



# 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 /*'sēpēr*/ “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.)<sup>1</sup> Again, מַגֵּלָה /*māgīl 'lā*/ “scroll, roll, book, writing” occurs 22 times,

<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew verb that corresponds to this noun סֵפֶר /*'sēpēr*/ is סָפַר /*sā 'pār*/ “count, number, tell, recount, relate”, which is somewhat surprising, since it does *not* mean to write, except for its participial form סוֹפֵר /*sō 'pēr*/, which means “scribe, writer”. This verb occurs 12 times in Genesis, but always with the meanings given above, never in its participial form.

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 /'sēp̄er/).<sup>2</sup>

This agrees with archeological and other external evidences, which suggest that the first writing<sup>3</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>4</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

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<sup>2</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.

<sup>3</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 B.C., as discussed in [sott.net/article/126038-Deciphering-of-earliest-Semitic-text-reveals-talk-of-snakes-and-spells](http://sott.net/article/126038-Deciphering-of-earliest-Semitic-text-reveals-talk-of-snakes-and-spells) (replaced dead link Oct. 2020).

<sup>4</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))

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), 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>5</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, in a [cuneiform script](#) unrelated to the earlier one.

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 herdsman 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 is the account of...”), as in Genesis 6:9: “These are the generations of Noah”. These divisions are fairly self-evident to anyone

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<sup>5</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.

reading through Genesis. The phrase “These are the generations of” is אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת / 'ēlleh tôlə 'dôṭ/ in Hebrew, with minor variations. תּוֹלְדוֹת /tôlə 'dôṭ/ 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.

In Genesis 2:23 it says, “...she shall be called Woman (אִשָּׁה / 'iš 'šâ/), because she was taken out of Man (אָדָם / 'îš/).” 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 / ḥaw 'wâ/, Modern Hebrew pronunciation Chava [ˈxava]), because she was the mother of all living (חַיָּה / ḥāy/).” The name “Eve” and the adjective “living” both start with the 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, חַוָּה / ḥaw 'wâ/ is *not* a current form of חַיָּה / ḥāy/, though it is similar to its feminine singular form חַיָּה / 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 9 on page 6, Hebrew came through such changes from Canaanite, which came through more changes from the Proto-Semitic language, which in turn almost certainly 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, though a linguist would definitely be able to tell that their consonant systems are similar.

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. (And it is possible that it was spoken by the ancestors of the Canaanites, who were descendants of Ham, rather than by the Semite ancestors of Abraham, as I explain in footnote 9.) 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. And Genesis 11:1-9 seems to say that there were no exceptions, that all the people then alive participated. We see this especially in verses 1, 6, and 9. So 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 9 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>6</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>7</sup> or where<sup>8</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 are Hebrew, Phoenician, and Ugaritic (all of which started out as varieties of Canaanite), Aramaic, Akkadian, Arabic, Amharic, and Mehri.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</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>7</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>8</sup> But it may well have been Canaan, based on my own research. See the last paragraph of the next footnote.

<sup>9</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 throughout 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!

One possible solution is suggested by the fact that the Semitic Languages are simply a subfamily of the greater [Afro-Asiatic language family](#), all of whose other subfamilies are descendants of Ham (as I demonstrate in [The Genesis 10 Table of Nations and Y-Chromosomal DNA](#)). This suggests that the language adoption may have gone the other way, and that the simplest scenario might be that the ancestors of the Canaanites brought what we call the Proto-Semitic language (which we should then call something else, like Ancestral 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](#).)

### 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>10</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>11</sup> suggesting 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>12</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.)

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<sup>10</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>11</sup> There was some variation in the way the three Proto-Sinaitic consonants [θ], [j], and [ʃ] 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  $\aleph$ , or in its earlier form  $\omega$ , though Hebrew never did this, and much later developed a way to represent the pronunciation difference in the spelling, as *sin*  $\aleph$  (originally pronounced [ʃ], much later changed to [s]) and *shin*  $\aleph$  [j]. 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>12</sup> This is discussed at length in the section about Lundin's reconstruction on page 8 of my [Semitic Alphabets charts](#).

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.

### 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 <i>Shin</i>	[ʃ], like <i>sh</i> 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 /s/	
הׁ <i>Heth</i>	[χ], does not exist in English	הׁ /h/ (or /h̄/)	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 /h/	
אׁ <i>ayin</i>	[ʁ], does not exist in English	אׁ /ʔ/ (or /g/)	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.
	[ʁ̄], does not exist in English	אׁ /ʔ/	

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 Egyptian 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.

