

# When Was Hebrew First Written?

Rick Aschmann

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## 1. Between Joseph and Moses

When was Hebrew (Canaanite) first written? The Bible itself suggests that it was after the time of Joseph, but before the time of Moses. The Hebrew verb כָּתַב /kā'tab/ “write”, which occurs 262 times in the Old Testament, never occurs in the book of Genesis; its first occurrence is Exodus 17:14. (Its noun form כְּתָב /kə'tāb/ “(a) writing”, which occurs 15 times, does not occur in Genesis either, first occurring in 1 Chronicles 28:19.) Similarly, סֵפֶר /'sēper/ “book, scroll, written account” occurs 187 times, and only once in Genesis, in 5:1, translated “written record” in the NIV, “book” in the ESV; the next occurrence is in Exodus 17:14, translated “scroll”. (It does not say when this “written record” was written, and it could easily refer to when Moses wrote it down.) Again, מְגִלָּה /məgīl'lah/ “scroll, roll, book, writing” occurs 22 times, but none in Genesis. (The earliest use of this word is by King David in Psalm 40:7, around 1000 B.C., and all of the other uses are in Isaiah (around 730 B.C.) or later, so this may be a word that was developed later than סֵפֶר /'sēper/).<sup>1</sup>

This agrees with archeological and other external evidences, which suggest that the first writing<sup>2</sup> of any [Northwest Semitic language](#) (which includes Hebrew and Canaanite as well as Aramaic), and the [first real alphabet](#) anywhere in the world, was the Proto-Sinaitic alphabet used to write various inscriptions in the Sinai Desert starting around 1850 B.C. (The [Wikipedia](#) article has lots of good information, but it is also skeptical that the Proto-Sinaitic script was a real al-

<sup>1</sup> The one verse in Genesis which does seem to imply written records is Genesis 41:49: in the ESV it says, “And Joseph stored up grain in great abundance, like the sand of the sea, until he *ceased to measure* it, for it could not be *measured*.” This is the literal translation, but the NIV says, “Joseph stored up huge quantities of grain, like the sand of the sea; it was so much that he *stopped keeping records* because it was beyond *measure*,” which is probably the correct meaning, since measuring would imply keeping written records. However, this is a different case: this was Joseph acting in his official capacity as an executive governmental official, and it would have been his Egyptian secretaries and not Joseph himself who would have kept these records. They would of course have kept them in the Egyptian language using Egyptian hieroglyphics, not in Hebrew or Canaanite.

<sup>2</sup> Other than an occasional inscription using Egyptian hieroglyphics, which was not an alphabet and was apparently never used systematically to write any Semitic language. Some of these occurred very early, as early as 2400 to 2600 B.C., as discussed in [news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2007/02/070205-snake-spells.html](http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2007/02/070205-snake-spells.html).

phabet, which it certainly was, as [Frank Simons](#) and [Brian Colless](#) demonstrate well, among many others.) Not only was it an alphabet, but it seems to have been the source of all later Semitic alphabets like the 27-consonant [Cuneiform Ugaritic alphabet](#) (which is solidly attested as early as 1400 B.C., shortly after Moses would have written the Pentateuch), and the 22-consonant [Cuneiform Short Alphabet](#), which dates to around the same time. The latter is identical to the 22-letter Phoenician alphabet which is the parent or sister alphabet to the 22-letter Hebrew alphabet, showing that there was an unbroken line of available alphabets for writing Northwest Semitic languages from 1850 B.C. on. (For technical details, see the [Appendix](#) below and my [Semitic Alphabets charts](#).)

The Bible makes it clear that Moses wrote most of the Pentateuch (though he obviously didn't write most of the last chapter of Deuteronomy, since this relates events after his death). However, some have claimed that he couldn't have written the Pentateuch, since no written materials have been found in Phoenician or Hebrew before 1200 B.C. This of course proves nothing, since perishable materials such as were used to write the Bible (papyrus or parchment or animal skins) would not be likely to survive.<sup>3</sup> Remember that absence of evidence for something does not imply evidence of its absence! But it is now clear that available writing systems predated Moses, so clearly he did have a writing system available to him.

