Professor Zarb, O.P., O.B.E. S.T.M., S.S.D. (Vat.) is best known as an authority on Biblical studies, as you can see from an article in the O.P. S.T.M., S.S.D. (Vat.) which deals with his biblical scholarship and contributions to the subject. It is the first step not only to biblical study, the subject in which Professor Zarb has specialised, but also to his native language which has remained essentially Semitic. As a Semitic scholar, Professor Zarb has attended lectures by such famous scholars as Perez Lagrange, Vincent, Abel and the Assyriologist Duhem in the Ecole Biblique et Archéologique Franaise of Jerusalem. But the study of Semitic languages is so intimately bound up with the study of Holy Scripture that Professor Zarb, who attended lectures by such famous scholars as Perez Lagrange, Vincent, Abel and the Assyriologist Duhem in the Ecole Biblique et Archéologique Franaise of Jerusalem, in the study of Semitic languages, especially Hebrew and Aramaic, including, naturally, the History of the Semites. The study of the Semitic languages, especially Hebrew and Aramaic, including, naturally, the History of the Semites.

The following is a complete list of the articles published in this review—


The following is a complete list of the articles published in this review—

He also contributed other philological articles. The following have been published in the *Times of Malta* under the pen-name *Orientalist*:

1. *Ghaqdex* — September 30, 1940.
2. "*Ghal*” or “*Al*” — October 7, 1940.
3. "*Min*” not "*Min*” — October, 1940.
4. *Basis of Maltese Literature*, October 18, 1940.
5. *The Maltese Alphabet*, October 20, 1940.
6. Neither "*U*” nor "*W*” but "*Ww*”, — October 25, 1940.
7. *Phology not Polemics* — October 30, 1940.
9. "*E*” and "*O*” — November 1, 1940.

and the following studies have appeared in *Scientia*.

1. *Language and Nationality*, 1941

These lists include all the philological output of Professor Zarb so far. There are also two book reviews, one of *Why Malta? Why Ghaqdex?* by D.G. Bellanti, published in *Scientia* of 1941, and another of *L-Ilsien Malti*, by the writer of this article, published in *Scientia* of 1946.

The lists of contributions show the range of interest and the predominantly controversial nature of Professor Zarb's philological notes. From a careful reading of his various contributions I think I can state his opinions briefly thus: (1) the alphabet of the *Ghaqdex tal-Kittieba tal-Malti* is not scientific; (2) Maltese is ultimately of Phoenician origin, (3) the orthography laid down by the *Ghaqdex tal-Kittieba tal-Malti* has violated the origin of some words, e.g. *minn*, from which should be written *min*; the conjunction *u* and *w*, which should be written *wu*, ‘*al*’ and ‘*al*” which are not distinguished in the Qhaqda’s orthography with comments on the phonetic values of *e* and *o* as well as the origin and the proper writing of *Ghaqdex*.

Is the alphabet devised by the *Ghaqdex tal-Kittieba tal-Malti* really unscientific? Professor Zarb unhesitatingly answers: “unquestionably so!”. As all depends on the meaning which we attach to the adjective "scientific", Professor Zarb’s opinion is a personal point of view worth discussing from another personal point of view. That other personal point of view is the one I hold with regard to the alphabet of the *Ghaqda*, which I do not consider perfect by any means though I must admit that I consider it historically the best devised so far and if we must make comparisons, superior to the English, and French orthographies, which are comparatively irrational. For this much I can say of the *Ghaqda*’s alphabet; though it is not perfectly scientific as the transcription of a Semitic language, yet, on the whole, it is rational and consequently the product of logical rules that give it consistency as a system of writing.

