

# DOCTRINE OF THE BIBLE

## Ancient Writing

### Lesson #2

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Throughout the ages God has chosen to reveal himself in a variety of ways. In fact, the author of Hebrews says in **Heb. 1:1-2**, “*God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son. .*” God indeed has revealed himself in many portions and in many ways. But out of all of the ways God has revealed himself, one way stands out clearer and more precisely than any – through the written Word. Peter, in **II Pet. 1:20-21** tells us that the written Word of God is a product of men being moved by the Holy Spirit to write down the very words of God himself.

Because God is an infinite and eternal spirit who is far above us, He wanted to communicate to mankind in a clear objective way. He wanted to communicate the knowledge of himself and His will. God chose to reveal himself in two primary ways. One way God reveals himself is through *general revelation*. General revelation is what can be known about God through creation. The problem with general revelation is that it is subjective and men, because of their wicked hearts, suppress the truth of God found in general revelation and distort what can be known about God in unrighteousness. Another way God reveals himself is through *special revelation*. Special revelation is objective, verbal communication. Examples of special revelation are visions, dreams, and theophanies (which are miraculous appearances of God such as when God appeared in the burning bush or as the Angel of the Lord). God also spoke to people through the mediation of angelic messengers.

The primary means of special revelation, which God has chosen to use to reveal himself to man, is His written Word, the Bible. The reason for this is that written language preserves God’s Word more accurately. If God spoke to individuals and they had to pass His Word on orally, it would be quickly corrupted. But once the Word of God was written down, it could be easily copied and hence communicated more accurately and extensively without corruption. Many Christians realize that the Bible was written a long time ago but many do not realize how. Have you ever wondered how the information of the Bible was recorded from the time of Moses who lived around 1500 BC to New Testament times? Do you know what materials were used to write down the Word of God? In this lesson we will learn about methods, languages, and materials used for recording information in ancient times. It is important to have some understanding of ancient writing as it will lay a foundation for understanding the ancient manuscripts of the Bible, their accuracy, and preservation. Niel Lightfoot speaking to this issue has said:

The starting point of our Bible is preceded and determined by another story, the history of ancient books and writing. It is necessary to know this story because the Bible is composed of documents which were not only written long ago, but have been transmitted and preserved through the years by means of writing. To know then something of the early history of writing and the origin of ancient books will provide an interesting background of the history of the Bible and at the same time will contribute immeasurably to the understanding of the life situations in which the Word of God had its birth. Thus the whole history of the Bible is conditioned on (1) the history of writing, and (2) the history of the materials used in making of ancient books.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Neil R. Lightfoot, *How We Got the Bible*, pgs. 13-14.

## I. DEFINITION OF IMPORTANT TERMS RELATED TO ANCIENT WRITING

- A. **Codex** - A book made of many sheets of papyrus, parchment, or vellum bound together in book form.
- B. **Fragment** - A small piece of an ancient written document.
- C. **Parchment/vellum** - Finely prepared animal skins used to write on from the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD onward. Vellum usually referred to the skins of calves and antelopes and parchment referred to the skins of sheep and goats.
- D. **Papyrus** - Early form of paper made with the Egyptian papyrus marsh plant.
- E. **Scroll** - An early type of book made from papyrus sheets pasted end to end and rolled up into a roll (**Isa. 34:4**).
- F. **Stylus** - A three sided writing instrument with a pointed end used to mark clay or wax tablets (**Jer. 17:1**).

## II. ANCIENT MATERIALS USED TO WRITE ON

- A. In Old Testament times many different materials were used such as stone, clay, wood, leather, wax, gold, silver, copper, lead, bone, linen, pieces of pottery, papyrus and vellum or parchment. These materials had letters either carved into them, impressed upon them, scratched on the surface, or written with pen and ink. The three most important materials, as far as ancient Biblical manuscripts are concerned, are leather, papyrus and vellum. These three materials make up the bulk of the ancient copies of the Bible now found in museums and universities all over the world.
  - 1. **Job 19:23-24** “Oh that my words were written! Oh that they were inscribed in a book! “That with an iron stylus and lead They were engraved in the rock forever!
  - 2. **III Jn. 13** had many things to write to you, but I am not willing to write them to you with pen and ink;
- B. **Leather** - This material was the principle material used for writing in Old Testament times. It was strong, durable, and reusable. Old ink writing could be scratched off the surface with a knife and new messages written. The Jewish Talmud, a commentary and list of traditional laws, required that Old Testament Scriptures be copied on to animal skins.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Neil R. Lightfoot, *How We Got Our Bible*, pg. 16.

