic alphabet, in use by the end of the second millennium, was adopted for Hebrew in the 12th or 11th century BCE. By the fifth century BCE, Aramaic was used by many nations as a first or second language. By the end of the fourth century BCE, the Aramaic alphabet script [כתב אשורית], also known as Hebrew square script, replaced the older script.

The original Northwest Semitic alphabet was spread abroad by the Phoenicians and adopted by the Greeks with order and names of letters. About the sixth century BCE, the Romans borrowed it from the Etruscans, who had abandoned the Semitic letter names in favor of phonetic letter names passed on to us by the Romans: "A," "B," "C" and so on. Otherwise the early Latin alphabet was structured much like its Northwest Semitic, Greek, and Etruscan predecessors.³

TRANSLITERATION

No alphabet has a one-to-one correspondence between the phonemes of the spoken word and the written words. For example, no standard alphabet takes into account regional pronunciation or accents. Also, some people pronounce these words the same and some are able to differentiate: don, dawn, done or Mary, merry, marry, Miri. Some people pronounce "car" with a broad /ah/ and short /r/ sound, while others pronounce the /a/ short with a long /r/ sound. Because vowel sounds are particularly hard to represent precisely in the alphabet, vowel pairs (diphthongs) or groups of letters are used for the complement of sounds. English has consonant pairs with one sound such as /th/, /sl/, /ph/. A speaker of English would not think twice about the pronunciation, and a reader would know how to read the words because this skill is part of the language-learning process.

Because the spelling of English can be ambiguous and pronunciation sometimes depends on context, one question that is never adequately answered is: "Should transliteration from a different alphabet match the written or oral form of the word?" There is no single right answer.

The *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1972) has done much to standardize transliteration. Essentially, it used the system developed by the Academy of Hebrew Language. However, the *EJ* was not able to standardize transliteration totally for the entire work. When using words that have passed

into English the *EJ* keeps the well-known spelling. That includes most names from the Tanakh.

Some of the difficulties of transliteration include:

1. The sounds of the vowels in the Tanakh may differ from Modern Hebrew sounds.
2. The spoken Hebrew of the Middle East and of Eastern Europe are different enough to make transliteration an inexact process.
3. Some proper names have been accepted into English, and some Hebrew words, such as "amen," "hallelujah," and "minyan" have become part of English. The "J" of *hallelujah* and the "Y" of *minyan* are from the Hebrew consonantal "yod," pronounced /y/ but have different meanings.

Why does English use "J" for names that begin with a consonantal "yod"? Examples are: Ya'akov [יַעֲקֹב], Yarden [יַרְדֵּן], Yehoshua [יְהוֹשֻׁעַ], Yermiyahu [יֵרֵמְיָהוּ], and Yosef [יֹסֵף]. Yitzhak [יִצְחָק] is not included here in this list because though it begins with a "yod" the English form begins with an "I."

Let us examine some English spellings of Hebrew names that are almost an exact transliteration even in modern spoken English, such as Adam and Sarah. They are pronounced with just a small shift in the length of the /a/ sound. Adam has a change in the accented syllable; Sarah has the same accent as in the Hebrew. Abraham [Avraham] is also very close to the Hebrew, with a very close correspondence between the Hebrew and English consonants except for the change from /v/ to /b/. There is also change in the vowel sound and accented syllable. Even regional dialects of English have vowel and accent shifts and English words can change meaning with a change in accent, so these English forms of the names are quite reasonable and logical.

Even understanding the history of the alphabet does not give a logical explanation for transliteration of names beginning with "yod." English now uses a modification of the Latin alphabet which is not identical to that of Old or Middle English.