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 ostrakon](#) (replaced dead link), which was written by an Israelite eyewitness of the battle of Aphek around 1076 B.C.<sup>13</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>14</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>13</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 83 of the cited article by William Shea it says, “The events referred to in the text of the ostrakon 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 ostrakon is also discussed in detail in Christopher A. Rollston’s article [What’s the Oldest Hebrew Inscription?](#) (replaced dead link), and in Aaron Demsky’s article [What’s the Oldest Hebrew Inscription?—A Reply to Christopher Rollston](#).

<sup>14</sup> [Duane Smith](#) (dead link) provides additional information.

## 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. (It was named after Abraham’s great-grandson Dan, who would not even be born for around 170 years at the time of this battle.) 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 quote above mentions Exodus 16:35, but I think verse 36 should also be included. This verse says: “(An omer is one tenth of an ephah.)” This suggests that later readers did not know what an omer was, and in fact the word “omer” is only used in Exodus 36, though “ephah” is used throughout the Old Testament. This suggests that an omer was a measure that was in use at the time of the Exodus, but went out of use later, and that this verse was a later edit so that later readers would know what it was.

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.

Another example which is not mentioned in either of these articles but is proposed by [this article](#) is the place name Rameses mentioned in Genesis 47:11, Exodus 1:11, 12:37, and Numbers 33:3,5. The Exodus and Numbers usages are often used by those who advocate a late date for the Exodus, on the grounds that the city of [Pi-Rameses](#) was founded by the pharaoh Rameses II, or at the earliest by his grandfather Rameses I, no earlier than 1290 B.C., on the site of the former capital of Avaris. However, this is evidently another such case of later editing, in which the name Rameses was substituted for Avaris for later readers. In any case the late date for the Exodus theory falls flat when we realize that Genesis 47:11 also mentions Rameses, but this reference is to the time of the Israelites’ *entry* into Egypt, 430 years earlier than the Exodus references. I know of no one who believes in the reliability of the Bible who claims that this also occurred during the reign of one of the Rameses! The only reasonable explanation is later editing.

And there is evidence that the Hebrew text 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.

## 5. Appendix 3: Implications for the Book of Job

This all has some interesting implications for the book of Job. If we believe in the inerrancy of Scripture we must believe that this book is about real events and real people.

Closely related to the literary form is the question of historicity. Certainly Job was a historical person (cf. Ezk 14:14,20; Jas 5:11), and his actual experience was substantially as recorded in this book. (*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 459. Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.)

However, these events probably took place before the Hebrew language was written, which has a number of interesting implications.

### 5.1. When and where did Job and his friends live?

Details in the book suggest that the events it describes occurred quite early in the history of the Bible, around the time of the patriarchs.

The date of the *writing* of the book is not to be confused with the date of the *history* narrated. The man Job apparently lived in early, patriarchal times. We note, for example, the longevity of Job, as well as the not inconsiderable practice of true religion (attended by special supernatural revelation) outside the bounds of the Abrahamic covenant, and the early economic and political developments reflected in the book. (*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 459.)

However, I believe we can actually get a lot closer than that, based on information in the book itself. The family connections of some of Job's friends give us some excellent clues.

