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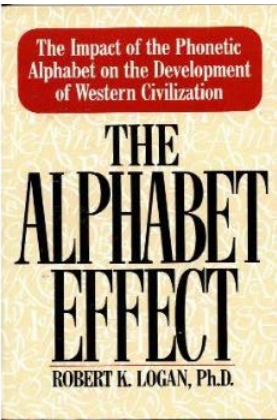
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The Alphabet Effect: The Impact of the Phonetic Alphabet on the Development of Western Civilization Paperback

by Robert K. Logan (Author)
★★★★☆ (9 customer reviews)

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Editorial Reviews

From Library Journal

This book has a message: the rise in the West of codified law, monotheism, theoretical science, logic, and individualism was fostered by the phonetic alphabet. Unfortunately, the message is not substantiated. Logan shows that literacy has contributed to many "Western" innovations, but literacy is not synonymous with alphabets witness the Chinese, the Japanese, etc. Further, the relation between the alphabet and monotheism is obscure: both the ancient Greeks and the Hindus had an alphabet and many gods. Logan may argue that the phonetic alphabet possesses "logic," but where is the logic in a random list of alphabetized words: aardvark, abacus, acrobat, admirable? Yet many Chinese dictionaries are logical, grouping related words under the appropriate sign. Not recommended. Catherine von Schon, SUNY at Stony Brook Lib.
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More About the Author

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Biography

Robert K. Logan is Professor Emeritus in physics at the U. of Toronto and Chief Scientist at the Strategic Innovation Lab (sLab) at the Ontario College of Art and Design. Logan has edited collections about Canadian politics (The Way Ahead for Canada and Canada's Third Option) based on his experiences as one of Pierre Trudeau's policy advisers. He has written about media and communications (The Alphabet Effect, The Fifth Language and The Sixth Language) based on his experience of collaborating and publishing with Marshall McLuhan. His book co-authored with McLuhan sits unpublished in the Canadian Archives in Ottawa, He has also written on the origin of language (The Extended Mind). Three new books are in the works at their respective publishers: Understanding New Media and What is Information based on work at the sLab and The Poetry of Physics based on a course of the same name that Logan has taught at U of T since 1971.
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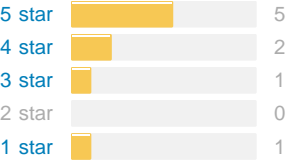


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The book is easy reading.

Elsnerr

In that capacity the phonetic alphabet facilitated scientific writing, which in turn enhanced the communication of scientific ideas.

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A tiny detail compared to the wealth of information the book provides.

Luiz Schechter

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3 of 4 people found the following review helpful
★★★★★ **History of the Alphabet**
By [John Smeltzer](#) on January 3, 2004

Format: Paperback
I enjoy history, but I don't often seek it out. My knowledge base of ancient history is really lacking, but this book piqued my interest to find out more. The basic idea of the book is that there is a connection between the use of the phonetic alphabet and the development of monotheism, codified law, and abstract science. I found the section on the inclusion of the zero in math to be particularly interesting. My only criticisms are that he seems to make a soft case, that is he goes out of his way to point out that he's not making a causal connection, and the final chapter (on computers), at this point, is more than a little dated.

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★★★★★ **Very interesting**
By [Frederick G. Widdowson](#) on May 16, 2013

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The author makes many assumptions but does provide a great deal of useful information. I would recommend this as a backup to other sources for context.

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★★★★★ **Great book!**
By [Luiz Schechter](#) on April 11, 2011

Format: Paperback | [Amazon Verified Purchase](#)
If you ever wondered how and why the Western Civilization managed to prevail over others, you must read this book. It is easy to read, entertaining and rich in historic details that certainly required extensive ressearch. It provides a unique insight to the development of science, understood as a consequence of the thinking processes involved in the use of phonetic alphabets. In my opinion the book may have understated the importance of treasuring books and literacy, a cultural habit indispensable for information to "jump" generations that lacked great minds. A tiny detail compared to the wealth of information the book provides.
This book is also essential to understand the role of the printing press in the Industrial Revolution, the closest paralel to the revolution we are living today due to Internet.