Phoenician	א	ב	ג	ד	ה	ו	ז	ח	ט	י	כ	ל	מ	נ	ס	ע	פ	צ	ק	ר	ש	ת	
Hebrew	א	ב	ג	ד	ה	ו	ז	ח	ט	י	כ	ל	מ	נ	ס	ע	פ	צ	ק	ר	ש	ת	
Greek	Α	Β	Γ	Δ	Ε	Ζ	Η	Θ	Ι	Κ	Λ	Μ	Ν	Ξ	Ο	Π	Ρ	Σ	Τ	Υ	Φ	Χ	Ψ
Tyrrhenian	Α	Β	Γ	Δ	Ε	Ζ	Η	Θ	Ι	Κ	Λ	Μ	Ν	Ξ	Ο	Π	Ρ	Σ	Τ	Υ	Φ	Χ	Ψ
Middle English	Ț	Ɔ	Ɔ	Ɔ	Ɔ	Ɔ	Ɔ	Ɔ	Ɔ	Ɔ	Ɔ	Ɔ	Ɔ	Ɔ	Ɔ	Ɔ	Ɔ	Ɔ	Ɔ	Ɔ	Ɔ	Ɔ	Ɔ
Latin	A	B	C	D	E	F	Z	H	I	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	V	X		

The alphabet chart has no letter "J". The Hebrew "yod" became "I" in Greek and in Latin where the "I" represented both vowel and consonant sounds. The "J" as a letter in its own right did not enter the English alphabet

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until the Middle Ages. Writers of Latin in the Middle Ages sometimes used "J" when there was a double "I," as in "VIIIJ." The final letter was then an "I" with a tail, and it did not have a separate sound. Vowels are difficult to transliterate because their sounds frequently differ in regional dialects.⁴

"I" is used in Latin for both the consonantal and vowel pronunciations, as it was the "yod" in the Hebrew alphabet. Users of Latin knew from the context how to pronounce the words with "I," just as the users of Hebrew learned how to vocalize the consonants. If "J" was used at all in early English it was a variant of "I."

The actual date when the sound of "J" was changed to /dzh/ is unknown. In the early 1630s Dutch printers started to use the "J" on a consistent basis. English-speakers copied the spelling, but forgot that the "J" was the descendent of a "yod" and needed the /y/ sound to be close to the Hebrew names. It seems the phoneme /dzh/ that now starts *Jacob* and *Joseph* is a mistake or misconception, for it certainly does not follow a linear progression from the sound of "yod" in the original Hebrew. It also does not follow the English roots of the letters "J" and "I." Names such as Yigal and Yael, which have no common English usage prior to the 20th century, have never been spelled with a "J" in English.

JACOB, ISAAC, JOSEPH

These three names all appear in the verse Genesis 50:24. Following are examples of the variant forms they take in the original and in transliteration:

Hebrew Bible

Va-yomer Yosef el ekhav, 'ano hi met, va'elohim pakod yifkod 'etkhem vi-he'elah 'etkhem min ha'aretz ha-zot, 'el ha'aretz 'asher nishba' li-'Avraham li-Yitshak uli-Ya'akov.

Vulgate Latin Translation

Quibus transactis locutus est fratribus suis post mortem meam Deus visitabit vos et ascendere faciet de terra ista ad terram quam iuravit Abraham Isaac et Iacob.

The Vulgate, the Latin Bible translation, completed by Jerome in the year 404, was translated directly from the original languages. Many translations into European languages were based on the Vulgate. Notice in the verse above "Joseph" does not appear. "Abraham" and "Isaac" are spelled the same way as in modern English.

Wycliffe English Bible 1381

Joseph spak to hise brithren, Aftir my deeth God schal visite you, and he schal make to stie fro this lond to the loond which he swoor to Abraham, **Ysaac**, and **Jacob**.

The English translation prepared by John Wycliffe and his associates was stylistically uneven and stilted, and contained both Latinisms and colloquialisms. The translation from the Hebrew translation was attributed to Nicholas of Hereford. "Ysaac" is used for Isaac. "Y" is the vowel sound of "yod" and would be pronounced like a long /i/. Jacob, Joseph, and Abraham are spelled as in modern English.

Tyndale Bible published c.1539

And **Joseph** sayde vnto his brethern: I die And God will suerlie vysett you and bringe you out of this lande vnto the lande which he sware vnto Abraham **Isaac** and **Iacob**.