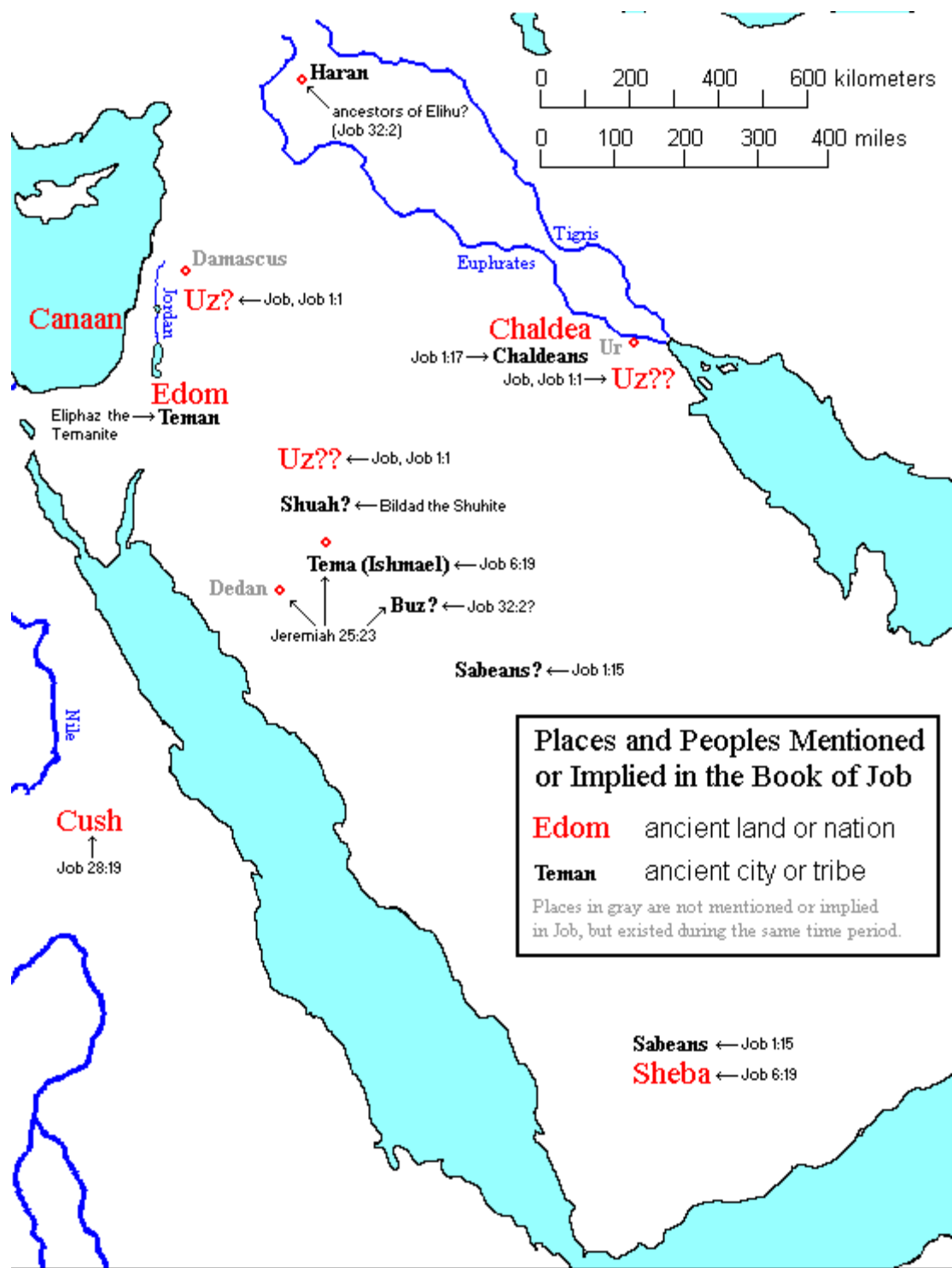
Eliphaz the Temanite would have been from Teman in Edom, which was known for its wisdom, as we see in Jeremiah 49:7. Teman was probably founded by and named after Esau's grandson Teman, mentioned in Genesis 36:8-11. Teman was the son of an earlier Eliphaz, son of Esau's second wife Adah whom Esau married in 1966 B.C.<sup>15</sup> But this would necessarily put the lifetime of Job's friend Eliphaz at least three generations after this date, since Teman would have to have already grown up and founded the city named after him, so 1900 B.C. at the earliest.

Similarly, Bildad the Shuhite was probably a descendant of Shuah, Abraham's son by his last wife Keturah, whom he probably married sometime after the death of Sarah in 1929 B.C.<sup>16</sup>, mentioned in Genesis 25:2. (Shuhite means descendant of Shuah in spite of not having the "a", as multiple sources confirm, including *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 464. This "a" is an epenthetic "a" common in Hebrew before pharyngealized consonants.) This would also put Bildad around 1900 B.C. at the earliest. Along with all of Keturah's sons, Shuah would have lived in "the land of the east", the Syrian Desert, as mentioned in Genesis 25:6.

It is difficult to pin down the family connection of Job's third friend, Zophar the Naamathite. This means someone from Naamah, but the location of Naamah and its ethnic identity are not clear.

<sup>15</sup> See my article [Esau's Choices](#). These are the only two people named Eliphaz in the Bible, so it seems to have been a particularly Edomite name. Its meaning is not clear.

<sup>16</sup> See my [Bible chronology chart](#).



