

BIBLICAL HEBREW AND THE SEMITIC LANGUAGES IN THE LIGHT OF CULTURAL ANTIQUITY: A NEW PROPOSAL

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***Abstract:** Scholars of ancient Near Eastern languages traditionally divide the Semitic languages into three major categories, broken down into numerous sub-categories. Hebrew finds a place in this taxonomy but only as a minor offspring of the great family to which it is related. However, to students of the Bible who take it seriously, Hebrew looms largest of them all because to them it was the divinely chosen conduit through which God revealed himself and his purposes for creation and history. One purpose of this paper among others is to justify the inordinate attention paid to this otherwise marginal tongue. Procedurally the paper will (1) survey the origin and development of the Semitic languages and literatures; (2) locate Hebrew within the larger family of the Semitic languages; and (3) engage the issue of the Hebrew language and the biblical text vis-à-vis their literary and larger cultural contexts.*

***Key words:** Hebrew language, Semitic languages, Old Testament chronology*

I. ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE SEMITIC LANGUAGES¹

Table 1
Semitic Languages of the Ancient Near East

Proto-Semitic?		
East Semitic	Northwest Semitic	South Semitic
Akkadian	Proto-NW Semitic	Arabic
Old Akkadian	Eblaite	Early South Arabic
Old Babylonian	Amorite	Classical (Quranic) Arabic
Old Assyrian	Aramaic	Dialectical Modern Arabic
Hymnal-Epic	Syriac	
Middle Babylonian	Canaanite	
Middle Assyrian	Ugaritic	

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¹ See Table 1. For an overall introduction to the Semitic language field, see Sabatino Moscati, ed., *An Introduction to the Comparative Grammar of the Semitic Languages* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1964).

Neo-Babylonian	Phoenic	
Neo-Assyrian	Punic	
Peripheral Dialects ²	Hebrew	
Amarna	Classical	
Mari	Late Biblical	
Nuzi	Mishnaic	
Alalakh	Medieval	
	Moabite	
	Ammonite	
	Edomite	

1. *East Semitic*. The earliest known Semitic writing in the strict sense dates from the Sumerian Early Dynastic period of Mesopotamia (ca. 3000–2800 BC).³ These literary artifacts of early Semitic culture exhibit (as did the culture in general) a clear dependence on Sumerian and other substrate (perhaps Subarian?) ethnicities.⁴ Indeed, the very earliest attestations of writing in the region were found in the Sumerian city-state of Uruk at level IVb, dated approximately 3200 BC.⁵ The subject matter of the “texts” consists principally of the counting of various commodities involved in trade including cloth, animals, and other everyday provisions. Formally they take the shape of two-dimensional drawings of spherical, rectangular, triangular, and other shapes in clay containers with tags identifying their contents. These containers are dubbed “envelopes” by Denise Schmandt-Besserat, a foremost scholar in their interpretation.⁶ The stylized pictographic signs are not alphabetic but syllabic, as are those of all the East Semitic language family. That is, each has a CV, VC, or CVC representative value (or values) and each value (i.e. pho-

² These are named for the locales where these dialects are attested, and they generally reflect a non-standard Akkadian form because they were usually composed by non-native writers of the major language.

³ The term “writing” embodies an inherent fluidity that occasions a variety of definitions, the full scope of which cannot be explored here. I. J. Gelb offers the following: Writing is “a system of human intercommunication by means of conventional visible marks.” I. J. Gelb, *A Study of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 12. The dates cited here, though necessarily imprecise, are shared generally by most historians of the period. See, e.g., Amélie Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East c. 3000–330 BC* (London: Routledge, 1995), 27.

⁴ For the possibility of a northern Subarian culture, including writing, contemporaneous with Uruk in the south, see William W. Hallo and William Kelly Simpson, *The Ancient Near East: A History* (2nd ed.; Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1998), 21–22.

⁵ Uruk is known in the OT as Erech (Gen 10:10) and in modern Arabic as Warka. For the discovery and deciphering of the inscriptions, cf. Adam Falkenstein, *Archaische Texte aus Uruk* (Ausgrabungen der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft in Uruk-Warka 2; Berlin: Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft Leipzig Kommissionsverlag O. Harrassowitz, 1936; Gelb, *A Study of Writing*, 61–68; and Edward Chiera, *They Wrote on Clay* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), esp. pp. 50–79.

⁶ Denise Schmandt-Besserat, *Before Writing*, vol. 1: *From Counting to Cuneiform* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992). See also idem, “An Archaic Recording System in the Uruk-Jemdet Nasr Period,” *AJA* 88.1 (1979): 19–83; and a slight nuancing to include metrological functions in idem, “From Tokens to Tablets: A Re-Evaluation of the So-called ‘Numerical Tablets,’” *Visible Language* 15.4 (1981): 321–44.

neme) can be written by more than one sign. The Sumerians developed these primitive signs into increasingly complicated forms which were then adopted by Semites, loosely designated “Akkadians,” who by 3000 BC had come from the Upper Euphrates/Habur region by great migrations into central and lower Mesopotamia.⁷ Though these peoples of vastly different ethnic origins lived in peaceful symbiosis for the most part, the militarily superior Semites eventually overthrew the culturally superior Sumerians under the leadership of Sargon the Great (2360–2305 BC). Nevertheless, the cumbersome cuneiform and syllabic scribal traditions of the Sumerians continued as a means of preserving classical literature by both cultural streams for 2,000 more years, down nearly to the Christian era.

2. *Northwest Semitic.*

a. *Biblical background.* Biblical chronology places Abraham in the city of Ur at the end of the third millennium, ca. 2100 BC.⁸ Archaeological research has laid bare a thriving city with amenities quite unexpected for such an early time.⁹ Abraham most surely was a wealthy, urbane, and cultured citizen at home in both the Sumerian and Old Akkadian languages and literatures. At the same time—and ironically—he would not have known a word of Hebrew since he was not yet a “Hebrew,” and Hebrew in any case had not yet come into existence as a discrete dialect. When he arrived in Haran and then Canaan, Abraham was plunged into the linguistic world of Northwest Semitic with its numerous sub-divisions.¹⁰ This demanded on his part the need to come to terms with new ways of speaking and writing.

b. *Abraham’s changing linguistic world.* The East Semitic dialects with which Abraham was familiar gave way to those of the Mediterranean littoral with their similarities to, but also major differences from, what he had known. In order for one to appreciate the challenge faced by the Patriarch, the following section outlines the technical lexical, morphological, grammatical, and syntactical markers that distinguish East Semitic languages from Northwestern and the variations within the larger Northwestern milieu.