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1 of 2 people found the following review helpful
★★★★★ **Logan is the authentic article**
By [Alan Steele](#) on December 1, 2010

Format: Paperback
Just want to contradict the review which questions Logan's credentials as a media ecologist. He is the real thing. He collaborated with Marshall McLuhan. In fact, they co-authored the article which Logan later elaborated into this book. He has done extensive research in media ecology and the evolution of language.
In addition to The Alphabet Effect, he's written The Sixth Language: Learning a Living in the Internet Age and The Extended Mind: The Emergence of Language, the Human Mind and Culture. In The Alphabet Effect he meticulously develops the hypothesis that the alphabet, in particular the Greek alphabet, which modified earlier Semitic alphabets by introducing 7 vowels, and thus "created the most accurate and unambiguous phonetic writing system ever known to man. The phonetic alphabet permits a one-to-one correspondence between the spoken and written language"(p. 40). "The constant repetition of the process of phonemic analysis of a spoken word, every time it is written in an alphabetic form subliminally promotes the skills of analysis and matching that are critical for the development of scientific and logical thinking" (p. 109-110). This analytical system of writing words by successively adding one sound symbol after another, although we take it for granted today, is one of the most ingenious systems every created. Logan suggests that it paved the way for codified law, monotheism, abstract science and deductive logic. And later, with the advent of the printing press and "the modern innovations associated with print, . . . created a climate conducive to the mutual development of vernacular literature, universal education, individualism, the Reformation, modern democratic institutions, and capitalism" (p. 226), always with the disclaimer that there are no "hard and fast causal links". [Read more ›](#)

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1 of 2 people found the following review helpful
★★★★☆ **Science is more complex than the alphabet**
By [J. Brew](#) on July 25, 2010

Format: Paperback
This is a curious book, it made me thinking, and also left me wanting to learn more.

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★★★★★ **The amazing "Alphabet Effect"**
This book brings out the tremendous effect of the phonic alphabet in ways that most people do not consider. [Read more](#)
Published 20 months ago by Elsnerr

★★★★★ **The Alphabet Effect ... is a highly credible hypothesis**
I'm no linguist and therefore cannot assess the scholarly authority of this book - I came upon it by good chance. [Read more](#)
Published on October 25, 2006 by V.H. Amavilah

★★★★☆ **It's interesting, Jim, but it's not science**
While browsing through the Linguistics section of local book store, I came across The Alphabet Effect: The Impact of the Phonetic Alphabet on the Development of Western... [Read more](#)
Published on March 26, 2006 by B. J. Helms

★★★★★ **Excellent work which offers interesting insight on language**
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The premise of the book is that the use of the phonetic alphabet led to a paradigm shift in human culture among Western Europeans, that left behind the rest of the world. "The use of repeatable, fragmented, identical elements, the letters, which began with the introduction of the phonetic alphabet is an an example of such a paradigm. The extension of this idea resulted in the development of codified law, monotheism, abstract science, and deductive logic."

I want to learn more about the development of science in China. There are a number of reference to Joseph Needham's epic work Science and Civilisation in China, which currently comprises 27 volumes. Logan primarily refers to Volume 2: History of scientific thought - which I should like to read and understand. Logan uses Needham's work to support his premise that phonetic alphabets led to abstract science and that pictographic languages do not enable the development of abstract science. Logan left me wanting to learn much more, I certainly was not convinced that his hypothesis is supported based on his research.

I don't believe that the phonetic alphabet led to the development of monotheism. Logan points out that the Greeks were the first to perfect the phonetic alphabet by adding vowels. Yet, the Greeks were polytheistic, as were the Romans.

This book does assemble a lot of interesting facts and data, which are flying together in loose formation. I think that the development of codified law, monotheism, abstract science, and deductive logic can not be explained as simple offshoots of the development of the phonetic alphabet. I believe the development of each of these areas in much more complex. [Read more](#) ›

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