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However, the final participant in the discussion helps us out again, “Elihu son of Barakel the **Buzite**, of the family of **Ram**”, as we are told in Job 32:2a. In reference to this verse *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* says:

Elihu’s origins are rather fully traced (v. 2a; cf. 1:1; Job 2:11). Buzite. Cf. Gen. 22:21. (*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 483.)

This implies that if we compare Job 32:2a and Genesis 22:21 this will provide us with all the information needed. Genesis 22:20-21 says:

<sup>20</sup>Some time later Abraham was told, “Milcah is also a mother; she has borne sons to your brother Nahor: <sup>21</sup>Uz the firstborn, **Buz** his brother, Kemuel (the father of **Aram**)...

Buzite means descendant of Buz, and Ram and Aram are variants of the same name, as multiple commentators confirm at [this page](#).<sup>17</sup> Thus Elihu was a descendant of Buz son of Nahor, Abraham’s brother, who had settled in Haran in northern Mesopotamia, and some of whose descendants, including at least Laban and his family, were still there at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century B.C. when Jacob returned to Canaan in 1909 B.C., as shown on my [Bible chronology chart](#).

Aram or Ram was evidently considered the head of the family, even though he was not Elihu’s direct ancestor. We have no information as to whether this branch of Nahor’s descendants stayed in Haran or not. If the Uz mentioned in Genesis 22:21 corresponds to the land of Uz where Job lived, as *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* comment above seems to imply, as well as many of the other commentators, then perhaps quite a number of Nahor’s descendants had moved down there and given the name to the land of Uz.<sup>18</sup>

The news Abraham received about these descendants of his brother reached him sometime in the 21<sup>st</sup> century B.C., so this simply shows that Elihu most likely lived sometime after 2000 B.C., which fits our time frame, though it doesn’t pin it down any more.

Another name mentioned in the book that might help is Tema. This name is mentioned in Job 6:19. Tema was a son of Ishmael son of Abraham, mentioned in Genesis 25:15. Since Ishmael died in 1937 B.C., this again fits our time frame of 1900 B.C. or later. All of Ishmael’s descendants lived in the deserts south and southeast of Canaan, as Genesis 25:18 makes clear. (Tradition says that the oasis called [Tayma](#) in the Arabian Desert is where Tema’s descendants settled, and this is probably the place referred to in Job 6:19.)

Therefore we have three different indications that the events of Job occurred around 1900 B.C. or later, but could not really have occurred much earlier.

For a lower limit to the time of Job, Jacob’s family moved to Egypt in 1876 B.C. They may have maintained some contact with Canaan after that, but once the oppression began, they would probably have had little contact, and would have had little opportunity to learn the story.<sup>19</sup> And in any case this marked the end of the patriarchal age, the setting in which these events occurred.

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<sup>17</sup> Several of them also note that Buz is a place mentioned much later, in Jeremiah 25:23, along with Dedan and Tema. We know with some certainty where Dedan and Tema were, the latter mentioned elsewhere on this page, and the former almost certainly the [Al-‘Ula Oasis](#). Dedan and Tema are shown on my map above, and are quite close together. This might suggest that Buz was close to these two, and I have placed it accordingly on the map, though this is of course not certain. Several of the commentators speculate that the descendants of Buz son of Nahor might have moved down to the Arabian Desert and founded this place.

The Pulpit Commentary accepts the Nahor connection for both Uz and Buz, but then suggests that they are both located near the lower end of the Euphrates (more [here](#)), and Hugh Ross holds the same opinion, and may have followed their lead (see **5.3. So where exactly was Uz?**).

<sup>18</sup> But see **5.3. So where exactly was Uz?** below for other possibilities. Uz is one of the most difficult places in the book to locate, even though it is where all the action takes place!

<sup>19</sup> Note that none of these people are actually Israelites, God’s chosen people. That is, none of them are descendants of Jacob (Israel), though if my assumptions are correct several of them are otherwise relatives of Abraham. Thus after the move of the Israelites to Egypt they would eventually have lost contact with them. Oddly enough, the one we know the least about is Job himself, since no information is provided about his ancestry.



Thus it seems probable that the events of Job occurred at some point in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century B.C.<sup>20 21</sup>

The map above shows the various places that are mentioned or implied in the book of Job. (If I have left any out, please [let me know](#).) The Sabeans (or Sabaeans) were the inhabitants of Sheba, in south Arabia. However, the “Sheba” article in the *New Bible Dictionary* suggests that they originally lived in north Arabia, so I have also placed them in north Arabia with a question mark.

