

# WRITING AND LANGUAGES IN THE BIBLICAL WORLD

## I. WRITING MATERIAL

### A. Clay Tablets

1. Developed in Mesopotamia; clay = most abundant material
2. Durable, but bulky; when fired (often accidentally), almost rock hard
3. Cuneiform characters impressed while clay was wet

### B. Potsherds (**Ostraca**)

1. Egypt/Palestine
2. Durable, but random sizes and bulky; ink could wash off
3. Hard, smooth writing surface for ink

### C. Papyrus

1. Paper like material from reed plant
2. Developed in Egypt and Byblos
3. Lightweight, but not durable
4. Rolled up as scrolls (= "book" throughout the Bible)

### D. Stone

### E. Parchment

1. Sheep or goat skin (**Vellum** = calf skin)
2. Used for Scrolls
3. Later (3rd cent. AD) used in **Codex** form
  - a. Codex = pages sewn together like a book
  - b. Codices could also be made from papyrus

## II. DEVELOPMENT OF WRITING: SCRIPTS (Distinct from "Language")

### A. In Sumer (South Mesopotamia): around 3500 BC

1. Writing developed for administrative or record-keeping—rather than religious or literary—purposes
2. **Cuneiform** Script
  - a. Began as *pictographic* symbols, which became *logograms* (sign = word)
  - b. Developed into more abstract characters of two types
    - 1) *Phonograms* ? *syllabograms* (sign = syllable)
    - 2) *Ideograms* or *determinatives* (sign = idea)
3. Medium = clay tablets

### B. Egypt: about 3100 BC

1. Egyptian **Hieroglyphic**
2. Picture writing (*rebus*); developed into characters of two types
  - a. *Phonograms* (sign = sound)
  - b. *Ideograms/Determinatives* (sign = complete word or idea)
3. Alphabetic equivalents for transliterating

### C. Development of the **Alphabet**: limited number of characters each represent basic single sounds

1. **Ugaritic**: alphabetic cuneiform on clay tablets (14<sup>th</sup> century BC)
2. **Sinaitic/Proto Canaanite** (ca. 1500 BC): Idea from Egyptian??
3. **Paleo-Hebrew/Phoenician** script (ca. 1200 BC)
4. Greek alphabet: adopted and adapted from Phoenician
5. Etruscan alphabet
6. Latin alphabet

### III. FAMILIES OF LANGUAGES

#### A. Semitic (Considered a “branch” of the Afro-Asiatic “family” in modern linguistics)

1. East Semitic: **Akkadian**
  - 1) **Babylonian**
  - 2) **Assyrian**
2. North Semitic
  - a. **Amorite**
  - b. **Aramaic**
3. Northwest Semitic
  - a. **Eblaite**
  - b. **Ugaritic/Canaanite**
  - c. **Hebrew**
4. South Semitic
  - a. **Arabic**
  - b. **Ethiopic**

#### B. Egyptian (also considered a “branch” of the Afro-Asiatic family)

1. Pharaonic Egyptian; written in Hieroglyphic, Hieratic, and Demotic scripts
2. **Coptic** = late Egyptian in the Coptic script; two dialects: **Bohairic** and **Sahidic**

#### C. Indo-European Languages (12 groups)

1. **Hittite**
2. Sanskrit and Cognates
3. Slavonic
4. Baltic
5. Germanic: (German, Dutch, **English**)
6. Celtic
7. Italic: includes **Latin** → modern “Romance” languages
8. Illyrian
9. Thraco-Phrygian
10. **Greek**

### IV. HEBREW

#### A. History and Use

1. Canaanite tongue; i.e., the language of Canaan
2. Bulk of OT written in Hebrew
3. Largely displaced by Aramaic as spoken language by NT period
4. Continued in use in synagogues and by religious scholars
5. Revived as a spoken language in modern times
6. 2 systems of pronunciation developed in different Jewish communities
  - a. **Ashkenazic**: Eastern European Jews (used in older grammars)
  - b. **Sephardic**: Spanish/Middle Eastern Jews (official in Israel; newer standard in biblical studies)

#### B. Written Form

1. 22 Letters; all consonants, no vowels
2. Script
  - a. Original: Proto-Hebrew and Phoenician (as found in OT period archaeological finds)
  - b. Later (ca. 200 BC): shift to “Square Aramaic” script (used in modern printed Hebrew)
3. Vowel indication
  - a. No indication = “*defective*” spelling
  - b. Use of *Matres Lectionis*: consonants used as indicators of vowels = “*plene*” spelling
  - c. System of dots & dashes added by Masoretes (see “The Old Testament Text”) as vowel signs
4. Verb Conjugations

#### C. Nature: concrete; forthright; personal; no abstractions

## V. ARAMAIC

### A. History

1. Language of the Arameans, a Semitic group dominant in Syria during the Iron Age
2. Under Assyria (2 Ki. 18:26), & esp. Persian Emp.: Aramaic = diplomatic language; *Lingua Franca*
3. Developed into **Syriac**

### B. Use in the Bible

1. Gen 31:47 - place name
2. Jer 10:11 - verse
3. Dan 2:4b -7:28
4. Ezra 4:8 - 6:18; 7:12-26

## VI. GREEK

### A. Indo-European Language Family

### B. History

1. Linear B Tablets from Bronze Age (1400-1200 BC): Mycenaean Greek
2. Classical Greek (800-350 BC)
3. Alexander spread Greek language through conquests
4. **Koine** Greek = **Hellenistic Greek** (300 BC onwards): language of the New Testament
5. 2 systems of pronunciation
  - a. **Erasmian** (used in biblical studies)
  - b. **Modern** (used in modern spoken Greek)

### C. Nature

1. Script: 24 Letters
2. Flexible, expressive, abstract