The term “Northwest,” imprecisely used, refers to the geographical orientation of the languages of the Mediterranean littoral vis-à-vis Mesopotamia. Formally, they differ from East Semitic in three important ways: (1) they are alphabetic rather than syllabic; (2) with the exception of Ugaritic they are generally written on surfaces such as papyrus, leather, and potsherds rather than being incised into clay or stone; and (3) they evince significant grammatical, syntactical, and lexical differences from East Semitic.¹¹

⁷ Dietz Otto Edzard, “The Early Dynastic Period,” in *The Near East: The Early Civilizations* (ed. Jean Bottéro, Elena Cassin, Jean Vercoutter; New York: Delacorte, 1967), 52–90.

⁸ See Eugene H. Merrill, “Fixed Dates in Patriarchal Chronology,” *BSac* 137.547 (1980): 241–51.

⁹ Leonard Woolley, *Excavations at Ur: A Record of Twelve Years’ Work* (London: E. Benn, 1954).

¹⁰ See Table 1. The term “Proto-Semitic” is employed to describe a non-attested but presumed common linguistic ancestor to all the Northwest Semitic dialects. See Moscati, *Introduction*, 15–16.

¹¹ For a helpful listing of all these features, see William L. Moran, “The Hebrew Language in Its Northwest Semitic Background,” in *The Bible and the Ancient Near East* (ed. G. Ernest Wright; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 59–84.

The two principal divisions of Northwest Semitic are Aramaic and Canaanite, together distinguished orthographically from East Semitic in two major ways: (1) Proto-Semitic /w/ is represented by /y/ (Akk *waladu* ["to bear"]) and Ug/Heb *yalad(u)* and (2) Northwest Semitic forms the plural by the insertion of an anaptyctic vowel between the 2nd and 3rd radicals (Akk *ardu*, *ard* vs. Ug/Heb *ard*>*aradim*).

3. *Amorite*. The biblical scene (and hence the linguistic scene) changed greatly with Abraham's obedience to the call of God. His sojourn of several decades in Haran had acquainted him with the outskirts of the Amorite culture with its strong dialectical differences from his native Akkadian tongue.¹² Though an insufficient number of literary texts have been recovered from Amorite-speaking sites to provide much information, it is clear that it was at least a bridge between East Semitic syllabic and a nascent Northwest Semitic alphabetic argot.¹³

4. *Aramaic*. Aramaic proper is unattested to earlier than the 9th century (though surely it existed much earlier) but the facility of its alphabetic script promoted its use eventually by most of the Middle Eastern world as late as the Christian era.¹⁴ Some of the major inscriptions and their locations are (1) Sfire (ca. 750, SE of Aleppo); (2) Panamu II (ca. 730, N. Syria); and Bar Rekub, son of Panamu (ca. 725, Zinjerli). Of greatest interest to students of the Bible, however, is the so-called Tel Dan inscription (ca. 850; Tel Dan, Israel). It appears to have been composed at the command of King Hazael of Damascus (contemporary to King Joram [852–841] and King Jehu [841–814] of Israel), who calls Israel "the House of David."¹⁵

Yet more important are the parts of the Hebrew Bible composed in Aramaic, namely, Ezra 4:8–6:18; 7:12–26; and Daniel 2:4b–7:28. Numerous other texts, both secular and religious, have come to light as have many in Syriac, a very late subset of Aramaic associated mainly with early church writings and liturgy.¹⁶

¹² The Amorites were well known to the peoples of Mesopotamia who called them either MAR.TU (Sumerian) or Amurrû and Martu (Akkadian), meaning "westerners." See CAD 1.2:93–95. They eventually migrated into both Mesopotamia and Canaan, arriving in the latter region no later than 2000 BC, the period of the patriarchs (Gen 14:7, 13; 15:16). See Mario Liverani, "The Amorites," in *Peoples of Old Testament Times* (ed. D. J. Wiseman; Oxford: Clarendon, 1973), 100–133.

¹³ The most helpful entrée into the Amorite language has come from onomastica, especially the names found in the Mari tablets of ca. 1750 BC. See on this Herbert B. Huffman, *Amorite Personal Names in the Mari Texts* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1965); see also Liverani, "The Amorites," 107: "Amorite is the only northwest-Semitic dialect attested to between 2300 and 1500 B.C." Thus, a case can be made for Abraham having originally (if not always) spoken Amorite.

¹⁴ The earliest of these is "The Inscription of King Zakir" of the end of the 9th c. See Franz Rosenthal, ed., *An Aramaic Handbook: Part I/1* (Porta Linguarum Orientalium 10; Weisbaden: Harrassowitz, 1967).

¹⁵ This document, with the famous Mesha Inscription, provides an illuminating counter-narrative to biblical historical events, the Tel Dan text to the troubled times of Jehu and Athaliah (2 Kgs 8:25–10:36), and the Mesha inscription to the rebellion of Moab against Israelite hegemony (2 Kgs 3:4–27). See, respectively, A. Biran and J. Naveh, "An Aramaic Stele Fragment from Tel Dan," *IEJ* 43 (1993): 81–98; and Andrew Dearman, *Studies in the Mesha Inscription and Moab* (ABS 2; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

¹⁶ Chief among the Aramaic texts are those from Qumran, the Onkelos and Palestinian Targums, and some Midrashim. For the Syriac, see Sebastian Brock, *An Introduction to Syriac Studies* (Gorgias Handbooks 4; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2006).