## 5.2. The Oral Culture of Job and its Implications

An important implication of the fact that Job lived in patriarchal times (even if very late in that period as I have suggested here) is that Hebrew was not yet a written language. In other words, they had an [oral culture](#). So none of the speeches or history related in the book could have been written down at the time, but would have had to be memorized at that time and recorded many years later. I am indebted to Hugh Ross’s books [Navigating Genesis](#) (chapter 8, Kindle locations 1383-1388) and [Hidden Treasures in the Book of Job](#) for this insight, which fits right in with the main conclusions of this article, though I had not thought about the implications for Job when I wrote it. (I had already written and posted this article before I read Dr. Ross’s books, though it did not yet contain these last sections about Job.)

Furthermore, Dr. Ross suggests that the reason most of Job is in poetic form is because this made it easier to memorize and pass down until such time as it could be written down.

Several clues suggest the story of Job predates the writing of Genesis and the rest of the Pentateuch (the Bible’s first five books). Scholars tend to agree that it more closely coincides with the era of Abraham (initially Abram), the patriarch, who left Ur in Chaldea (Gen. 11:31) an estimated 660 years before Moses and the establishment of the Ten Commandments and the Hebrews’ civil and ceremonial laws. (*Hidden Treasures in the Book of Job*, p. 30.)

I put the date some 450 years before the law (see previous section), but otherwise this is right on.

The fact that the Hebrew language did not yet exist in written form at the time of Abraham and the patriarchs may explain the poetic form in which the book of Job was recorded. Such a style characterizes many ancient stories because it facilitated memorization, a way to preserve the account’s accuracy until Hebrew writing developed. No record exists to identify who put the account of Job into written Hebrew. Scholarly speculation ranges from Moses to Joshua to Solomon to Isaiah. (*Hidden Treasures in the Book of Job*, p. 32.)

*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* comes to similar conclusions:

<sup>20</sup> However, the information in Job 42:16 telling us that Job lived 140 years after God healed him and telling about his descendants would obviously have had to be learned later, in the middle or late 18<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Even with reduced contact it is not too improbable that such simple information could have been obtained. The start of the oppression or the pharaoh who began it is impossible to pin down, as I make clear in [this article](#), but even if the oppression had already started occasional news might be received.

<sup>21</sup> Hugh Ross, in his book *Hidden Treasures in the Book of Job*, which I discuss in the next section, cites on page 32 *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*’s statement on page 459: “The name of both the book and its hero, *’Iyyōb*, appears in extra-Biblical texts as early as 2000 B.C.”, which potentially puts the date 100 years earlier than mine. Unfortunately, the latter provides no reference for this information. However, various sources I have consulted say that Job (in the Hebrew form of his name **יֹבָב** /*’i’yōb*/) occurs in the Berlin Execration texts, including the [New International Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties](#) (replaced dead link) by Gleason Archer, which says on page 429: “Albright suggested that Job may have been a contemporary of the patriarchs in the pre-Mosaic age. He supports the credibility of Job by the authentic second-millennium employment of the name *’Iyyōb*. (It should be noted that in the Berlin Execration text, *’Iyyōb* appears as the name of a Syrian prince living near Damascus; ...)”. The [Wikipedia article on Execration texts](#) says: “The Berlin and Brussels texts date approximately from the end of the 20th century BCE to midway through the 18th century BCE.”, i.e. between 1900 and 1750 B.C., which fits my estimate very nicely. I assume that this is what *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* is referring to, since I find no other likely source.

Closely related to the literary form is the question of historicity. Certainly Job was a historical person (cf. Ezk 14:14,20; Jas 5:11), and his actual experience was substantially as recorded in this book. Nevertheless, the magnificent poetry of the several discourses has compelled general assent to the conclusion that the treatment of the account here is not literal but free. (*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 459.)

The question regarding the dating of the book, then, is: How long was the story of the patriarch Job transmitted—whether orally or at least partially in writing—before the anonymous Israelite writer, under divine inspiration, transformed the tradition into the canonical book of Job. (*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 459.)

Many conservative scholars have favored a date [of writing] in Solomon’s time, that being the great age of Biblical Wisdom literature (cf., e.g., the similarities of Job to Psalms 88 and 89, which are from the Solomonic age; cf. I Kgs 4:31). (*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 460.)

