

# When Was Hebrew First Written?

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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** /məgil'lā/ "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>

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<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.

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 alphabet, 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 matches letter for letter the 22-letter Phoenician alphabet which is the parent or sister alphabet to the 22-letter Hebrew alphabet. This shows that there was an unbroken line of available alphabets for writing Northwest Semitic languages from 1850 B.C. on. (For technical details, see [Appendix 1](#) 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, and there is evidence from the text itself of later editing of certain details; see [Appendix 2](#) for more details). 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.

### 1.1. 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),

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<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).

<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))

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 “Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians” (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 [Appendix 1](#) below for more on this question.

## 2. Was 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 herdsmen 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 [parchment](#) (or leather), 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 language distantly related to Hebrew and Aramaic but quite distinct, 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.

### 2.1. 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

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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.

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 **וְהֵלֶּךְ הָאֱלֹהִים** /ʔəlləh tōlə' dōt/ in Hebrew, with minor variations. **וְהֵלֶּךְ הָאֱלֹהִים** /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”.

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](#).

## 2.2. But wasn't Hebrew the original language?

No, it was not. However, I suspect that many Bible-believing Christians, if you ask them which they think was the original language, the language that Adam spoke, will say “Hebrew, I suppose, because that's what Genesis was written in”. And down through the history of Judaism and Christianity many have said that Hebrew must have been the original language, and this article gives a nice overview of some of their opinions and reasons: [charlesasullivan.com/3965/hebrew-and-the-first-language-of-mankind](http://charlesasullivan.com/3965/hebrew-and-the-first-language-of-mankind), though it also concludes that Hebrew was not the original language.

And there are many websites expounding both sides of this issue, often at great length. Try doing an Internet search for phrases like “Was Hebrew the original language?” or “What language was spoken before the Tower of Babel?” to see plenty of these.

One argument many give is that the names in the first part of Genesis are Hebrew, and their meanings only make sense in Hebrew. The Wikipedia article on the [Adamic language](#) says:

Traditional Jewish exegesis such as Midrash (Genesis Rabbah 38) says that Adam spoke Hebrew because the names he gives Eve – Isha (Book of Genesis 2:23) and Chava (Genesis 3:20) – only make sense in Hebrew”.
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In Genesis 2:23 it says, “...she shall be called Woman (**אִשָּׁה** /ʔiš' šâ/), because she was taken out of Man (**אִישׁ** /'ʔiš/).” The Hebrew word for woman is similar to the word for man; in fact it is simply the word for man with the feminine suffix /â/ added and the doubling of the consonant /š/.

And in Genesis 3:20 it says “The man called his wife's name Eve (**חַוָּה** /ħaw' wâ/, Modern Hebrew pronunciation Chava [ˈxava]), because she was the mother of all living (**חַיָּה** /'ħāy/).” The name “Eve” and the adjective “living” both start with same first two sounds, and the text implies that the former is derived from the latter.

However, these arguments do not prove that these all had to be originally Hebrew words. In English [the word “woman” is also derived from the word for “man”](#), but Hebrew and English

are not even related languages. All it proves is that in the original language, whatever it was, the word for woman was derived from the word for man, just like in Hebrew or English.

And the fact that the name Adam gave his wife was said to be derived from the adjective for “living” again does not prove it was Hebrew. In fact,  $\text{חַיָּוִת}$  /ḥaw'wâ/ is *not* a current form of  $\text{חַי}$  /ḥāy/, though it is similar to its feminine singular form  $\text{חַיָּוִת}$  /ḥay'yâ/. This suggests that it has been changed a lot over the passing years.

And in fact some of the names in the first part of Genesis cannot be identified with Hebrew meanings. The name Abel does not seem to mean anything in Hebrew, and many of the names in Genesis 5 do not have a clear meaning that scholars agree on. Many of these may have been passed down over the years with inevitable changes in pronunciation, or God may have given them to Moses, but in either case they would not be Hebrew.