1. **Jer. 36:23** When Jehudi had read three or four columns, the king cut it with a scribe's knife and threw it into the fire that was in the brazier, until all the scroll was consumed in the fire that was in the brazier.

**C. Papyrus** - This was the most popular material used for writing in New Testament times. Papyrus came from a tall marsh plant that grew to 18 feet and was triangular in cross section. It was kind of like a cat tail that grew along the banks of the Nile especially in the Nile delta area. In order to make the papyrus paper, the stems were cut in thin slices, then placed side by side, overlapped at right angles on wooden planks, and beat with mallets to weld them together. After drying, the surface would be lightly sanded, the edges would be trimmed, and the ends glued together to form a roll. These rolls were the "books" used about the fourth century BC to the first century AD. Around the second century AD papyrus rolls were replaced with sheets of papyrus bound at the edges into books. This allowed for writing on both sides, easier access to the information, and the ability to write more information on a smaller amount of material. A book made of parchment sheets is called a "codex."<sup>3</sup>

1. **Job 8:11** "Can the papyrus grow up without a marsh? Can the rushes grow without water?"
2. **Rev. 5:1** I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a book written inside and on the back, sealed up with seven seals.

**D. Parchments/vellum** - The finely processed skins of goats and sheep (parchments) and calves and antelopes (vellum) became popular during the reign of King Eumenes II of Persia in Asia minor (197-158 BC). Egypt which had a monopoly on papyrus tried to boycott progress of King Eumenes by cutting off his supply of papyrus. This moved Eumenes to perfect the art of treating animal skins for the use of writing. The skins had the hair removed, were scraped and pulled tight to dry. Then they were trimmed and folded in half with the hair side facing hair side and inside facing inside. These folders were then bound together to form very durable books, some of which have survived to today and are in remarkable condition.

1. **II Tim. 4:13** When you come bring the cloak which I left at Troas with Carpus, and the books, especially the parchments.

### III. SCRIPTURAL PROOF OF ANCIENT BIBLICAL WRITING

In the late 1800's and earlier in this century sceptics tried to argue that Moses could not have written the first five books of the Old Testament because extensive written documents had not developed and the Ten commandments were too advanced to be

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<sup>3</sup>The *Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2, pg. 1142. Neil R. Lightfoot, *How We Got the Bible*, pgs. 15-21.

written in 1500 BC. Yet, in recent years, those sceptics have been silenced as archeologists have discovered that even Abraham (2500 BC) was most likely familiar with five different written languages.<sup>4</sup> Another find, which proved that a complex law of the Old Testament was not improbable during Moses' time, was the discovery of the code of Hammurabi (also called Hammurapi). Hammurabi was the ruler of Babylon and Susa around 1764 BC. The code of Hammurabi was written on a huge stele (stone) called the diorite stele and had a complex system of laws to regulate social behavior in Babylon.<sup>5</sup> But even if archeology did not find these writings, we must not forget that God's Word is true even if men think it is not. We must hold to the truth of Rom. 3:4, "**let God be found true, though every man *be found* a liar. . .**"

#### A. **Moses was the first inspired writer of the Bible**

1. **Ex. 17:14<sup>6</sup>** Then the Lord said to Moses, "Write this in a book as a memorial and recite it to Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven."
2. **Deut. 31:9, 24** So Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and to all the elders of Israel. . . It came about, when Moses finished writing the words of this law in a book until they were complete,

#### B. **Biblical witness to Moses' authorship of the first five books of the Bible**

1. **Josh. 8:31** just as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded the sons of Israel, as it is written in the book of the law of Moses, an altar of uncut stones on which no man had wielded an iron tool; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the Lord, and sacrificed peace offerings.
2. **Luke 24:44** Now He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled."

#### C. **Other Biblical references to the authors of Scripture**

1. **Josh. 24:26** And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God; and he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak that was by the sanctuary of the Lord.
2. **I Sam. 10:25** Then Samuel told the people the ordinances of the kingdom, and wrote them in the book and placed it before the Lord. And Samuel sent all the people away, each one to his house.

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<sup>4</sup>*Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia*, vol. 5, pg. 1014.

<sup>5</sup>*New Bible Dictionary*, Logos Bible Software, under 'Hammurabi'.

<sup>6</sup> This is the first mention of anyone writing anything down in the Bible.