How does the fact that Hebrew wasn't written until after the time of Joseph affect the inerrancy of Scripture? Not at all. So was the information all passed down orally, or did God reveal it directly to Moses? Most likely some of both, but the early stories of the creation and the flood didn't have to be written down for God to make sure Moses got them right.

### A. Did Joseph or Moses Invent the Alphabet?

So did Moses, or Joseph before him, invent the Proto-Sinaitic alphabet, as some have suggested?

Moses certainly did not, since the earliest inscriptions in the Proto-Sinaitic alphabet have been dated to 1850 B.C., and the other major find has been dated to the 1700's, both well before the time of Moses. In any case, if Moses had invented it, it would be a new and untried medium, not the fluent medium we see used to write the Pentateuch, suggesting that it had been used for a while, and that he had plenty of experience with it. It evidently was adapted from [Egyptian hieroglyphics](#) (which were not an alphabet but a primarily logographic writing system like Chinese), so it was likely well known in Egypt and used by the many Canaanites who lived there. Moses could either have learned it from the Egyptians, since he was well educated (Acts 7:22), or from the Israelites, who may well have been already using it.

How about Joseph? The time period of the earliest inscriptions found is about right for his lifetime, but there is absolutely no evidence one way or the other. The fact that no mention of writing occurs in Genesis suggests that he did not, but we simply do not know.

Actually, there is good linguistic evidence that no Israelite invented the alphabet that Moses used, but rather that it was a Phoenician. See the [Appendix](#) below for more on this question.

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<sup>3</sup> At least, they would be unlikely to survive in the climate of most of Canaan. In the extremely dry climate of [Egypt](#) or the [Desert of Judea](#) papyri have survived for millennia, if stored away and not used. However, with use they would deteriorate even in a desert climate.

“In a dry climate, like that of Egypt, papyrus is stable, formed as it is of highly rot-resistant cellulose; but storage in humid conditions can result in molds attacking and destroying the material. ... In European conditions, papyrus seems to have lasted only a matter of decades; a 200-year-old papyrus was considered extraordinary.” ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papyrus#Manufacture\\_and\\_use](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papyrus#Manufacture_and_use))

## 2. Nothing Written Earlier?

But couldn't some of the early material have been written down in some other writing system? Weren't there other writing systems available? Certainly there were: the [cuneiform syllabary](#) had been used as early as [3000 B.C.](#),<sup>4</sup> to write the Sumerian and Akkadian languages, among others. The writing medium was clay tablets. This writing system was never used for Aramaic, Canaanite, or Hebrew, the languages used by the patriarchs, though the Proto-Sinaitic alphabet was apparently adapted much later (around 1500-1300 B.C.) for writing on clay tablets, in one place, [Ugarit](#), on the north coast of Syria, for writing the [Ugaritic language](#), a distant variety of Canaanite.

However, I very much doubt that clay tablets or any other written medium was used by the patriarchs or their ancestors to record Genesis. As explained above, the Bible itself suggests that the patriarchs had an oral culture. They were nomadic herdsman who lived in tents and moved from place to place in search of pasture for their animals, much like the Bedouins of today. This mobile lifestyle would make it very difficult to transport clay tablets, which are very fragile. Later on, when Moses wrote the Pentateuch, he probably wrote it on [leather or parchment](#), which transports much better, but only seems to have been used in Egypt at this early date, not Mesopotamia.

Another issue is: what language would they have written in? It wouldn't have been Hebrew: Hebrew was not Abraham's native language, ancient Aramaic was. Hebrew was actually the language of the wicked Canaanites, as I explain in [God Doesn't Have Favorite Languages](#), and was the native language of Isaac and Jacob and their descendants. But these languages were not written in Abraham's day, but were only spoken languages.