In any case, as I already mentioned above, and explain in great detail in [God Doesn't Have Favorite Languages](#), Hebrew was not Abraham's native language, ancient Aramaic was. Hebrew was actually the language of the wicked Canaanites, and since all languages are constantly changing, it would have undergone drastic changes down through the centuries. And as I explain below in footnote **8** on page **7**, Hebrew came through such changes from Canaanite, which came through more changes from the Proto-Semitic language (or simply Proto-Canaanite), which in turn probably came through even more changes from the Proto-Afro-Asiatic language. And this language was so different from the Hebrew of the Bible that no one hearing the two spoken together (which would be impossible, because of the time gap) would even think they were similar languages, although a linguist would definitely be able to tell that they were related.

And either the Proto-Afro-Asiatic language itself, or an even more remote ancestor, would have been one of the languages that came out of the division of the languages at the Tower of Babel. But it was probably spoken by the ancestors of the Canaanites, who were descendants of Ham, not by the Semite ancestors of Abraham, as I explain in footnote **8**. So no, not only was Hebrew not the original language, but it did not even exist in any form recognizable as such until many long years after the Tower of Babel, let alone in the time of Adam.

And of course there is really no reason to believe that *anyone* retained the language that was spoken *before* the Tower of Babel, in spite of the legend that Eber (or Heber), the ancestor of Abraham, was living at the time of the Tower of Babel but was exempted from the curse of Babel because he was righteous and refused to participate in building the tower, and thus retained the original language, Hebrew, which was supposedly named for him. (See [Sullivan](#) already cited above, searching for “Heber”, and see [here](#), for information about this legend.) There is absolutely no biblical evidence for any part of this legend, and as I explain in [The Meaning of the Word “Hebrew” in Genesis](#), it is unlikely that the name “Hebrew” is even related to or derived from the name Eber. When God divided the languages, I expect he did a thorough job and didn't make an exception for anyone!

So if the original language wasn't Hebrew, then what was it? We do not know. We have absolutely no information about it, except such tiny hints as we are given in the first chapters of Genesis, some of which I have discussed above, and these really tell us nothing of substance.

For further details and an explanation of all of the evidence, see footnote **8** and the links there. Or if you really want to dig into this issue, read the entire Appendix 1 below.

### 3. Appendix 1: 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.

#### 3.1. Semitic Alphabets and Proto-Semitic

The Proto-Sinaitic alphabet, and most of the Semitic alphabets derived from it, have only consonants: the vowels are not written. Surprisingly, this works well for these languages because of their unusual structure: anyone who speaks the language knows which vowels are 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).

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

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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.

are Hebrew, Phoenician, and Ugaritic (all of which started out as varieties of Canaanite), Aramaic, Akkadian, Arabic, Amharic, and Mehri.<sup>8</sup>

### 3.2. 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 “there 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 [ʔ] 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 all three into one, which was spelled 𐤓, or in its earlier form 𐤌, though Hebrew never did this, and much later developed a way to represent the pronunciation difference in the spelling, as sin 𐤑 (originally pronounced [ʔ], much later

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.)

How 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.

We don't know when the Israelites adopted 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 Egyp-

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changed to [s]) and shin ש [ʃ]. To see a more technical explanation, see my [Semitic Alphabets charts](#), footnote 3 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](#).



tian 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.

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

Letter	Pronunciation in the Hebrew Old Testament	Spelling in the Hebrew Old Testament and Traditional Transliteration	Comment
שׁ Shin	[ʃ], like sh in English	שׁ /š/	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.
	[ʃ̄], does not exist in English	שׁ /š/	
הׁ Heth	[χ], does not exist in English	הׁ /ħ/ (or /h/)	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.
	[ħ], does not exist in English	הׁ /ħ/	
עׁ ‘ayin	[ʕ], does not exist in English	עׁ /ʕ/ (or /ġ/)	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.
	[ʕ̄], does not exist in English	עׁ /ʕ/	

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 an earlier version of the article it used to say:

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.

(The current version of this article has greatly condensed this information, but this earlier version clearly shows the stages.)

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!