5. *Canaanite*. Canaanite, another inadequate term for a number of reasons, embodies Phoenician, Ugaritic,¹⁷ Hebrew, Moabite, Ammonite, and Edomite.¹⁸ The latter three occur in only a few exemplars, none of which provides significant contribution to the overall Northwest Semitic picture.¹⁹ Within the broader Northwest Semitic field, Canaanite, as opposed to Aramaic, Amorite, and Eblaite,²⁰ presents the following isoglossic features among others:

a. *Lexical*. *hlk* in Northwest Semitic becomes a secondary root *ylk* in Canaanite only, and only in the imperfect, imperative, and infinitive construct; Ugaritic Gt and Hebrew *hiphil* are also formed from this root, e.g., *yēlēk* for *yahālōk*; *lēk* for *hālōk*; *hōlīk* for *hehēlīk*. The following lexemes are limited to Canaanite: *gāg* (roof); *לחם* (table); *הלך*, *hln* (window); *yšn* (old); *zqn* (old age); *grš* (drive out).

b. *Morphological*. Impf 3fp preformative is /t/ rather than /y/ (Heb *תקומן*, *tēqumān* rather than Aramaic *yēqumān*); in hollow verbs the *piel* and *hiphil* are often replaced by *polel* and *hihpolel* (Heb *kōnēn*; Ug *knn*); the impf preformative is /a/ if the thematic vowel is /i/ or /u/, and /i/ if the following syllable is /a/ (Barth-Ginsberg Law); in the derived conjugations /a/ of the prefix is attenuated to /i/ unless followed by /w/ (*hišlīk*, but *hōrīd*).²¹

6. *Phoenician*. As the designation suggests, Phoenician was the language of the state which lay on the Mediterranean coast just to the northwest of Israel in what is roughly the location of modern Lebanon. Its principal cities were Tyre, Sidon, and Byblos, the last of which yielded a great number of inscriptions from the 10th century and later.²² Since these are remarkably similar to Hebrew inscriptions and texts, they are most instructive in seeking prototypes of both dialects.

The subdivision Phoenic (as opposed to Hebrew) attests the following isoglosses:

¹⁷ For early reservations about the inclusion of Ugaritic in the Canaanite family, see Albrecht Goetze, "Is Ugaritic a Canaanite Dialect?," ["no"] *Language* 17 (1941): 127–38. A strong contrary argument is proffered by Zellig G. Harris, *The Development of the Canaanite Dialects* (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1939), 10–11.

¹⁸ Eduard Y. Kutscher, *A History of the Hebrew Language* (Leiden: Brill, 1982), 3–4.

¹⁹ For descriptions of these, see Harris, *The Development of the Canaanite Dialects*. Ammonite is represented by the Deir 'Allā Balaam Text (Jo Ann Hackett, *The Balaam Text from Deir 'Allā* [HSM 31; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984]). Moabite is best represented by the Mesha Inscription (see Dearman, *Studies*), and for a reading of "House of David" in the inscription, see André Lemaire, "'House of David' Restored in Moabite Inscription," *BAR* 20.3 (1994): 30–37. Edomite has presented no literary texts to date. For an Edomite bulla, see *COS* 2.73:201.

²⁰ Eblaite refers to the language native to the city-state of Ebla (Tell Mardikh) in northeast Syria. No agreement currently exists as to the precise categorical fit of the language within the spectrum of Semitic. The thousands of tablets found there date to the late 3rd millennium (ca. 2300/2200 BC). See in general Giovanni Pettinato, *The Archives of Ebla* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981).

²¹ For application of this "law" in Ugaritic see Daniel Sivan, *A Grammar of the Ugaritic Language* (HdO 28; Leiden: Brill, 2001), 115–17.

²² Zellig S. Harris, *A Grammar of the Phoenician Language* (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1936), 1–10. The latest expression of Phoenician is Punic, inscriptions in which have been found in Carthage, Sardinia, Spain, and even France (Marseille). For the inscriptions, see H. Donner and W. Röllig, *Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften*, vol. 1: *Texte* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1971), texts 1–60 (Phoenician) and 61–116 (Punic).

a. *Lexical*. The lexical category includes *mnm* for Heb *měuma*, (“anything”); *ytn* (“give”) for Heb/Aram *ntn* (cf. Akk *nadānu*; the copulative is *kwn* for Heb *hyh/hwh*. Regular words for “foot,” “city,” and “gold” are *paḏam*, *qart*, and *ḥārûš* respectively.

b. *Syntactical*. Phoenic presents only a perfect consecutive and either the infinitive absolute or a 3fs perfect which does not change with the person or number (?) of the subject; Hebraic shows both the perfect and imperfect consecutive (preterite) and both infinitives construct and absolute.

7. *Ugaritic*. The remarkable discovery in 1927 of several thousand cuneiform tablets at a promontory on the Syrian coast named Ras Shamra (soon identified as the ancient city-state of Ugarit) completely revised prevailing opinions concerning Phoenician, Canaanite, and especially Hebrew writings, their provenance, antiquity, linguistic structures, and literary traditions.²³ Though composed in cuneiform characters, the texts proved to be alphabetic. More important, their themes, motifs, and epical poetic qualities were strikingly similar to those in the Bible, thus attesting to a great deal of commonality between the two cultures. The similarities strongly suggest that Hebrew was very much at home in the latter 13th century, the date of the Ugaritic compositions, and without doubt even earlier.²⁴

Ugaritic orthographical and grammatical features (as opposed to other Northwest Semitic languages) include the following: the causative preformative /š/ rather than /h/; additional consonants (*ḥ, ḡ, ṭ, ḏ, ṣ*); retention of Gt stem; all the moods of Classical Arabic; vases and case endings of PS; lacking definite article; dual attested in adjectives, verbs, and pronouns as well as in nouns; no shift >/ā/ to /ō/; frequent use of adverbial –am; emphatic enclitic –m(a?) or m(i); vocatives are /y/ (yā) or /l/ (lā). Lexical peculiarities include the regular use of *rgm*, “to speak”; *špš*, “sun.”