3. **Jer. 36:2** “Take a scroll and write on it all the words which I have spoken to you concerning Israel and concerning Judah, and concerning all the nations, from the day I first spoke to you, from the days of Josiah, even to this day.
4. **Neh. 8:1, 8** And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had given to Israel. . . They read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading.
5. These are just a sample of the many references in the Bible to things being written. In fact, if you search the Scriptures, you will discover that there are over 400 uses of the words, “write,” “wrote,” “written,” or “recorded.” The New Testament employs the phrase “**it is written**” 60 times when mentioning or quoting the Old Testament Scriptures. And the New Testament uses the term “Scriptures” 20 times, sometimes in reference to the Old Testament, and other times in reference to the New Testament.

#### IV. IMPORTANT LANGUAGES RELATED TO THE BIBLE<sup>7</sup>

- A. The languages that are most important in relation to the Old Testament are the Semitic languages. They are divided up into four regional divisions.
  1. The **eastern division** is *Akkadian* the language of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires which are mentioned frequently in the Old Testament.
  2. The **southern division** languages include *Arabic and Ethiopic*. Ethiopic was called Cush in the Old Testament (see **Gen. 10:7-8; Isa. 45:14**). Arabic was one of the languages used in the Arab speaking countries and is still very popular today being the official language of Egypt.
  3. The **northern division** languages include *Amorite and Aramaic*. Aramaic was the language of the Syrians and several sections of the Old Testament were written in Aramaic (e.g. **Ezra 4:7-6:1; 7:12-26; Dan. 2:4-7:28**). The Amorites were in the land of Israel before it was conquered by Joshua (see **Deut. 7:1; Josh. 10:26**).
  4. The **northwest division** languages include *Ugaritic, Phoenician, Moabite, and Hebrew*. Ugaritic has been an important language because it sheds light on the meaning of Hebrew words. The Phoenicians are mentioned in **Gen. 10:8-12; I Kings 5:6; Neh. 13:16; Ezek. 27:9; and Zeph. 1:11**. The Phoenician language is an important one because the Phoenician alphabet was used and adapted by other languages. Moabite was used

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<sup>7</sup>Information from this section taken from Geisler and Nix, *General Introduction to the Bible*, pgs. 324-326.