But when is an orthography perfectly scientific? That is the crux of the question. I think according to Professor Zarb the *Ghaqda*’s orthography would be perfectly scientific if it agreed in every detail with a system of Arabic or Hebrew writing. But that point of view, I am afraid, does not take into consideration the fact that Maltese though basically Semitic, is now a mixed language enriched with non-Semitic sounds and substracted of some Semitic sounds. My personal opinion is that you can no more adopt a thoroughly Semitic alphabet for the Maltese Language than you can devise a thoroughly Semitic grammar for Maltese Morphology and Syntax. Professor Zarb seems to hold the contrary view since he argues plausibly that as Maltese is a Semitic Language, its alphabetical symbols should be accordingly those of a Semitic language, preferably Hebrew (*The Maltese Alphabet*, T.O.M. October 20, 1940). Hence he proposed the following alphabet with Hebrew names:

1) *alef*—(2) *bet*,—b (3) *gimel*,—g and g, (4) *dalet*—d, (5)

That is the Hebrew alphabet with some Maltese adaptations. I am afraid I am unable to accept Professor Zarb's Hebrew nomenclature. I see no reason for it. Actually the nomenclatures of the Hebrew and Arabic alphabets are both primitive and by modern standards phonetically "unscientific". In the 20th century we must improve on alphabetical nomenclatures that were devised many centuries ago. The alphabet of the Ghaqda is unscientific not because it has not adopted Hebrew or Arabic names for the letters but because, like Hebrew and Arabic, and other modern alphabets, it has described letters by misleading phonetic labels. Let me explain what I have in mind. The voiced bilabial plosive b is Be in Maltese, Bet in Hebrew and Ba in Arabic. Actually Be, Bet and Ba consist not only of the phonetic value of the letter b, but of the phonetic value of the letter b plus the phonetic value of the vowel e in Maltese, of the vowel e and the voiceless dental plosive t in Hebrew and of the vowel a in Arabic. It is obvious that neither Arabic nor Hebrew has a perfect, or shall we say scientific, nomenclature for its alphabet. As I have said, the nomenclature of Hebrew or Arabic letters cannot be scientific because it was a primitive attempt to represent, or memorise, different sounds by different images. The first Semitic alphabet started as a pictorial device as we can still see from a comparative study of the meanings of the Phoenician and Hebrew letters. To explain myself I now give the Hebrew letters with their respective meanings: (1) Heb.—Ar. ʼalef, Gr. alfa—α; (2) Heb. beth, Ar. ba, Gr. beta—β; (compare Maltese b$t in Wara l-Bjut), (3) Heb. gimel, Ar. ʼim, Gr. gamma—γ; (4) Heb. daleth, Ar. dal, Gr. delta—δ; (5) Heb. he, Ar. ha—plural or singular window (?); (6) Heb.—Ar. waw—hoo; (7) Heb. zain, Ar. zaj, Gr. zeta—τ; (8) Heb. heth, Ar. ha, Gr. eta—θ; (9) Heb. teth, Ar. ta, Gr. theta—σ; (10) Heb. yodh—γ.

Ar, ya, Gr. iota—ι; (11) Heb. kaph, Ar. kaf, Gr. kappa—κ; (12) Heb. lamedh, Ar. lam, Gr. lambda—λ; (13) Heb. mem, Ar. mim, Gr. mu—μ; (14) Heb.—Ar. nun, Gr. nu—ν; (15) Heb. samekh, Gr. sigma—σ; (16) Heb.—Ar. 'ayin—-eye, M. ghajn; (17) Heb. pe, Ar. fa, Gr. pi—mouth, M. fomm; (18) Heb. cadhe, Ar. sad—fish hook, M. sad, whence stād (VIII) to fish; (19) Heb.—Ar. qoff—eye of a needle or back of head (?); (20) Heb. resh, Ar. ra, Gr. rho—head, M. ras; (21) Heb. sin, shin, Ar. sin—tooth, M. sinna; (22) Heb. tav, Ar. ta—sign or cross.

These examples show us that the traditional Hebrew and Arabic alphabetic nomenclatures retain their pictorial or symbolic origin and that phonetically, for this very reason, they cannot be accepted as the prototypes of a scientific Maltese orthography. The proposal made by my colleague has one advantage which an exclusively Semitic-minded scholar is bound to consider of paramount importance. It would help to familiarise our students with the nomenclature of one of the major Semitic languages, the language of the Bible. However, I do not consider this advantage by any means greater than the disadvantage of teaching our students different ways of alphabetical nomenclatures. Summing up I agree that the nomenclature adopted by the Ghaqda is unscientific but not because it has not adopted Hebrew or Arabic descriptions for its letters symbols but because it has blindly followed the nomenclature of Italian letters, which, like most other traditional alphabets of Europe, are not phonetically well described.