8. *Hebrew*. In addition to being the language of the OT, Hebrew existed in ancient times in (1) inscriptions (10th c. and later);²⁵ (2) Second Temple religious texts such as the Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, and Dead Sea Scrolls (ca. 250 BC–AD 135); (3) Mishnaic and Midrashic rabbinical writings (AD 500); Masoretic and other biblical scholarly notations (AD 500–930); and medieval exegetical commentaries, philosophical treatises, and theological compendia (AD 1000–1500). In all, a nearly unbroken stream of writings exist which enable a reconstruction of the development of the sacred language and literature from 1000 BC to the present day.²⁶

9. *South Semitic*. For the sake of completeness, a few points should be made regarding Arabic and its first cousin (Ethiopic) and its modern dialectal expres-

²³ For the discovery of Ugarit and its import, see Margaret Drower, “Ugarit,” in *The Cambridge Ancient History, Vol. II, Part 2* (3rd ed.; Cambridge: The University Press, 1975), 130–48; Anson Rainey, “The Kingdom of Ugarit,” *BA* 88 (1965): 102–25.

²⁴ It is important to note that Ugarit had existed for several centuries before its violent destruction in ca. 1200 and that the subject matter of much of the literature found there reflects therefore a much earlier milieu. See H. Cazelles, “Ugarit et la Bible,” *MdB* 20 (1981): 26–27; Marguerite Yon, “Ugarit: 6,000 Years of History,” *NEA* 63.4 (2000): 187–89.

²⁵ Klaas A. D. Smelik, *Writings from Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991).

²⁶ See, above all, Kutscher, *History*.

sions in North Africa, Egypt, the Middle East, and elsewhere more distant. These have made little or no contribution to biblical Hebrew language and literature so for the purposes of this paper will receive no further attention.²⁷

II. THE ORIGINS OF HEBREW ACCORDING TO THE BIBLICAL TRADITION

The term “Hebrew” occurs for the first time in the Bible as an ethnic description of Abraham by the narrator of Abraham’s life and times (Gen 14:13).²⁸ However, foreigners such as Potiphar’s wife called Joseph a Hebrew (Gen 39:14, 17) as did Pharaoh’s butler (41:12), both in the time of Sesostris II of Dynasty 12 (1897–1878 BC). A later pharaoh also spoke of the sons of Abraham as Hebrews in the accounts leading up to the exodus (Exod 1:15, 16, 19). This was probably Pharaoh Thutmose I (1526–1512 BC) of Dynasty 18. His daughter referred to baby Moses as well as his mother as Hebrews (Exod 2:6, 7). Finally, Moses, when grown to manhood, implicitly called another Hebrew by that label (2:13).

It is true, of course, that a case cannot be made that the patriarchs and later Israelites knew and spoke a language called Hebrew simply because they bore that ethnic designation. At the same time, it is well to recall that the patriarchs very early came in contact with language groups that were doubtless already experimenting with alphabetic forms.²⁹ This possibility has become probability in light of several major finds: (1) a 19th/18th century BC alphabetic graffiti from Wadi Hol in deep South Egypt;³⁰ (2) the famous turquoise mine alphabet from Serabit al-Khadem in the Sinai Peninsula, dated to the 16th century BC;³¹ and (3) ‘Izbet Šarṭah (ca. 1150 BC).³² The lengthy and beautifully crafted Ugaritic alphabetic inscriptions already described are thought to have their earliest roots in the early Second Millennium, perhaps as early as Abraham himself.³³

²⁷ Moscati, *Comparative Grammar*, 13–15. Arabic consists of (1) Early South Arabic (500 BC?); (2) Pre-Classical North Arabic (300 BC?); (3) Classical Arabic (7th c.); and (4) more than a dozen important minor dialects. Ethiopic (early AD) finds later expression in (1) Tigrīña, (2) Tigre, (3) Amharic, (4) Harari, and (5) Gurage.

²⁸ This writer is committed to the traditional Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch; thus any other descriptions of authorship in this paper should be understood in this light.

²⁹ Joseph Naveh, *Origins of the Alphabet* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Publishing House, 1994).

³⁰ Elizabeth J. Himelfarb, “First Alphabet Found in Egypt,” *Archaeology Archive* 53/1 (2000): 1.

³¹ W. F. Albright, “The Early Alphabetic Inscriptions from Sinai and Their Decipherment,” *BAJOR* 110 (1948): 6–22; idem, “Some Important Recent Discoveries: Alphabetic Origins and the Idrimi Statue,” *BAJOR* 118 (1950): 11–20.

³² Aaron Demsky, “A Proto-Canaanite ABCEDARY Dating from the Period of the Judges and Its Implications for the History of the Alphabet,” *TA* 4.1–2 (1977): 14–27.

³³ Robert R. Stieglitz, “The Ugaritic Cuneiform and Canaanite Linear Alphabets,” *JNES* 30 (1971): 135–39. For the likelihood of Hebrew as an early Canaanite language, see Kutscher, *A History of the Hebrew Language*, 1: “From both the Canaanite (Phoenician) inscriptions and from the glosses of El-Amarna ... we know that this language [Canaanite] was very close to Hebrew. We may assume that the language of the inhabitants was very close to that of the Israelite tribes when they penetrated Canaan. ... According to the tradition of the Israelites, which most Jewish scholars do not doubt, their forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob roamed Canaan already several hundred years previously.”

III. THE ORIGINS OF THE SEMITIC LANGUAGE FAMILY

The foregoing groundwork leads to the central focus of this paper, namely, the origin of the Semitic language family and, perhaps, as an ancillary by-product, the origins of human written discourse in general. We have noted above that the earliest extant texts so far recovered in the Middle East have clear ancestral connections to the later East Semitic Assyrian and Babylonian languages, albeit transmitted through Sumerian, a non-Semitic tongue. These, we have also noted, are to be dated ca. 3200 BC, 1,000 years before Abraham.

