

## From Moses to the Latest English (or other language) Translation

### Books:

Ewert, David. *From Ancient Tablets to Modern Translations*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983.

Wegner, Paul D. *The Journey from Texts to Translations*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999.

History of writing (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Writing>)

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*Main article: History of writing*

### The beginning of writing



GRAPHIC: Globular envelope with a cluster of accountancy tokens, Uruk period, from Susa. Louvre Museum

By definition, the modern practice of history begins with written records; evidence of human culture without writing is the realm of prehistory.

The writing process first evolved from economic necessity in the ancient near east. Writing most likely began as a consequence of political expansion in ancient cultures, which needed reliable means for transmitting information, maintaining financial accounts, keeping historical records, and similar activities. Around the 4th millennium BC, the complexity of trade and administration outgrew the power of memory, and writing became a more dependable method of recording and presenting transactions in a permanent form. The Dispilio Tablet, which was carbon dated to the 6th millennium BC, may be evidence that writing was used even earlier than that.

Archaeologist Denise Schmandt-Besserat determined the link between previously

uncategorized clay 'tokens' and the first known writing, Mesopotamian cuneiform. The clay tokens were used to represent commodities,

and perhaps even units of time spent in labour, and their number and type became more complex as civilization advanced. A degree of complexity was reached when over a hundred different kinds of tokens had to be accounted for, and tokens were wrapped and fired in clay, with markings to indicate the kind of tokens inside. These markings soon replaced the tokens themselves, and the clay envelopes were demonstrably the prototype for clay writing tablets. In both Mesoamerica and Ancient Egypt writing may have evolved through calendrics and a political necessity for recording historical and environmental events.

### Mesopotamia

In approximately 8000 BC, the Mesopotamians began using clay tokens to count their agricultural and manufactured goods. Later they began placing the tokens in large, hollow, clay containers (bullae) which were sealed; the quantity of tokens in each container came to be expressed by impressing, on the container's surface, one picture for each instance of the token inside. They next dispensed with the tokens, relying solely on symbols for the tokens, drawn on clay surfaces. To avoid making a picture for each instance of the same object (for example: 100 pictures of a hat to represent 100 hats), they 'counted' the objects by using various small marks. In this way the Sumerians added "a system for enumerating objects to their incipient system of symbols". The original Mesopotamian writing system (believed to be the world's oldest) was derived from this method of keeping accounts circa 3600 BC, and by the end of the 4th millenni-

um BC, this had evolved into using a triangular-shaped stylus pressed into soft clay for recording numbers. This was gradually augmented with using a sharp stylus, indicating what was being counted by means of pictographs. Round-stylus and sharp-stylus writing was gradually replaced by writing using a wedge-shaped stylus (hence the term cuneiform), at first only for logograms, but evolved to include phonetic elements by the 29th century BC. Around 2700 BC, cuneiform began to represent

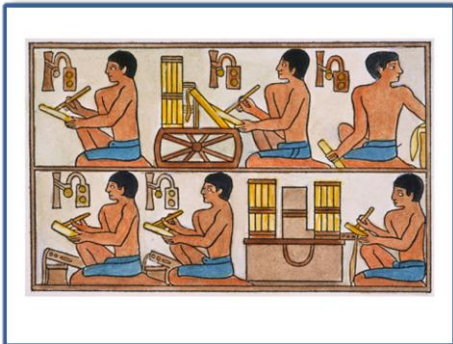


syllables of spoken Sumerian. Also in that period, cuneiform writing became a general purpose writing system for logograms, syllables, and numbers, and this script was adapted to another Mesopotamian language, the East Semitic Akkadian (Assyrian and Babylonian) in around 2600 BC,

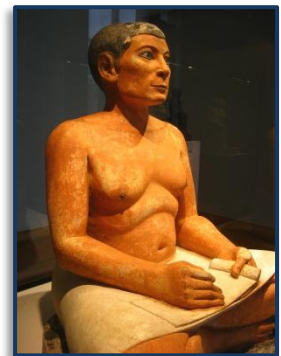


and from there to others such as Elamite, Hattian, Hurrian and Hittite. Scripts similar in appearance to this writing system include those for Ugaritic and Old Persian. With the adoption of Aramaic as the 'lingua franca' of the Neo Assyrian Empire, Old Aramaic was also adapted to Mesopotamian Cuneiform. The last Cuneiform scripts in Akkadian discovered thus far date from the 1st Century AD.