The literary and governmental languages in Mesopotamia at the time were [Akkadian](#), a distantly related but quite distinct language, and [Sumerian](#), a totally unrelated language, and these are the languages used for the written records in Haran and in the [Sumerian/Akkadian city of Ur](#) during this time period. If the Genesis narratives were written in these, Moses would have had to translate them into Hebrew.

In my view all of this makes it very unlikely that Genesis was in written form before the time of Moses.

### A. An Alternative Theory

However, others suggest that Genesis indicates otherwise, and even suggest that it demonstrates a written tradition going all the way back to Adam.

The book of Genesis appears to be clearly divided into a number of sections, each one set off by the phrase "These are the generations of ..." (ESV; in Genesis the NIV always has "This is the account of..."), as in Genesis 6:9: "These are the generations of Noah." These divisions are fairly self-evident to anyone reading through Genesis. The phrase "These are the generations of" is [תּוֹלְדוֹת אֵלֶּה](#) /[?əlleh tōlə' dōt/](#) in Hebrew, with minor variations. [תּוֹלְדוֹת](#) /[tōlə' dōt/](#) can usually be translated "generations" or "descendants", with the meanings these words normally have in English, but this word is a bit slippery: in Genesis 2:4 it certainly does not have either of these meanings (though the ESV translates it "generations" anyway, following the King James), but something more like "account" or "proceedings" or even "results."

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<sup>4</sup> Before 3000 B.C. clay tablets were used to keep accounting records or inventories, but these were not actually recording human language as such, and could not yet be used to record a spoken human language.

These phrases are naturally understood as introducing the entire section following them, since the person mentioned is generally the subject of what follows. However, the [Wiseman hypothesis](#) or *Tablet Theory* claims that these phrases actually *terminate* the *previous* section, and that they tell us who the author of the clay tablet was that that section was written on. Besides the link given above, other presentations of this theory are by [Curt Sewell](#) (search for “Tablet Divisions”) or [Mortenson and Hodge](#) (search for “Breakdown of the toledoth”).

The objections to this theory are many, even for those who believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, and are explained well in the [Wikipedia article](#).

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### 3. Appendix: Which alphabet was used?

This section is somewhat technical, and so may not be of interest to many readers, and in any case it does not affect issues such as the inerrancy of Scripture, which have been dealt with above, so I have placed it here as an appendix for those interested in more of the technical detail surrounding this question.

Why do I think that the alphabet Moses used was some form of the Phoenician alphabet, and that it couldn't have been invented by Israelites? Why couldn't Moses have used some adaptation of the Proto-Sinaitic alphabet itself to write the Pentateuch? I had at first thought that he did, and expressed this in earlier versions of this article, but all the evidence suggests that he used a descendant alphabet, the [Phoenician alphabet](#) of 22 consonants adapted from the Proto-Sinaitic alphabet by the Phoenicians who lived on the north coast of Palestine to write their particular form of Canaanite. This alphabet is essentially the same as the modern 22-consonant Hebrew alphabet except that the letters have changed their shape a lot. The question hinges around how many consonants are found in each of these alphabets, compared with how many consonants the various spoken languages had.

#### A. Semitic Alphabets and Proto-Semitic

The Proto-Sinaitic alphabet, and most of the Semitic alphabets derived from it, had only consonants: the vowels were not written. Surprisingly, this worked well for these languages because of their unusual structure: anyone who spoke the language would know which vowels were needed based on the context.<sup>5</sup>

All of the [Semitic languages](#) were almost certainly descended from a single language which linguists call [Proto-Semitic](#). No one knows what they called their language, or even exactly when<sup>6</sup> or where<sup>7</sup> they lived: all the evidence for the existence of this language comes from comparing all of its descendant languages and reconstructing it. However, the evidence that such a language existed is overwhelming, because the daughter languages show so many similarities. In fact, the reconstruction is sufficiently solid that we can be sure that the language had exactly 29 consonant sounds, even though it was apparently not a written language. A few of its descendant languages even now retain all of those consonants, as for example the [Mehri language](#) spoken on the south coast of Yemen and Oman (it actually has 30 consonant sounds now).