#### 4. Appendix 2: Did Moses write the Pentateuch?

Tradition has always affirmed that Moses wrote the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. It is only in the last few centuries that this has been called into question, by liberal scholars who question the truth of God's Word, as suggested [here](#).

But for those of us who believe the Bible, it is clear that Moses did write these books. It is explicitly stated in the text itself that he wrote much of Exodus through Deuteronomy, as in Exodus 17:14, 24:4,12, 34:27-28, Numbers 33:2, and Deuteronomy 28:58, 31:9,22.

Jesus affirms this many times, one of the clearest cases being John 5:46-47: “<sup>46</sup> If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. <sup>47</sup> But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?” This most likely refers to Deut. 18:15, where Moses says, “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.” This part of Deuteronomy is never explicitly said to have been written down by Moses, so the implication is that Moses wrote all of the books in which he is the main character.

And in any case Jesus affirms the tradition that Moses wrote the entire section of the Bible known as the “Law of Moses” or the “Books of Moses”, in Luke 24:44: «He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”» Here Jesus is using “the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” to refer to the entire Old Testament: these were the three divisions into which the Bible was traditionally divided, and included all the books. (See [these commentaries](#) for details.) Thus he affirmed Moses' authorship of the entire Pentateuch, even though there does not seem to be any case in the New Testament where any specific verse in Genesis is explicitly stated to be written by Moses.

So we can be confident that the essential text of the five books was written by Moses.

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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](#).

## 4.1. Later (Minor) Editing

However, it is just as clear that there were later editors, the most obvious case being that someone else had to write most or all of the last chapter of Deuteronomy, a likely candidate being Joshua. Not only that, but there are signs that many little clarifying notes were added throughout the text, some of which must have been written as late as the time of the kings. I quote from the “Pentateuch” article in the *New Bible Dictionary, Third Edition* (1996):

Aalders’ studies have broken fresh ground and point the way for further advance. Of particular interest are his recognition of post-Mosaic and non-Mosaic elements in the Pentateuch (e.g. Gn. 14:14; 36:31; Ex. 11:3; 16:35; Nu. 12:3; 21:14–15; 32:34ff.; Dt. 2:12; 34:1-12) and his awareness of the fact that neither Testament ascribes the entire work to Moses, although both attribute substantial parts of it to him. The great legal codes, for instance, are credited specifically to Moses (e.g. Ex. 20:2–23:33; 34:11–26; Dt. 5-26; cf. Dt. 31:9, 24), as is the Israelites’ itinerary mentioned in Nu. 33:2. As far as the Gn. stories are concerned, Moses may or may not have been the one who compiled them from their written and oral forms. The evidences of post-Mosaic editing of the Pentateuch are found in the references cited above, and especially in the mention of such ancient documents as ‘the Book of the Wars of the Lord’ (Nu. 21:14). It is difficult to date the final redaction of the Pentateuch. Aalders’ suggestion that it took place some time within the reigns of Saul and David is credible, although some further allowance should probably be made for the modernizing of vocabulary and style.

For example, Genesis 14:14 says that Abram “went in pursuit as far as Dan”, which was the northernmost city in Israel. But there was no city called Dan until the time of the Judges, some 800 years later or more, as we see in Judges 18:29, built on the ruins of the previous city Laish. And there is another reference to Dan in Deuteronomy 34:1, still many years before it actually existed. And the other verses cited at the beginning of the quote above are similarly things that must have been added after Moses’ death, or else are things that Moses himself was not likely to have said himself, such as Numbers 12:3, and so are probably later commentary.

The “Genesis” article in the *New Bible Dictionary* gives a few more cases:

If we allow for a few later ‘footnotes’ added by copyists up to the time of the Monarchy to explain points for contemporary readers (e.g. 12:6, 13:7, 14:17, and parts of 36:9-43), there is nothing that need be dated after the time of Moses.

And there is evidence that the Hebrew itself may have been adjusted to reflect its later form, as explained [here](#).

However, none of this means that Moses did not write the five books: these later adjustments were quite minor.