However, as Dr. Ross points out above, this last idea for when it was written is only one of many theories, and we cannot know for certain.

So at the time the events of the book took place, and the speeches recorded in the book were made, Hebrew was almost certainly not a written language. This would necessarily mean that someone memorized the speeches, and passed them down to later generations, so that they could eventually be written down. In his book Dr. Ross speaks of “recording” the debates and “record-keeping”, though by this he means memorizing, not written records:

Another indication of the debate’s momentous nature was the careful, detailed manner in which the debate was **recorded**. Given the early date when this debate must have occurred (see p. 30), **recording** this conversation would have been no easy matter. It probably required a dedicated team, and someone of especially high position and skill to lead that team. Several details support the conclusion that the **record-keeping** supervisor was Elihu. First, Elihu was much younger than Job, Eliphaz, Zophar, and Bildad, perhaps as much as a generation (or more) younger. In spite of his youth, however, he outmatched the combined wisdom of Eliphaz, Zophar, and Bildad (see Job 32-37). It appears from Elihu’s own words (see Job 32:6-22) and from the fact he was present at the debate that Elihu was the intellectual and spiritual prodigy of his time. As such, he would have recognized the importance of **recording** the conversation for posterity. Other leaders, as well as Job and his associates, would have confirmed Elihu’s qualification for the role. (*Hidden Treasures in the Book of Job*, p. 29.)

Though speculative, this could well have been the scenario. Whether Elihu or someone else was listening and memorizing the speeches, someone must have, because they were then passed down so that they could eventually be written down.<sup>22</sup>

### 5.3. So where exactly was Uz?

It is not clear where the land of Uz (עֻז / ‘ūs) was, unlike most of the other places mentioned or implied in the book of Job, as I have shown in section 5.1. **When and where did Job and his friends live?** above.

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<sup>22</sup> The only thing that makes me skeptical that Elihu was the “record-keeping supervisor” is that at least once he seems to misquote Job. In Job 35:3 (ESV) he quotes Job as saying, “What advantage have I? How am I better off than if I had sinned?” And it is true that Job did say this, in Job 21:15. However, Elihu took it out of context! Job is speaking about the ungodly, and saying that *they* would say that, but he would not! This makes me doubt that Elihu had a good enough memory for his supposed role as chief recorder.

### 5.3.1. Older Commentators and Three Main Locations

Various older commentators on [this page](#) discuss the question, but do not agree. Nearly all mention the fact that there were three different men named Uz in the different genealogies in the Bible, as Ellicott explains:

The first mention of this name is in Genesis 10:23, where Uz is said to have been one of the sons of Aram, who was one of the sons of Shem. (Compare 1 Chronicles 1:17.) Another Uz (in the Authorised Version spelt Huz) is mentioned in Genesis 22:21 as the firstborn of Nahor, the brother of Abraham. A third form of this name is mentioned in Genesis 36:28 among “the sons of Seir the Horite, who inhabited the land” [v. 20] of Edom. (Compare 1 Chronicles 1:42.)

Beyond this there is little agreement, either about the location of the land, or about which if any of these three men it was named after. Ellicott goes on to say:

It is probable that each of these is to be associated with a different district: the first perhaps with that of the Lebanon—a district near Damascus is still called *El-Ghutha*; the second with that of Mesopotamia or Chaldea; and the third with the Edomite district south of Palestine.

He does not explain why he makes this assumption that each man had a region named after him, nor how he identifies where each one was located, but evidently he is basing these locations on various traditions. In fact, these seem to be the three locations preferred by one or the other of the different commentators. However, none of the other commentators agree with him: they each assume just one location for Uz, even if it cannot be precisely identified.

Two of the commentators mention *El-Ghutha* (Ellicott) or *Guta* ([Barnes](#)), near Damascus. This is a region just to the southeast of Damascus, named [Ghouta](#) الغوطة /al- 'gūta/ [al-ʕu:tʰa] in modern Arabic. It might seem that this name (an Arabic name with a probable Aramaic origin) is not at all similar to “Uz”, but if we study the history of the Semitic consonants we see that the association is actually quite probable, in fact is an exact match.<sup>23</sup>

The name Uz is only found in two other places in the Old Testament, and Ellicott goes on to say about these:

From the mention of “the land of Uz” (Lamentations 4:21) and “the kings of the land of Uz” (Jeremiah 25:20), where in each case the association seems to be with Edom, it is probable that the land of Job is to be identified rather with the district south and southeast of Palestine.