The relationship of this to the Bible concerns Abraham who was described as 'very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold' (Gen. 13.2). The evidence from the history of writing is that it had its first impetus in trying to keep up with one's wealth. Writing was initially an accounting endeavor. From that it is easy to posit



that Abraham could and did write, if nothing else, in an effort to keep accounts of what he owned. He traveled to Egypt (Gen. 12) as did his progeny, a place known for its history of writing and historical depictions and theological inquiry.



It at one time (even presently among some folks—Elon retired president!) was thought that the Bible couldn't

have been as ancient as it claims because writing only came about in the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium B.C. As shown above, this has been completely negated. The possibility of Abraham and his family having the ability to write is not only possible but more than likely. With Joseph bringing the family of his father Jacob/Israel to Egypt to live for 400 years, this tradition of writing would incubate nicely in a great environment.<sup>1</sup> And Moses was a product of all of that history.

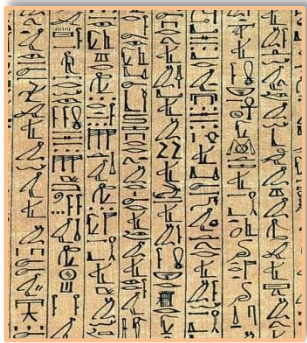
<sup>1</sup>“The Old Kingdom (3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. 3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> dynasties) seated scribe is one of the most famous works of Egyptian art in the world. The scribe sits cross-legged with a papyrus scroll on his lap. The face is lively and enhanced by the quartz eyes (inlaid in a copper setting). The scribe has a slight roll of fat on his chest / belly, which is an ancient convention designed to show that he was well off. The statue was probably set in a separate base (now lost) that would have been carved with the names and titles of the owner. The statue was found by Auguste Mariette in November, 1850 near the row of sphinxes leading to the Serapeum. While this statue is clearly from the Old Kingdom, a more specific date cannot be arrived at.”  
(<http://nearchaology.blogspot.com/2012/09/the-louvres-seated-scribe.html>).

The word for ‘write’ (כָּתַב *katágraphon*) first appears in Exod. 17.14 and is used 225 times while the word ‘scribe/writer’ (סֹפֵר *grammatéws*) first appears in Judges 5.14 (KJV) and is used 53 times. We see the office named as one of the royal offices to the king (2 Sam. 20.25, 1 Kings 4.3) giving an indication of how important the job was in Jewish tradition. Again, remember that in the NT times a blue collar worker (τέκτων—carpenter, builder) could go to a synagogue in a remote village (Nazareth) and read from the book (βιβλίον) of Isaiah. Which of course implies that that small synagogue in Galilee also had the Torah and the rest of the books!

Having established that writing was an active endeavor from at least the third millenium B.C., we need to look at writing systems. Our discussion is confined to the biblical geographic region which extends from Egypt to Persia. The language and the writing systems that stand behind the text of Scripture come from these two distinct areas that developed writing in distinctive ways due to a couple of geographic differences. Both areas had materials for clay tablets and both had the use of potsherds (broken pieces of pottery). The major difference was that Egypt had papyrus while Mesopotamia (Assyria, Babylon) and Persia did not. Both places appear to have begun their languages with a logographic system, one in which a picture represents a word. The eastern regions produced these pictograms on clay tablets (clay was abundant!) and used a wedge shaped stylus to impress the images in a cuneiform system of writing. In Egypt, their pictographic system developed more fully because they had an easier material to work with, papyrus. Papyrus comes from the stalk of a reed that grows along the banks of water ways. It can be split into strips



When heaven above was not yet named, nor earth below pronounced by name, Apsu, the first one, their begetter and maker Tiamat, who bore them all, had mixed their waters together, but had not formed pastures, nor discovered reed-beds. When yet no gods were manifest, nor names pronounced, nor destinies decreed, then gods were born within them.  
The Enkima Elish.