This inevitably raises questions as to (1) the antiquity of civilization in the Middle East as determined primarily through archaeological research; (2) the literacy of humankind in general in light of various theories of cultural origins and development and the dates assigned to them; (3) the biblical chronologies and their contribution to the question in general; and (4) the origin of writing inferentially derived from the biblical traditions.

1. *The antiquity of Ancient Near Eastern civilizations.*³⁴ Anthropologists, sociologists, archaeologists, and historians are of the same mind that what might be called “civilization” can be traced back in the Middle East to at least the Neolithic Period (ca. 9000 BC).³⁵ In common typology, the Neolithic Period was succeeded by the Chalcolithic (ca. 4500–3000 BC), Bronze (3000–1200 BC), and Iron Ages (1200–300 BC).³⁶ The following important sites in Mesopotamia linked to this scheme have given their names to eras marked by cultural and social change: Jarmo (ca. 6750 BC), Hassuna (5800 BC), Samarra (5200 BC), Tell Halaf (4800 BC), Eridu (5000 BC), Ubaid (5000 BC), Uruk (4000 BC), and Jemdet Nasr (3000 BC). The situation in Egypt is described somewhat differently (by regions, not city-states) and reflects considerably later urbanization: Fayum A (4250 BC), El Omari (3300 BC), Amratian (3600 BC), and Gerzean (3000 BC). Not to be overlooked is Jericho in the Levant, dated by some scholars as early as 7000 BC.

2. *The development of written language against the background of antiquity.* Given the several millions of years ascribed to the emergence of *homo sapiens* and the relatively late date for the appearance of earliest writing, a perplexing question or two must surely occur to a thinking person: (1) Why did it take so long for intelligent beings to devise a means of long-distance communication apart from oral transmission? (2) Is it possible that writing, like most other skills, suffered a considerable setback in

³⁴ No attempt can be made in this paper either to defend or discount the dating of ancient civilizations. The dates here reflect the broad consensus of scholars in the field.

³⁵ See, e.g., Jean Bottéro, ed., *The Near East: The Earliest Civilizations* (New York: Delacorte, 1967); R. W. Ehrich, ed., *Chronologies in Old World Archaeology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1932); Jacquetta Hawkes, *The First Great Civilizations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973); J. Mellaart, *Earliest Civilizations of the Near East* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974); Hans J. Nissen, *The Early History of the Ancient Near East, 9000–2000 B.C.* (trans. Elizabeth Lutzweiler, with Kenneth J. Northcott; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); A. Perkins, *The Comparative Archaeology of Early Mesopotamia* (SAOC 25; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

³⁶ The Bronze Age in the Middle East is further broken down to EB I (3000–2200 BC), EB–MB (2200–1800 BC), MB (1800–1550 BC), and LB (1550–1200 BC). Likewise, the Iron Age is subdivided into Iron I (1200–900 BC), Iron II (900–600 BC) and Iron III (600–300 BC).

the wake of disasters such as the universal flood and the confusion of speech at Babel? Though the dates of those events cannot be determined with precision, it is inconceivable that tens of thousands of years could elapse between the ability to communicate only orally and the development of means of doing so in script.

In a brilliant analysis of the development of human societies, Jared Diamond addresses the origins and antiquity of writing as well as other facets of human existence.³⁷ He dates the beginnings of village life at ca. 11,000 BC and the emergence of *Homo erectus* about 1.8 million years ago.³⁸ These dates are accepted generally by most anthropologists and sociologists. However, he correctly dates the origin of writing to the Sumerians of 3200 BC without adequate comment as to the implications of the time lags between the two sets of dates.

The issue is: How can one account for the lack of village life from 1.8 million years ago to 11,000 BC? And more striking perhaps is the inability to write by civilizations that discovered the skills of plant and animal domestication; the manufacture of tools, weapons, and other implements; textiles; and pottery, all as early as 10,000 years in some cases before the “invention” of writing that sprang up here and there in rudimentary forms almost spontaneously. Diamond offers no answers to those questions other than to attribute the delay to environment, disease, and an innate abhorrence of new things. These factors hardly seem adequate always and everywhere across the planet to account for 8,000 years of illiteracy.

In terms of ancient Near Eastern literary tradition, the antiquity of the Mesopotamian world and its cultural forms according to their writings far exceeds anything so far supportable by the archaeological evidence. The Sumerian King List, for example, lists all the rulers of Sumer from the moment “kingship was lowered from heaven” until the reign of Sin-Magir, a period of more than 445,738 years!³⁹ Not until the reigns of Old Akkadian dynasts under Sargon the Great (2360–2305 BC) do the figures approach numbers compatible with modern times.

It is of interest to note that the kings on the list prior to the flood of the Gilgamesh Epic lived sometimes 40 times longer than those after the flood. For example, Enmenluanna of Badtibira reigned for 43,200 years just before the flood and Palakinatim only (!) 900 years, just after the flood.⁴⁰

³⁷ Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 35–36.

³⁹ Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Sumerian King List* (AS 11; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 71–127.

⁴⁰ The same phenomenon is also true of the Genesis genealogies to a lesser degree. Methuselah lived for 969 years two generations prior to the flood (Gen 5:27) and Arpachshad 403 years two generations after it (Gen 11:13). These longevities have raised considerable difficulties for conservative scholars who have resorted to all manner of “solutions” in an attempt to be true to the text and, at the same time, to a hermeneutic that brings the figures into line with modern experience and even to secular data of the patriarchal era. For example, how can Abraham have lived to 175 years in the same era as Ur-Nammu who ruled for only 17 years (2113–2096 BC)? For a solution that accepts the biblical data at face value despite the ancient Near Eastern figures, see Eugene H. Merrill, “The Lifespans of the EB–MB Patriarchs: A Hermeneutical and Historical Conundrum,” in *Herr, was ist der Mensch, dass du dich seiner*

3. *The Biblical Chronologies and Their Contribution to the Question of Near Eastern Antiquity*. Attempts to grapple with the complex issues swirling around biblical chronology are legion. Results range from (1) a simple face-value acceptance of the raw biblical data to (2) elaborate schemes created to accommodate the biblical historical and literary data to those postulated—and even canonized—by secular scholarship. The approach advocated here may be called a *medias res*, one that accepts the consensus dating of historical events (as opposed to those that fail to meet the standards of “historical”) by means of a disciplined and judicious use of historical and archaeological research and, at the same time, takes seriously the facts and figures yielded by careful readings of the biblical texts and respectful commitment to the results attained thereby.