Several of the commentators agree with him, but others do not.

Barnes and Jamieson-Fausset-Brown prefer the eastern location in lower Mesopotamia, as does the Pulpit Commentary.

A. B. Davidson in the *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges* says:

The land of Uz, therefore, probably lay east of Palestine and north of Edom.

However, he cannot decide between a southerly location nearer Edom and a northerly one in Bashan, near Damascus.

Barnes and Jamieson-Fausset-Brown seem to think the Sabaeans and the Chaldeans lived close to each other, but this is not the case, as the *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges* recognizes, and as the map above shows: the Chaldeans lived east of Canaan, in Mesopotamia, whereas the Sabaeans lived south

<sup>23</sup> Using standard comparative linguistic methods we can reconstruct a Proto-Semitic form which would have produced precisely these two names. If we assume that the Arabic pronunciation (without the Arabic article) was taken directly from the late Aramaic pronunciation, then if the two names had the same origin the Proto-Semitic form must have been /'gūta/ [ʕu:θ'a], which would also have been the early Aramaic pronunciation, but the late Aramaic pronunciation would have been /'gūta/ [ʕu:tʰa], which exactly matches the Arabic pronunciation. On the other hand, Proto-Semitic /'gūta/ [ʕu:θ'a] would have become ʕṯṯ /'ūṯ/ [ʕu:sʰ] in ancient Hebrew, if the final unstressed vowel was lost, which was normal. This would exactly match one of the two possibilities for the ancient Hebrew pronunciation of Uz! (See my [Semitic Alphabets charts](#) and [Pairs of Consonants Spelled with the Same Letter in Hebrew](#) on page 8 above for details.)

of Canaan, and eventually lived in Sheba in southern Arabia, though they may have lived a bit further north earlier.

The following quote from Gill might seem to suggest that he also believes this, though actually he does not:

[Uz] is said to be near the land of Canaan, for in Arabia Felix the Sabeans lived; and certain it is that this country was near to the Sabeans and Chaldeans, and to the land of Edom, from whence Eliphaz the Temanite came...

Arabia Felix refers to the far south of the Arabian Peninsula, which agrees with my location for Sheba and the Sabeans on the map above. It seems that all he is really saying is that we need to find a place that was *reasonably* close to Canaan, south Arabia, and Mesopotamia, and earlier he makes clear where he thinks it was:

...very probably it was one of the Arabias Job lived in, either Petraea or Deserta, probably the latter...

[Arabia Petraea](#) referred to the desert areas closest to Canaan, whereas [Arabia Deserta](#) referred to the desert interior of the Arabian Peninsula. Thus he generally places Uz somewhere south of Canaan.

### 5.3.2. More Recent Commentators

What about more recent commentators? They don't agree any more than the older ones do, and they tend to choose from among the same three locations as the older commentators.

The *Wycliffe Bible Commentary* is quite general:

Job's homeland, Uz, lay somewhere to the east of Canaan, near the borders of the desert that separates the eastern and western arms of the Fertile Crescent. (*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 461.)

H. L. Ellison in the "Job" article in the *New Bible Dictionary* says:

The location of the land of Uz, where he lived, is uncertain. The modern tendency is to regard it as on the borders of Edom, certain indications in the book being regarded as Edomite; but the traditions placing it in the Hauran (Bashan) are far more probable. (*The New Bible Dictionary*)

And D. A. Hubbard in the "Uz" article in the *New Bible Dictionary* says:

...Hauran, S of Damascus... is supported by Josephus (Ant. 1.145) and both Christian and Muslim traditions.

However, he himself inclines to the southern location.

Thus it appears that the ancient traditions favored Hauran (Bashan) as the location of Uz.

Hugh Ross favors the location of both Uz and Buz near the mouth of the Euphrates:

Job resided in the land of Uz (1:1), located immediately south of Chaldea in the region near the northwest shore of the Persian Gulf... (*Hidden Treasures in the Book of Job*, p. 30.)

Elihu is said to have lived in the adjoining land of Buz. (*Hidden Treasures in the Book of Job*, p. 31.)

However, he gives no references for either of these statements, though he might be following the Pulpit Commentary. (See footnote **17** for more on a connection between Uz and Buz, whether individuals or places.)