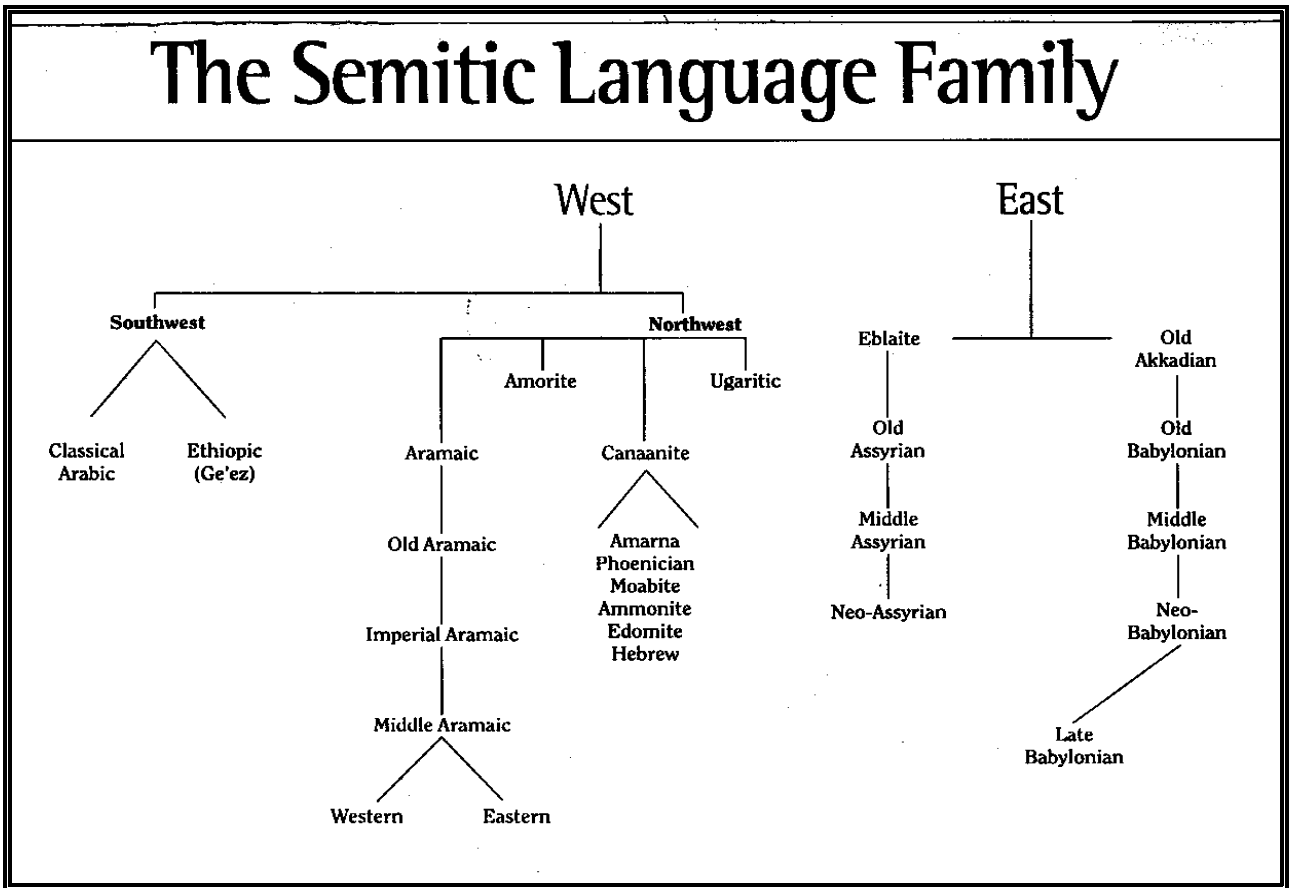


Figure 1 John H. Walton, *Chronological Background Charts to the Old Testament*, pg. 90

by the descendants of Lot, Abraham’s nephew. Hebrew is the most important Old Testament language as most of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew. In **II Kings 18:26, 28** it is referred to as “Judean” and in **Isa. 19:18** “the language of Canaan.” There are four subcategories of Hebrew dialects which have been used throughout history i.e., Biblical, Mishnaic, Medieval, and Modern.

- B. The languages that are most importantly related to the New Testament are arranged into two groups.
1. The **Semitic Family** languages which relate to the New Testament are *Hebrew and Aramaic*. Aramaic was the common language among the Jews during the time of Jesus. Hebrew was the ancient language of the Old Testament Scriptures which the Rabbis cherished.
  2. The **Indo European Family** languages that relate to the New Testament a

<sup>e</sup>**John 3:16** in Greek: Οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον, ὥστε τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ ἔδωκεν, ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν μὴ ἀπόληται ἀλλ' ἔχη ζωὴν αἰώνιον.

*Latin and Greek.* Latin was the language used by Rome in New Testament times. The inscription on Jesus cross, we are told, was written in Latin, Hebrew, and Greek (**Jn. 19:20**). Greek, like Hebrew, fell into several dialects, the common Greek was called Koine Greek. It is the Greek dialect of the New Testament.

# North Semitic Alphabets

Old	Phoenician-Hebrew			Palmyrene		Aramaic	Syriac	Square Hebrew	Modern Print
	Phoenician	Jerusalem	Carthage	North Syria	Egyptian Papyri	Palmyra	Strangelo	Inscription	
	(1200 B.C.)	(700 B.C.)	(c. 300 B.C.)	(c. 750 B.C.)	(c. 400 B.C.)	(A.D. 150)	(A.D. c. 200)	(A.D. 100-400)	
A	𐤀	א	𐤁	𐤁	𐤁	𐤀	ܐ	א	A
B	𐤁	ב	𐤂	ב	ב	𐤁	ܒ	ב	B
G	𐤂	ג	𐤃	ג	ג	𐤂	ܓ	ג	G
D	𐤃	ד	𐤄	ד	ד	𐤃	ܕ	ד	D
H	𐤄	ה	𐤅	ה	ה	𐤄	ܗ	ה	H
I	𐤅	ו	𐤆	ו	ו	𐤅	ܘ	ו	I
Z	𐤆	ז	𐤇	ז	ז	𐤆	ܙ	ז	Z
J	𐤇	ח	𐤈	ח	ח	𐤇	ܚ	ח	J
L	𐤈	ט	𐤉	ט	ט	𐤈	ܛ	ט	L
N	𐤉	י	𐤊	י	י	𐤉	ܢ	י	N
P	𐤊	כ	𐤋	כ	כ	𐤊	ܦ	כ	P
Q	𐤋	ק	𐤌	ק	ק	𐤋	ܩ	ק	Q
R	𐤌	ר	𐤍	ר	ר	𐤌	ܚ	ר	R
S	𐤍	ש	𐤎	ש	ש	𐤍	ܫ	ש	S
T	𐤎	ת	𐤏	ת	ת	𐤎	ܬ	ת	T
X +	𐤏	ס	𐤐	ס	ס	𐤏	ܫ	ס	X +

Figure 2 Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, pg. 113