In his letter The Basis of Maltese Literature published in the "Times of Malta" of October 19, 1940, Professor Zarb writes that the alphabet of the Ghaqda has completely lost "the character of a Semitic alphabet and looks more like an Aryan language", because "among other things, there is no sign in the alphabet followed by the Ghaqda to indicate the Aleph as distinguished from a vowel. Moreover, that the alphabet is evidently formed on the type of Aryan
languages is also apparent from the fact that vowels and consonants are classed together in one alphabet whereas in the grammar of every Semitic language consonants and vowels are treated separately." Once more while I must say that Professor Zarb's facts are correct yet I have to express disagreement with the conclusions he draws from them. I do not see what difference it makes to the structure of Maltese Grammar whether we treat vowels and consonants together or separately. In Semitic languages the consonants only were originally written because vowels could be readily supplied by the native reader. Thus, if I write MHH KBR, a Maltese reader could easily supply the missing vowels and read mohh kbir. But the omission of vowels is after all a weakness. It taxes the memory too much especially when the vocabulary is large and varied and it may create confusion. The context may not make it always clear enough whether KBR should be read kiber or kbir or kbar or kobar or kburja. Hence the addition of vowels to the consonants in Arabic by peculiar signs over, or under, the consonants and in Hebrew by a system of dots. The separate classification of consonants in the Semitic languages is not a grammatical necessity but a matter of orthographic expediency which does not in any way affect the morphology of the syntax of the language. Once a Latin alphabet has been adopted for the Maltese language, there is no reason why the Latin alphabetical classification should not be also adopted. Nor can I agree with my colleague that the Ghaqda must be blamed for not adopting a symbol corresponding to Hebrew and Arabic 'aleph. The Semitic 'aleph with a consonantal value that my colleague is thinking of is "the plosive consonant produced by completely closing the vocal chords and then suddenly separating them". As W.H.T. Gairdner, from whose work The Phonetics of Arabic (1925) this definition has been taken, points out, "the glottal stop is prefixed by many English speakers to words which are generally considered to begin with vowels, particularly when the vowel is strongly stressed. Thus many would prefix it to the word our in the sentence 'It was'nt our fault', if the word is pronounced with emphasis. The sound may likewise be observed when a person pronounces the names of the English letter a, e, i, o, rapidly and staccato, one after another; the glottal stop has the effect of separating the vowels from each other. This is what was meant by the old term 'hiatus' in this connexion. In Arabic it can equally occur before a consonant and finally. When it occurs in an initial position it is considerably weaker than in other positions. It follows from this that in Arabic (as in Hebrew, where the glottal stop is the 'aleph) no word begins with a vowel. Words written in English letters like akbar, abu are really pronounced 'akbar, 'abu, but with weak position as in English. The sound of the glottal stop is known to the Arabs as hamza (compression, i.e. of the larynx,) or more fully hamzatu l qatgh meaning "the hamza of cutting (i.e. separating)", because of the hiatus made by the closing of the vocal chords and the stopping of voice and breath. This Arabic description of the sound suggests a final hint of great practical importance, namely, that wherever the glottal stop occurs, voice and breath must be entirely 'cut off' for a moment. For example, 'al, 'ab the father can only be prevented from passing into 'al ab by entirely cutting off voice and breath after 'al.'

I think that Professor Zarb has entirely overlooked, or ignored, the fact that the Arabic separating or cutting hamza has been so weakened in Maltese, not to say completely obliterated, that it has ceased to count as a phonetic unit with the consequence that a symbol for Arabic hamza in Maltese would have to be a symbol without a corresponding sound. Indeed, where the hamza sound still exists initially in some dialects it is so weakened that there is no more reason for indicating it by a separate symbol than there is in similar occurrences of initial glottal stops in English and German. After all, the creators of the Ghaqda's alphabet had to satisfy two urgent requirements, namely, the morphological structure of the language and
its practical adoption in the schools. Professor Zarb would no doubt urge the basic triliterism of the language for the retention of initial hamza in such Maltese words as 'iben, 'isem, 'ikreh, 'akbar, and 'ikber. It is quite true that the omission of initial hamza upsets the trilateral pattern of Arabic nouns and adjectives; but it is no less true that the morphology of the language does not thereby suffer any prejudice or misrepresentation such as it would have suffered if additional symbols were adopted to indicate sounds phonetically non-existent in Maltese. While triliterism is the basis of Semitic morphology, it is also true that trilateral word-patterns were preceded by biradical word patterns as we can still see from quadrilaterals made up of the repetition of a biradical base, e.g. dam+dam=damdam, to resound; per+per=perper, to flap.