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<sup>5</sup> The writing system for Akkadian, which was mentioned above, was much older than the Proto-Sinaitic alphabet, and was totally unrelated, though both languages were Semitic. It is a [syllabary](#), not a consonantal alphabet.

<sup>6</sup> But it had to be well before 2800 B.C. when [the first Akkadian proper names were attested in Sumerian texts](#), to give the eastern subfamily of Semitic time to diverge from the rest. One reasonable estimate is [3800 B.C.](#)

<sup>7</sup> But it may well have been Canaan, based on my own research. See the last paragraph of the next footnote.

But all languages are constantly changing, as I discuss in my article [God Doesn't Have Favorite Languages](#). Because of this, all of the daughter languages that descended from Proto-Semitic have changed a great deal, both from Proto-Semitic and from each other. Among these are Hebrew, Phoenician, and Ugaritic (all of which started out as varieties of Canaanite), Aramaic, Akkadian, Arabic, Amharic, and Mehri.<sup>8</sup>

## B. A Question of Consonants

As I said above, Proto-Semitic had 29 consonants, but the oldest alphabets, and those used to write the languages most similar to the Hebrew variety of the Canaanite language, had already lost a couple of those consonants.

The [Cuneiform Ugaritic alphabet](#) had 27 consonants.<sup>9</sup> This was used to write a language quite similar to Canaanite that was spoken in the city of Ugarit on the north coast of Syria for several centuries up until its destruction in the 12<sup>th</sup> century B.C. There is a large amount of literature written in this language on clay tablets, which often shed light on the cultural context of the Old Testament and of the old Canaanite religion that the Israelites had so much trouble with.

The Proto-Sinaitic alphabet also seems to have had 27 consonants, and the evidence suggests that it was several centuries older than the Ugaritic alphabet, the earliest inscriptions dating from around 1850 B.C. The discussion of this in my [Semitic Alphabets charts](#) is somewhat involved, but the conclusion is that it probably had the same consonants as Ugaritic,<sup>10</sup> suggesting

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<sup>8</sup> Now let me be clear: the Semitic languages took their [name](#) from the Biblical patriarch Shem, who was the ancestor of Abraham, but not all of the speakers of Semitic languages are descended from Shem, nor did all descendants of Shem speak Semitic languages. The Canaanites spoke a Semitic language but were descended from Ham, whereas the [Elamites](#) were descendants of Shem but spoke a language which seems to be unrelated to any other known language, but was one of the earliest written languages.

Does this call into question the truth of the Bible? Certainly not: Genesis 11:9 says that “the LORD confused the language of the whole world.” We don’t have any more details: in the most extreme case he could have given each person a different language! In his mercy he probably did not do this, but probably gave nuclear families the same language, or even cohesive clans. But there is no reason why he would have given all of the descendants of Shem the same language. To give one third of humanity the same language wouldn’t have confused the languages much!

So how did the Canaanites end up speaking a Semitic language? We don’t know! Many times through history a people has abandoned its own language because of conquest or intermarriage or even for commercial reasons. We do not know enough of the history of Canaan between the time of Babel and Abraham to know how the Canaanites adopted a Semitic language. But this is not a problem for Biblical inerrancy.

To make things even more confusing, Abraham’s family started out speaking one Semitic language, Aramaic, but then adopted a different Semitic language, Canaanite, adopted from descendants of Ham!

The solution seems to be that, since the Semitic Languages are simply a subfamily of the greater [Afro-Asiatic language family](#), all of whose other subfamilies are descendants of Ham, it is far more likely that the ancestors of the Canaanites brought what we call the Proto-Semitic language (which we should then call Proto-Canaanite) to southwest Asia, after which the descendants of Arpachshad, Aram, and Asshur, for unknown reasons, abandoned their previous languages (some of them perhaps related to Elamite), and adopted the older form of the Canaanites’ language, which we call Proto-Semitic, even though initially no Semitic peoples would have spoken it! (For more information on this analysis, see my article [The Genesis 10 Table of Nations and Y-Chromosomal DNA](#).)

