

# The Aleph and the écorché

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## SUMMARY

The woodcuts in Vesalius' *De humani corporis fabrica* reflect both philosophical and theological ideas. A previously unrecognized Hebrew symbol in *De humani* is the écorché in the second muscle tableau. Its pose is evocative of an Aleph, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The Aleph is a symbol of the brain and represents the highest level of knowledge and wisdom beneath that of god himself. With arms pointing to heaven and earth, the second écorché appears to anthropomorphize this ancient Hebrew symbol and may be a Humanist re-imagination of Old Testament imagery to demonstrate the famous Latin aphorism, *nosce te ipsum*, and the importance of anatomic dissection for the understanding of the human condition.

**Key words:** Vesalius – Aleph – Ecorche – *De humani corporis fabrica* – Hebrew – Symbolism – *Nosce te ipsum*

## To the Editor,

Hebrew and Arabic were the languages of medicine for most of the Middle Ages, and Hebrew terms appear along with the Greek and Latin in Andreas Vesalius' *Tabulae anatomicae sex* (Etziony, 1945). A previously unrecognized Hebrew symbol in *De humani corporis fabrica* is the écorché in the second muscle tableau. Its pose is evocative of an Aleph, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet (Fig. 1).

The Aleph is formed from two yods , (א) the tenth Hebrew letter, one pointing up, the other down; they are connected by a vav , (ו) the sixth letter (Kaplan, 1979). The Aleph symbolizes the brain

and keter, the highest level of knowledge and wisdom beneath that of god himself (Kaplan, 1979). Borges famously described the Aleph as 'one of the points in space that contains all other points' (Borges, 1945).

Kemp (2010) writes that the woodcuts in *De humani* were designed to reflect both philosophical and theological ideas. In the muscle tableaux, the écorchés exhibit their bodies in the spirit of the old aphorism, *nosce te ipsum*, or know thyself (Kemp, 2010). Calcar may have posed the second écorché in more than just the most practical way to demonstrate the upper extremity flexors and extensors. With one arm pointing up, the other down, the second écorché expresses man's divine yet mortal nature. In doing so, it anthropomorphizes the Aleph, the dissected body itself becoming wisdom and knowledge.

The frontispiece of *De humani* shows Vesalius dissecting a woman's womb as the figure of death looms in the background. Here, in sharp contrast to Medieval Christian orthodoxy in which Christ was 'the way and the truth and life,' Vesalius reveals the secrets of life through dissection. Taken together with the second muscle tableau, these illustrations may be a Humanist re-imagination of Old and New Testament imagery to demonstrate the importance of anatomic dissection for the understanding of the human condition.

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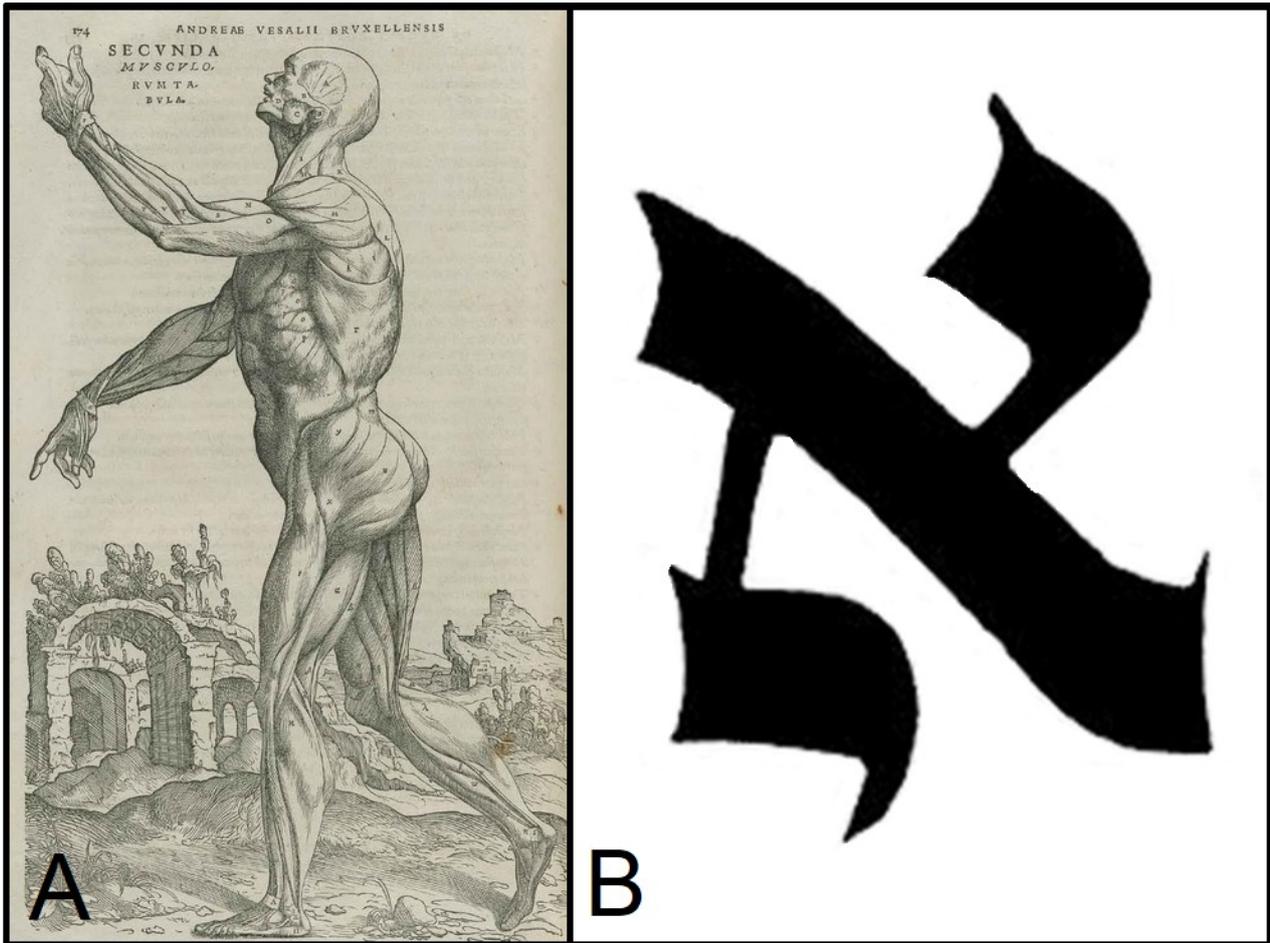


Fig 1. A. The second muscle tableau from Vesalius' *De humani corporis fabrica*, 1543, by Jan Stephan van Calcar. B. The aleph.

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