As pointed out by Gairdner in the quoted passage, the initial “hamza” is considerably weaker than in other positions in Arabic words. In Maltese the weakness became so great that the sound actually dropped out and the Semitic rule that no word, or syllable of a word, can begin with a vowel no longer applies to Maltese.

Examples of the weakening and elimination of hamza occurs in Arabic words between a vowel sequence and internally before a consonant. Thus a'a becomes a: as masadda to ma:asadda (how hard it is!); i'ay becomes -ay as Eg. fejn, M. fejn for fi'ayn; a'i becomes -i as in willa (M. willa) if not; a' becomes a: as ra:s (head), M. ras, for Ar. ra's; u' becomes u: as mu:mi:n for mu'mi:n, believers; i' becomes i as bi: r for bfr, a well. The historical radicals of the Maltese verb qara, to read, are Q—R—'. Following the pattern of tilab from talab, to pray, the corresponding form from qara should be qra't while in fact it is qrajt; that is to say, that hamza in this verb and in other words has ceased to be a phonetic reality as it was in Classical Arabic. If we must write 'isem 'ikber, 'iswed etc. to keep the triliteral pattern, why must we not accordingly write ra's, bi'r and qra't? Do we not here drop one of the radicals and so violate the classical trilateral pattern? I must say that Professor Zarb does not deal with internal hamza. None the less, there is no reason why the rules should not also apply to internal hamza as much as they do to initial hamza. If the answer to be self-consistent is that we must write bi'r and not bir, ra's and not ras, qra't and not qrajt, surely it is obvious enough that the Ghaqda's system would be too cumbersome and detached from phonetic reality to be a good guide to scientific or practical writing. I should say that scientific writing must be actual, that is, it must give the nearest phonetic transcription of actual sounds possible. In other words, a scientific alphabet must be purely factual like Chemistry and Physics. I think that my colleague should have insisted not on the phrase “a scientific alphabet” but on the phrase “an etymological alphabet”, that is, an alphabet retaining the historical sounds of Semitic Maltese whether these still exist or not. But an etymological alphabet in this sense is highly unscientific. Now the Ghaqda's alphabet is largely etymological, though not to the extent that Professor Zarb would like it to be. To the extent that it is etymological the Ghaqda's alphabet is unscientific. In this sense the alphabet proposed by Fr. Zarb would be even more unscientific. As words drop and change their meanings, so they drop and change their sounds in the course of time. While the hypothetical proto-Semitic tongue must have been one, the Semitic family of languages includes sounds some of which are common to the whole family and some peculiar to one or more languages. For the same reason the sounds of Modern English include phonemes that did not exist in Old English and have lost sounds which existed in Old English. This is a general law. A scientific orthography must transcribe the sounds of the language as they are actually pronounced.