<sup>9</sup> The alphabet actually had 30 letters, but the last three were a kind of appendix that did not actually increase the number of distinct consonants.

<sup>10</sup> There was some variation in the way the three Proto-Sinaitic consonants [θ], [ʃ], and [ħ] came out in Ugaritic, North Canaanite, and South Canaanite, but in all three cases this resulted in two consonants each, so the consonant count remained the same, with some variation as to which words had which one. Eventually Phoenician merged

that Proto-Canaanite (which included Ugaritic) had 27 consonants, and this is probably the form of the Canaanite language spoken through most or all of Canaan during the time the Israelites were in Egypt, and all the way up to the 12<sup>th</sup> century B.C. in some areas, such as Ugarit. Thus it is very probable that the Ugaritic alphabet derived from the Proto-Sinaitic alphabet, but that the letter shapes had to be drastically adjusted to fit a [cuneiform](#) alphabet, which used wedges to write on wet clay.<sup>11</sup>

As I discuss in [God Doesn't Have Favorite Languages](#), Abraham's native language was Aramaic, but he and his family learned the Canaanite language after they moved to Canaan in about 2091 B.C., and the dialect that they developed eventually became the language we now call Hebrew.

The next event in our saga is that Abraham's family moved to Egypt, in approximately 1876 B.C., and did not reenter Canaan until approximately 1406 B.C., thus separating themselves from contact with the rest of the Canaanite speakers for some 470 years. And, as I said, since all languages are constantly changing, both Hebrew and Canaanite changed in different ways. The Canaanite spoken along the north coast of Canaan in the area later called Phoenicia by the Greeks (modern Lebanon) changed much faster than Hebrew did. This is not surprising: it was an important maritime trading area, and history has repeatedly shown that the languages of important commercial centers naturally change faster than backwater areas like Goshen in Egypt, where the Israelites lived as slaves. How do I know it changed faster? Because it ended up with only 22 consonants, whereas there is good evidence that Hebrew retained 25 consonants in their spoken language throughout the period in which the Old Testament was written, even though only 22 consonants were written.

It was apparently the Phoenicians who developed the 22-consonant alphabet that later became the Hebrew alphabet, and this is evidently the alphabet that Moses used to write the Pentateuch, because he wrote using only the 22 letters of that alphabet. However, there is good evidence that in the Old Testament three Phoenician letters were each used to write two different Hebrew consonants which had merged into one in Phoenician, as shown in the table on the next page. (For further technical details, see my [Semitic Alphabets charts](#), page 6.)

Why does this prove that Moses (or some earlier Israelites) adopted the Phoenician alphabet and not some earlier form of the Proto-Sinaitic or Ugaritic alphabet? Because if the Israelites had borrowed one of the latter, it would have had all the consonants they needed, and no doubling-up would have been necessary. Throughout the long history of alphabets used in many languages we see that quite often an alphabet with too few sounds is used to write a language, but letters are only eliminated if they are not (or no longer) needed, they are never eliminated if they are still needed.

So why did Hebrew adopt the Phoenician alphabet, when it was inadequate? Because it was presumably the only alphabet they knew of or had access to! They must not have known about the earlier Proto-Sinaitic alphabet or its descendant the Ugaritic alphabet, and so adopted the Phoenician one.

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all three into one, which was spelled  $\psi$ , or in its earlier form  $\omega$ , though Hebrew never did this, and much later developed a way to represent the pronunciation difference in the spelling, as sin  $\psi$  (originally pronounced [ʃ], much later changed to [s]) and shin  $\psi$ [ʃ]. To see a more technical explanation, see my [Semitic Alphabets charts](#), footnote 2 at the bottom of page 3 and top of page 4.

<sup>11</sup> This is discussed at length in the section about Lundin's reconstruction on page 8 of my [Semitic Alphabets charts](#).