Tyndale's translation of the Pentateuch was the first part of the Bible to be printed in English. For his effort he was branded a heretic and executed in 1536. Both Joseph and Jacob are spelled with an initial "I". Note also the spelling, "vysett" for "visit" compared to the "visite" in the Wycliffe version.

King James Version 1611

And **Joseph** said unto his brethren, I die: and God will surely visit you, and bring you out of this land unto the land which he sware to Abraham, to **Isaac**, and to **Jacob**.

This verse is almost identical to the Tyndale Bible except for the spelling of some words.

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Douay-Rheims Translation 1609-10

After which he told his brethren: God will visit you after my death, and will make you go up out of this land, to the land which he swore to Abraham, **Isaac**, and **Jacob**.

American Standard Version 1901

And **Joseph** said unto his brethren, I die; but God will surely visit you, and bring you up out of this land unto the land which he sware to Abraham, to **Isaac**, and to **Jacob**.

This is almost identical to the Tyndale Bible except for the spelling of some words.

Jewish Publication Society 1985

Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die. God will surely take notice of you and bring you up from this land to the land that He promised on an oath to Abraham, to **Isaac** and **Jacob**."

HEBREW	CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH	TYNDALE	GREEK
יעקב	Jacob	Iocob	
	Iakob	Jakob	
יוסף	Joseph	Ioseph	
	Iosef	Joseph	
יצחק	Isaac	Isaac	
	Isaak	Jizchack	
ישראל	Israel	Israell	
	Israhl	Jisrael	
יהודה	Judah	Iuda	
	Iovdj	Jehudah	
אברהם	Abraham	Abraham	
Abra'am	Abraham		

If one spells the name "Iacob" in English and pronounces the "I" with the consonant sound of "Y" it will be almost the same as the Hebrew "Yakob,"

but with a shorter vowel and /b/ in place of the softer /v/. The same could be said for Ioseph/Joseph/. All the Greek and German transliterations are also very close to the Hebrew originals.

NOTES

1. Noah Webster and Melville Dewey were only partly successful with their spelling reform proposals. Dewey wanted to spell "night" as "nite." He even persuaded the *Chicago Tribune* to adopt some of his proposed new spellings but that did not last.
2. Examples are the Norman Conquest of England in 1066 and the American Revolution.
3. See: Michael Everson, "On the Status of the Latin Letter þorn and of Its Sorting Order" www.evertype.com/standards/wynnyogh/thorn.html
4. For example: in Hebrew many people cannot differentiate between a "segol" and a "sereh." Most Hebrew speakers do not differentiate between a "gimmel" or "dalat" with and without a *dagesh* [dot in the middle of the letters "bet," "gimmel," "dalet," "khof," "peh," "tof"] that is supposed to indicate a doubling and a shift in the pronunciation. In Ancient Hebrew, all the letters with and without a *dagesh* had different sounds. Only the "bet/vet," "kof/khof," "peh/feh," and in Ashkenazi pronunciation "tof/sof" have separate pronunciations. Because the meaning is not changed with the pronunciation, this adds a level of complexity to the transliteration problem.
5. For example, the letter called "thorn," pronounced /th/ as in "the," is used in Middle English and modern Icelandic, but not modern English. The letters "J," "U," "W," and "Y" were not in the ancient Latin of Rome, nor were there phonemes for /th/, /ph/, or /kh/, while the diphthong notations such as "r̄" and "̄" which were used by scribes to save space are not used today. In Ancient Greek the "X [chi]" was pronounced /kh/ as in the Hebrew "khof." The "V" in Latin was both a consonant and vowel, in contrast to English that uses "U" for a vowel and "V" for a consonant. In Old English and Middle English the pronunciation of "W" was closer to the German "V."

Spelling in English is not always phonetic because words borrowed or assimilated from other languages usually keep their native spelling, regional pronunciation variations of English, 14 vowel sounds of English, silent letters, spelling reform to separate British and American English, and purposeful changes to make English more like Latin.