With these parameters in place, Table 2 (below) lists persons and events most important in the narratives of (1) Israel’s history from Abraham and later and (2) the history of pre-patriarchal times according to James Ussher.⁴¹ Whereas Table 2 dates are virtually certain and commonly accepted, at least in conservative circles, those of Table 3 (below) are problematic to modern scholars of all stripes.

Table 2
Chronology of the History of Major Events in Israel’s History⁴²

Person/Event	Date	Biblical Text
Decree of Cyrus	538; Dyn. 26; Iron III	2 Chr 34:23; Ezra 1:1–4
Babylonia Exile	586; Dyn. 26; Iron III	2 Kgs 25:1–22; 2 Chr 36:13–21
Assyrian Exile	722; Dyn. 22; Iron II	2 Kgs 17:3–6
Division of the Monarchy	931; Dyn. 22; Iron I	1 Kgs 12:16–17; 2 Chr 10:1–17
Reign of David	1011–971; Dyn. 21; Iron I	2 Sam 5:1–5; 1 Chr 11:1–3
Period of the Judges	1350–1080; Dyn. 18–20; LB–Iron I	Judg 3:7–11
Conquest of Canaan	1406–1350; Dyn. 18; LB II	Josh 3:1–4:24
The Exodus	1446; Dyn. 18; LB II	Exod 12:31–14:31
Period of Egyptian Sojourn	1876–1446; Dyn. 12–18; MB II–LB II	Exod 12:40

annimmi? (ed. Tina Arnold Walter Hilbrands and Heiko Wenzel; Bodenborn: SCM R. Brockhaus, 2013), 115–25.

⁴¹ Ussher’s work (ca. 1650) is the most famous of early attempts at constructing a biblical chronology. He did so by adhering to the Masoretic text and taking the numerical data of Genesis at face value. For a brief account of Ussher and his dating, see Eugene H. Merrill, “Chronology,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 113–22.

⁴² The appropriate archaeological eras and contemporary Egyptian dynasties are listed in parallel. The siglum *b.* indicates birth date.

Table 3
Chronology of Archbishop Ussher Based on the Masoretic Text⁴³

Abraham	b. 1996	Gen 11:26
Peleg	b. 2247	Gen 11:16; cf. 10:25
Tower of Babel	ca. 2260?	Gen 11:1–9
Eber	b. 2281	Gen 10:24; 11:15
Great Flood	2348	Gen 7:9–8:14
Shem	b. 2446	Gen 5:32
Noah	b. 2984	Gen 5:29
Enoch	b. 3382	Gen 5:18

Table 4
A Correlation of the Secular and Biblical Dates
of Pre-Patriarchal Persons and Events⁴⁴

Eras of the OT	Eras of the ANE	Comments
Abraham (2166–1991)	Ur III (2180–1800); 1 st Intermediate Egypt (ca. 2300–2000)	Sumerian re-emergence and domination of Mesopotamia; EB–MB
	Akkadian Dynasty (2360–2180)	Introduction of Semitic rule; integration of Hebrew ancestors; EB II
Noah and the Great Flood in “closed” chronology	Sumerian Early Dynastic (2850–2360); Old Kingdom Egypt (ca. 3000–2300)	Royal inscriptions, king lists, coexistence with Semites; Enmebaragisi (ca. 2700); 1 st dynasty after the flood (Sum. King List); EB I and II
Noah	Mes. Jemdet Nasr (3000); Eg. Dyn. I (Menes)	EB I
Adam	Mes. Uruk (4000)	Mes. and Eg. Neolithic
	Mes. Ubaid, Eridu (5000)	S. Mes. and Eg. Neolithic; breakdown of connection
	Mes. Halaf (4800)	N. Mes. Chalcolithic; Eg. Neolithic

⁴³ This table contains only selective dates; moreover, Ussher did not include Babel in his listing. The table is included because of the influence it had on the King James Version and many others until modern times. Even the most conservative scholars now reject most of Ussher’s scheme but for his time and in light of his lack of access to extra-biblical resources he was remarkably accurate. See Merrill, “Chronology,” 118.

⁴⁴ The purpose of this table is twofold: (1) to demonstrate the disconnect between the Ussher approach and others of its kind, on the one hand, and the evidence from the ancient Near East as discovered and interpreted by secularists, on the other hand; and (2) to include informatively the data commonly accepted by those working in the field. See Ehrlich, *Chronologies*, 175–79.

	Mes. Samarra, Nineveh II (5250); Eg. Helwan	Mes. Neolithic; Eg. Mesolithic
	Mes. Nineveh I, Hassuna (5800); Eg. Kom Ombo	Mes. Neolithic; Eg. Mesolithic
	Mes. Jarmo (6750); Eg. Kom Ombo; Pal. Jericho (ca. 7000)	Mes. Neolithic; Eg. Mesolithic; Pal. Neolithic

Table 4 reflects the thinking of this author with no opportunity here either to defend the figures or explain the method employed in achieving them. Suffice to say that it takes seriously the findings of archaeological and other hard sciences but even more seriously the claims of the Bible that preclude the extreme longevity of ancient eras formulated by those sciences. Table 5 also merely offers reasonable possibilities given the author's self-imposed parameter regarding the antiquity of the ancient world vis-à-vis the Bible's own testimony to such matters.