Another controversial subject to which Professor Zarb has given his attention is the origin of the Maltese Language, to which he refers in several of his articles (and with which he deals extensively in his article The Origin of the
Maltese Language and its Bearing on Orthography (published in Scientia of 1946). There can be no disagreement that the Maltese Language is basically Semitic notwithstanding the influx of foreign words and phrases. Fr. Zarb has outlined the characteristic features of a Semitic language in his article The Maltese Language - Semitic or Argen published in Scientia of 1943. Again in his article discussing the origin of the Maltese Language he touches controversial ground. I cannot very well see how one can correlate a Latin alphabet with the origin of a Semitic language. I think that the most we can do is to devise all the necessary symbols from the Latin alphabet to cope with the amount of sounds in the language including those which do not exist in the language from which we have taken the alphabet. But I do not think it is possible to determine the origin of the language or to use the origin of the language as a term of reference for the selection of symbols. The most that could be done, as I have said, is to use the right symbols to represent Semitic sounds but that will leave us a long way from the origin of the Maltese Language. One thing more that could be done when choosing letters from the Latin alphabet was to consider the morphological structure of the language and adopt trilliterism as a basis wherever possible and expedient. But again this does not take us beyond a knowledge of the fact that Maltese as a Semitic language has its own phonetic and morphological peculiarities. Even that would leave us not less a long way far from the origin of the language. It is in my opinion a dangerous confusion of ideas not to distinguish clearly in the study of a language between what is merely conventional and what is natural. Symbols, or shall we say orthography, are merely a matter of convention while the origin of a language, like our birth, is a natural phenomenon. You do not attain to a knowledge of a natural phenomenon from a consideration of what is conventional because there is no logical sequence between the two. Professor Zarb writes quite to the point that “the only possible way of solving the problem whether the present form of the Maltese Language is derived from the Phoenician or the Arabic language is to draw a comparison between the Phoenician and the other languages of the Canaanitic group, especially Hebrew on one side and the Arabic languages on the other. This comparison will lead us to detect the peculiarities of each language: which are then compared to the present form of the Maltese Language. If Maltese possesses the peculiarities of the Phoenician language it most clearly belongs to the Canaanitic group of the Semitic languages, but if on the contrary the Maltese Language has the same peculiarities of the Arabic languages then it must be definitely classified amongst the group of the Arabic languages”. Then Professor Zarb proceeds to examine “the principal differences of the alphabet as used in the Arabic language and in the languages of the Canaanitic group” and after, the alphabet of the Maltese language which “in the first centuries of the Christian era was written in the Phoenician alphabet, inherited together with the Phoenician language by the Carthaginians, who also succeeded the Phoenicians as rulers of these islands.” Once more he criticises the alphabet of the Ghaqda. As the subject-matter of the lecture in question is largely based on purely orthographical considerations, I find it very hard to follow why “the writing of Maltese, if one ignores the new rules introduced by the Ghaqda, is more simple and akin to the orthography of the Canaanitic group of languages than to Arabic. And this conclusion is coherent with the alphabetical system which is also more similar to the Canaanitic than to the Arabic system”. I dare say that from a comparison of orthographies you can prove precious little. All the sounds of Semitic Maltese occur in Arabic.

Maltese has lost, or possibly never had, some Arabic sounds while it has acquired a few non-Semitic ones. These lost sounds are (1) ‘aleph, (2) th (th in thick), (3) kh (ch in Scotch “loch”); but this sound can be still heard in some M. dialects, (4) dh (sounding like Eng. th in then), (5) the four
emphatic consonants s, d, t, and z, (6) voiced velar gh which still survives in Gozo and (7) pharyngal ' the effect of which still survives in the pharingalization of the preceding and/or succeeding vowel. Of these, five sounds were retained in Hebrew which is believed to have been pronounced much as they were in Phoenician. These are (1) 'aleph, (2) teth (emphatic t), (3) samekh (emphatic s), (4) 'ayin and (5) sadhe. Non-Semitic sounds acquired by Maltese are (1) c, but with some Semitic exceptions. This sound occurs also in some Arabic dialects. (2) p, also with some Semitic exceptions, (3) v, except in two words only, iva, yes, and venven, to fling, in which v stands for w, (4) z, ts and (5) dz. Obviously no conclusion of Phoenician origin can be drawn from a comparison of the alphabets only. I do not deny the possibility of a Phoenician or a Punic "substratum," but before we express a definite opinion we have to make a detailed comparative study of the Maltese vocabulary, morphology and syntax, with which Professor Zarb unfortunately did not find time to deal in the lecture in question.

As the limited space at my disposal makes it impossible for me to deal with the other philological points raised by Professor Zarb, I have to stop here reserving my further discussion for another issue of Scientia. Linguistic disagreements, such as I have expressed in this essay, should provoke more opinions which together should shed a great light on the importance and the real explanation of the issues raised. This is the great merit of Professor Zarb as I see it. He has not accepted the work of the Ghaqda uncritically. He has subjected its principles to searching criticism. That is all to the good. It gave me a chance to study the reasons for and against the principles of the Ghaqda. Professor Zarb in this sense has contributed to the greater knowledge of Maltese philology.

To me it has been a pleasure to deal with his philological output which is but one of his various, and shall I say, minor facets of his intellectual life abroad and in Malta.