### Pairs of Consonants Spelled with the Same Letter in Hebrew

Letter	Pronunciation in the Hebrew Old Testament	Spelling in the Hebrew Old Testament	Comment
שׁ Shin	[ʃ], like sh in English	שׁ	These two sounds have always been pronounced differently, and are now distinguished by dots. The second one is now pronounced s, but was not pronounced this way until well after the completion of the Hebrew Old Testament.
	[ʃ̥], does not exist in English	שׂ	
ח Heth	[χ], does not exist in English	ח	By 1000 A.D. these two sounds were pronounced the same, having merged into the second one, which is also how they ended up in Phoenician many centuries before, but in Hebrew they were pronounced differently until well after the completion of the Hebrew Old Testament.
	[h], does not exist in English	ח	
ע ‘ayin	[ʕ], does not exist in English	ע	By 1000 A.D. these two sounds were pronounced the same, having merged into the second one, which is also how they ended up in Phoenician many centuries before, but in Hebrew they were pronounced differently until well after the completion of the Hebrew Old Testament.
	[ʕ̥], does not exist in English	ע	

We don’t know when the Israelites borrowed the Phoenician alphabet, but since Moses started writing the Pentateuch around the time of the Exodus from Egypt in about 1446 B.C., it must have been before then. Actually it seems to me very likely that Moses, who was an Egyptian prince, and who was “instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians” (Acts 7:22), learned it from Phoenician teachers as part of his international education.

Some people would deny this, saying that the Phoenician alphabet did not exist at that time. So how early do we have evidence of the Phoenician alphabet? Well, it depends a bit on terminology. If you look at the top of the [Wikipedia article](#), it seems to say that the Phoenician alphabet began about 1050 B.C. But if we read the rest of the article we see that this is simply when it is found in vigorous use. Further on in the article it says:

«The Proto-Sinaitic script was in use from ca. 1850 BCE in the Sinai by Canaanite speakers. There are sporadic attestations of very short Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions in Canaan in the late Middle and Late Bronze Age, but the script was not widely used until the rise of new Semitic kingdoms in the 13th and 12th centuries BCE. The oldest known inscription that goes by the name of Phoenician is the Ahiaram epitaph, engraved on the sarcophagus of King Ahiaram from c. 1200 BCE. It has become conventional to refer to the script as “Proto-Canaanite” until the mid-11th century, when it is first attested on inscribed bronze arrowheads, and as “Phoenician” only after 1050 BCE.»

Thus, the script clearly existed in some form earlier than 1050 B.C., but is conventionally called “Proto-Canaanite” at that stage. Unfortunately, the “Proto-Canaanite” inscriptions are

mostly too short to really be able to tell how many consonants were being used at that stage, however, the earliest actual listing of Phoenician/Hebrew alphabetical order, and the oldest Hebrew document, is the ['Izbet Sartah ostracon](#), which was written by an Israelite eyewitness of the battle of Aphek around 1076 B.C.<sup>12</sup>

There is also other evidence that the Phoenician alphabet dates from at least before the destruction of the city of Ugarit in 1180-1170 B.C. It turns out that the Ugaritic Alphabet also had a short form, a 22-letter alphabet, which was apparently used to write Phoenician, examples of which were found among the clay tablets at Ugarit. The best information I have found on this comes from [Dennis Pardee](#), page 7.<sup>13</sup>

So the bottom line is that we don't know when the 22 letter alphabet was standardized by the Phoenicians, but it certainly could have been as early as the 15<sup>th</sup> century B.C. when Moses used it to write the Pentateuch!

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<sup>12</sup> This battle is described in 1 Samuel 4, and it occurred just before the death of Eli the priest, which my chronology places at around 1076 B.C.

On page 84 of the article it says, "The events referred to in the text of the ostracon parallel those in 1 Sam 4-6. Since the inscription reads like a contemporary record of the biblical events, the date for the biblical episode can be applied to the time for the writing of this text. From its historical and chronological relations in the Bible, the Battle at Aphek can be dated approximately to the second quarter of the eleventh century, so a similar date can be applied to this text."

This ostracon is also discussed in detail in [What's the Oldest Hebrew Inscription?](#)

<sup>13</sup> There is additional information at [this site](#).