Table 5
Proposed Chronology of Pre-Patriarchal Biblical Events

Person/Event	Date	Comment
Eber	3960	Patronym of Hebrew people; father of Peleg (Gen 10:24)
Peleg	4000	Son of Eber; name means "be separated"; connected to linguistic division of humankind (Gen 10:25)?; 4,000 years before texts of Uruk
Tower of Babel	4000	Occasion of "confounding" (<i>bālal</i>) language and "scattering" (<i>pûs</i>) people (Gen 11:8, 9)
The Great Flood	5500	Three "generations" before Babel (Gen 10:22–25; 11:10–17); the ages of the fathers at death total 1,500 years, perhaps suggesting an era (Gen. 11:10–17)
Creation	12,000	The ages of the fathers at death total 7,600 years (Gen 5:3–12)

4. *The Origin of Writing and Biblical Traditions.* In attempting to trace the origin of Hebrew as the Semitic language of special interest, it is unnecessary to look later than the patriarchal era since there can be no doubt that Moses spoke and wrote an alphabetic dialect that was either Hebrew or at least what may be called "proto-Hebrew." Two narratives of importance to early OT and pre-Hebrew times are

sufficient to pave the way to a clearer understanding of the state of the language by 1400 BC, the likely date of the composition of the Torah:⁴⁵

a. Abram (Abraham) of Ur, a famous Sumerian city-state, was a resident there near the end of the 3rd millennium BC (2166–2091) according to the Masoretic chronology. He was, as a Semite, surely bilingual, at home in both Sumerian and Akkadian, and was moreover a devotee of Ur's chief deity, the moon god NANNA (or Sin).⁴⁶ Joshua makes mention of the fact that Terah, Abraham, and the other Hebrew ancestors of Israel from “beyond the river” (i.e. the Euphrates) “served other gods” (Josh 24:3).

b. Moses refers to Jacob “their father” as an Aramean who was perishing (thus Heb *'ōbēd*) and therefore went to Egypt, intimating that his sojourn of 20 years in Haran, the land of his grandfather Abraham, identified him not so much a Hebrew as an Aramean (Deut 26:5; cf. Gen 25:20, 30; 28:5; 31:20, 24, 40–42). One may assume that Jacob also mastered Amorite or primitive Aramaic there, not unexpectedly since his mother Rebekah was from the region of Haran (Gen 27:43; 28:1–5; 29:4).

A reasonable assumption to draw from these examples is that a trajectory of language development had occurred until by the time of Moses Hebrew was a fully developed, discrete dialect of Northwest Semitic. The “Hebrew” of the Israelite community in their 430-year sojourn in Egypt very likely exemplified a transitional form that eventuated basically in the Hebrew of the Torah.⁴⁷ Nothing in the record gives reason to think otherwise.

As for evidence of early writing on the part of the Hebrews/Israelites, much must be inferred but more is attested in the record itself. The following comments are limited to Torah only since no doubt exists as to post-Mosaic writing. Interesting enough, the verb “to write” (*kātab*), the noun “writing,” (*miktāb*), and the adjectival passive of the verb, “written” (*niktāb*), never occur in Genesis. More will be said presently.

The first reference to anyone writing is the command to Moses by Yahweh to write a memorandum concerning Amalek's cowardly attack on the old and infirm of the Israelite caravan leaving Egypt (Exod 17:1). Thereafter, God is said to have

⁴⁵ The Bible makes no further reference to Mesopotamia until the Assyrians (8th c.) and Babylonians (7th c.) began to make inroads into Israel and Judah respectively. Aram (=Syria), on the other hand, was an inveterate enemy of Israel from the time of the judges through nearly the end of the OT period (Jud 3:8; 2 Chr 28:5).

⁴⁶ It is customary to render transliterations of Sumerian logograms in upper case and Akkadian syllables in lower case. For the cultus at Ur in this period, see Samuel Noah Kramer, *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 124–64. It is interesting to note that a second center of moon worship was Haran, the very city to which Terah, Abram, and their families migrated and from which Abram eventually continued on to Canaan (Gen 11:27–12:5). Joshua makes mention of the fact that Terah, Abraham, and the other Hebrew ancestors of Israel from “beyond the river” (i.e. the Euphrates) “served other gods” (Josh 24:3). As noted above, Moses referred to Jacob “their father” as an Aramean who was perishing (thus Heb *'ōbēd*).

⁴⁷ Obviously, no indicators of vocalization existed in 1400 so the text of Moses would have been consonantal only. Moreover, the ravages of time and the inevitable inadvertences of generations of scribes resulted in textual variations that make impossible an exact replication of the *textus primus*.

written (Exod 24:12; 32:16, 32; Deut 10:4), as did Moses on numerous occasions (Exod 24:4; 34:27; Deut 4:13; 5:22; 31:24). Others who wrote or were told to do so were the priests (Num 5:23), the king (Deut 17:18), and ordinary citizens (Deut 6:9; 24:1; 31:19). The record indicates that Israelites of the Mosaic period were largely literate and that they certainly wrote Hebrew.

More inferential are the instances where writing of some kind—no matter how “primitive”—seems essential. The following are cases in point:

1. If one grants Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, the question of his sources for periods long antedating his own experience inevitably arises. Two options are possible: oral tradition or written texts. Though orality is not to be lightly dismissed, the existence of writing nearly 2,000 years before Moses’s time evokes the question: Why depend on oral tradition when writing was at hand? It is true that scholarship in the main asserts that no evidence exists of texts contemporary to creation or even the flood or the Tower of Babel. However, a case can be made that the Hebrew term *tôlēdôt*, usually translated “generation” or the like, might rather be a reference to records of persons and events that obviously would have been in written form.⁴⁸ The word occurs 11 times as follows:

- | | |
|------------------|--|
| 1. Genesis 2:4 | The Account of the Heavens and the Earth |
| 2. Genesis 5:1 | The Account of Adam |
| 3. Genesis 6:9 | The Account of Noah |
| 4. Genesis 10:1 | The Account of Shem, Ham, and Japheth |
| 5. Genesis 11:10 | The Account of Shem |
| 6. Genesis 11:27 | The Account of Terah |
| 7. Genesis 25:12 | The Account of Abraham’s Son Ishmael |
| 8. Genesis 25:19 | The Account of Abraham’s Son Isaac |
| 9. Genesis 36:1 | The Account of Esau |
| 10. Genesis 36:9 | The Account of Esau |
| 11. Genesis 37:2 | The Account of Jacob |

2. The Genesis genealogies of the patriarchs, one beginning with Adam and ending with Noah (Gen 5:1–32) and the other beginning with Shem and ending with Abraham (Gen 11:10–32), surely existed in written form before Moses recorded them in his own work. At the very least, Abraham (2166–1991 BC) died more than 450 years before Moses was born (1526 BC) and therefore depended on an unbroken transmission of the technical data of the genealogy listings.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ JPS, NAC, NEB “story”; NAS, NET, NLT, TNIV “account”; ESV, KJV, NRSV “generations”; HCSB “records”; NKJV “history.”