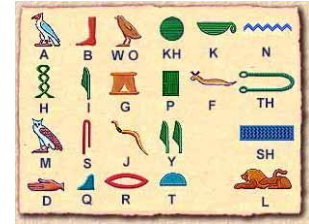
which can be layed out in two layers going cross wise to each other and then pounded together to form a tight bond and producing a material very conducive to taking ink laid down by a stylus. As such, the writing system of Egypt is much more ‘artistic’ than that of Mesopotamia. Both systems took the handsized writing system and reproduced them on largers scales,



like the walls of buildings and the sides of mountains (the Behistun Inscription).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The inscription includes three versions of the same text, written in three different cuneiform script languages: Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian (a later form of Akkadian). In effect, then, the inscription is to cuneiform what the Rosetta Stone is to Egyptian hieroglyphs: the document most crucial in the decipherment of a previously lost script. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Behistun\\_Inscription](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Behistun_Inscription)).

Though cuneiform was predominantly used to depict either a pictographic or syllabary language (each symbol represents either a whole word or a syllable), Ugaritic was a cuneiform system whose symbols represented letters, i.e. a single symbol for a single sound. This was a true alphabet. Egyptian hieroglyphics became more of a true alphabet writing systems, with the first sound of the word represented by the symbol becoming in essence the sound for the picture.



Ugaritic is a semitic language closely related to Hebrew and found, predominantly, in its own cuneiform symbols.

Modern Hebrew	Paleo-Hebrew (before 586 B.C.)	Ugaritic
בראשית ברא אלהים	𐤁𐤓𐤀𐤔 𐤁𐤓 𐤀𐤋𐤇𐤍	𐎁𐎗𐎕𐎗 𐎁𐎗 𐎀𐎗𐎕𐎗
את השמים ואת הארץ	𐤀𐤕 𐤇𐤕𐤓𐤀𐤕 𐤁𐤓 𐤀𐤓𐤕	𐎀𐎕 𐎇𐎕𐎓𐎀𐎕 𐎁𐎗 𐎀𐎕𐎕

So, we are left with the children of Israel coming out of Egypt, a nation with an ancient history of writing. It is not, then, surprising for the words 'write' and 'book' to show up early in the writings of the Torah.

In the following verses we find these words:

Book (noun): Hebrew *Sēpher* (סֵפֶר), Greek *Biblion* (βιβλίον)

Write (verb): Hebrew *Kātab* (כָּתַב), Greek *Graphō* (γράφω)

Josh. 1.8 This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.

Deu 31:26 "Take this Book of the Law and put it by the side of the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may be there for a witness against you.

Exodus 17.14 And the LORD said to Moses, "Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven."

Exodus 24.7 Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient."

Exodus 32.32 But now, if thou wilt forgive their sin -- and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written."

Numbers 21.14 Wherefore it is said in the Book of the Wars of the LORD, "Waheb in Suphah, and the valleys of the Arnon,

Deuteronomy 17.18 "And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, from that which is in the charge of the Levitical priests;

Deuteronomy 28.58 "If you are not careful to do all the words of this law which are written in this book, that you may fear this glorious and awful name, the LORD your God,

Deuteronomy 28.61 Every sickness also, and every affliction which is not recorded in the book of this law, the LORD will bring upon you, until you are destroyed.

Deuteronomy 29.27 therefore the anger of the LORD was kindled against this land, bringing upon it all the curses written in this book;

Deuteronomy 30.10 if you obey the voice of the LORD your God, to keep his commandments and his statutes which are written in this book of the law, if you turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

Joshua 1.8 This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall have good success.

Joshua 8.31 as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded the people of Israel, as it is written in the book of the law of Moses, "an altar of unhewn stones, upon which no man has lifted an iron tool"; and they offered on it burnt offerings to the LORD, and sacrificed peace offerings.

Joshua 8.34 And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the book of the law.

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## Notes

### **Ancient Egypt**

Early Dynastic Period	3100–2686 BC
Old Kingdom	2686–2181 BC
1st Intermediate Period	2181–2055 BC
Middle Kingdom	2055–1650 BC
2nd Intermediate Period	1650–1550 BC
New Kingdom	1550–1069 BC
3rd Intermediate Period	1069–664 BCE
Late Period	664–332 BCE