⁴⁹ It is true, of course, that genealogies covering many generations were memorized and transmitted orally in ancient times (and even today).

3. Undertakings like the construction of Noah's ark are unimaginable without some means of measurements, listings, instructions, and descriptions, all of which presuppose written communication (Gen 6:14–16). The same is true of the meticulous recording of the names in the various genealogical registers (Gen 5:3–32; 11:10–32) and the Table of Nations (Gen 10:1–32)

4. All the narrative material prior to Moses seems on the surface to reflect careful attention to detail unlikely to have existed in oral transmission alone. Incidental notations by the author such as the observation that “the Canaanite was then in the land” (Gen 12:6; 13:7), the clearly eyewitness story of the kings from the east who invaded Canaan but were defeated by Abraham and his friends (Gen 14:1–21), the listing of ten people groups that occupied land to be given to Abraham's descendants (Gen 15:19–21), and the intimate nuances of Eliezer's bargaining with Laban to acquire Rebekah, his sister, as wife for Isaac, Abraham's son—all attest to careful recording of facts and feelings that demands writing.

IV. THE DEVELOPMENT OF HEBREW WITHIN THE CANONICAL LITERATURE

The work of the Masoretes in the second half of the first Christian millennium (AD 500–1000) flattened out to a great extent the textual tradition that had come to them from ancient times. However, they had at hand manuscripts and oral traditions of which scribes of the late Second Temple period were already aware and upon which they had made notations. These included such measures as (1) advancement of a system of vocalization beyond the *matres lectionis* introduced as early as the 8th century BC; (2) observations of data such as numbers of occurrences of words, phrases, and the like in given biblical passages; (3) euphemisms designed to protect against undue familiarity with God or to offer alternatives to offensive language; or even (4) suggestions of textual emendations, at least in the margins.

Despite all appearance of homogeneity, the received text itself bears internal witness to the stages through which the Hebrew language passed in the thousand years between Moses and the Chronicler.⁵⁰ Unfortunately, no manuscripts exist for the entire period from text origination through final text fixation and canonization so demonstrable developments of the language in that span of time cannot be attained from those sources. However, scribal notations referred to above reflect an ongoing process of textual refinement and multiple textual variations attested to in

⁵⁰ Clear examples of this are (1) the presence of archaisms in the Pentateuch which are lacking in later books and (2) the difference in various features of Hebrew grammar, syntax, and lexica between the exilic and post-exilic writings. Thus Avi Hurvitz, *A Linguistic Study of the Relationship Between the Priestly Source and the Book of Ezekiel: A New Approach to an Old Problem* (Pendé, France: J. Gabalda, 1982); Mark F. Rooker, *Biblical Hebrew in Transition: The Language of the Book of Ezekiel* (JSOTSS 90; Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1990).

the Dead Sea Scrolls and other late Second Temple writings confirm the fact that no single witness can be singled out as the so-called *autographon*.⁵¹

The factors just described do not in any way detract from the clear biblical affirmation as to the nature of the Bible in the final analysis: It is the Word of God, breathed out by the Holy Spirit (2 Tim 3:16) and composed by prophets and apostles as they were carried along by that selfsame Spirit (2 Peter 1:21). Any alterations, updates, or other modifications of the text in the long periods of its transition were also Spirit-led and thus part of the ongoing safeguard of biblical inerrancy.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The survey of the data described above leads to the following conclusions:

1. Hebrew, though the language of the Bible of Israel and the church, is not entirely *sui generis* nor can it claim to be the most ancient of tongues or a unique vehicle of oral and written communication.

2. The language seems to have originated in the Mediterranean world as one of many dialects of a family of Semitic languages with roots as far back as the Early/Middle Bronze Age (ca. 2000 BC).

3. Like all languages it has evolved through a series of developmental changes and in its case as follows:

- (1) postulated Proto-Semitic phase
- (2) discrete language within what is labeled “Northwest Semitic” characterized by the use of a workable alphabet
- (3) the “Mosaic Period” in which the first biblical texts were composed
- (4) the “Classical Period” of the United Monarchy era
- (5) introduction of so-called *matres lectionis*, that is, the use of some consonants to represent vocalic phonemes
- (6) literary refinements of the “Prophetic Period”
- (7) the “Jewish” language of the Second Temple period
- (8) the dialect of the Talmud (Mishnah) and Midrashim
- (9) the laborious preservation of the ancient tongue and the invention of a vocalic system by the Masoretes
- (10) the philosophical and dialectical Hebrew of medieval discourse
- (11) the various permutations occasioned by the fragmentation of Jewish life in the Diaspora
- (12) the “resurrection” of the speech of the fathers as a project of the Zionist Movement of the latter 19th century.

The sovereign God could have chosen any language—or no language at all, for that matter—to communicate his intentions for creation and especially for mankind. However, he chose Hebrew which, though not likely the language of

⁵¹ Scribal notations include *puncta extraordinaria*, the inverted nun, *tiqqune sofferim*, and the *keṯtib/qere* variational readings. See Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament* (trans. Peter R. Ackroyd; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1957), 12–17; and especially, Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

Eden, or even of the pre-Abraham patriarchs, became the written vehicle in which he delighted and through which he charged Moses to inscribe the sacred text. It is not “the language of heaven,” to be sure, but without one’s careful study of it, the fullness of the revelation of God as to creation, sin, the fall, and redemption and restoration through Jesus Christ can never be adequately grasped. *Laus tota deo et linguae Hebraicae.*