### 5.3.3. My Opinion

While recognizing that various opinions have been held by reputable Bible scholars through the centuries, I believe I can put forth a compelling case for the traditional location in Hauran (Bashan) as the location of Uz, including using some linguistic arguments that I don't believe anyone else has put forward.

Several different pieces of evidence I have already mentioned point to this location.

1. As I already mentioned in footnote **21**, the [New International Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties](#) by Gleason Archer, says on page 429:

(It should be noted that in the Berlin Execration text, 'Iyyōb appears as the name of a Syrian prince living near Damascus; ...)."

This is Job's actual Hebrew name, and this text would have been produced between 1900 and 1750 B.C. according to the [Wikipedia article on Execration texts](#).

2. As I already mentioned in **5.3.1. Older Commentators and Three Main Locations**, and explain in detail in footnote **23**, the region just to the southeast of Damascus, named [Ghouta](#) الغوطة /al- 'gūṭa/ [al- 'ħu:tʰa], is actually an exact match to the Hebrew name "Uz" (׀ז /'ūs/ [l'ħu:sʰ]) if we compare the two using standard comparative linguistic methods.

3. As I have already noted in citing Ellison and Hubbard above, this is the traditional area, being supported by Josephus (Ant. 1.145) and both Christian and Muslim traditions.

The Muslim traditions are very specific, referring to a location about 40 miles (60 kilometers) south of Damascus. A. B. Davidson, in the [Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges](#), says:

This tradition places the home of Job in the *Nukra*, the fertile depression of Bashan at the south-east foot of Hermon. Near the town of *Nawa*, about 40 miles almost due south of Damascus, a little to the west of the pilgrim route from this city to Mecca, and about the latitude of the north end of the sea of Tiberias, there still exist a *Makâm*, that is, place, or tomb, and monastery of Job.

The place is actually called *Al-Shaykh Saad*, and the [Wikipedia article](#) gives many more details, which agree with Davidson's details. It is about 20 miles (30 kilometers) east of the Sea of Galilee.

Further evidences are:

4. The climate of Hauran (Bashan) matches the description of Uz. The *Wycliffe Bible Commentary* points out that:

It was an area of towns, farms, and migrating herds. (*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 461).

And Dr. Ross, in a personal communication with me on Facebook said, "The context of Job indicates a semi-desert rather than a desert location. East of Jordan is a desert." This is why he prefers southern Mesopotamia (which is not a desert only because of ready availability of river water for irrigation).

However, though in general areas east of Jordan are desert, this is not the case for Hauran (Bashan), and was not since ancient times. The [Wikipedia article](#) on Hauran says:

Rainfall above the 200 millimeter mark is characteristic throughout the Hauran, but otherwise climate and precipitation levels vary between its subregions. The relatively frequent rainfall and the abundance of water springs have historically allowed the *Nuqrah* and *Jabal Hauran* to become major grain-growing regions. The Hauran plain receives an average 250 millimeters of rainfall, which allows the plains to support stable, grain-based agriculture. *Jabal Hauran* receives considerably greater rainfall, which supports more orchard and tree-based cultivation. *Jabal Hauran* is frequently covered by snow during the winter.

This is not the case for the southern option near Edom, south of the Dead Sea, which is much dryer and is not suitable for agriculture, but only for nomadic herding.



5. Linguistic considerations make an area near Canaan far more likely than southern Mesopotamia, as I discuss in the next section, though this could apply about equally to either the northern or southern option.<sup>24</sup>

#### 5.4. What language were Job and his friends speaking?

As far as I have been able to find, all of the commentators on the book of Job assume that the language being used was Hebrew, and I would agree. It seems very improbable that the events and speeches could have been memorized and passed down orally in another language, and then transferred over orally to Hebrew.

As I have already discussed earlier in this article (in sections **2. Was nothing written earlier?**, **2.2. But wasn't Hebrew the original language?**, and **3.2. A Question of Consonants**), Hebrew started out as a form of the Canaanite language. Hebrew was not Abraham's native language, ancient Aramaic was, and his family only learned Canaanite (Hebrew) after they arrived in Canaan around 2091 B.C.

Abraham's family would have spoken Aramaic both when they lived in or near Ur in southeast Mesopotamia and after they moved to Haran in northwest Mesopotamia. (See map below.) However, after Abram's part of the family moved to Canaan, leaving the rest of his family in Haran, they would have learned Canaanite. So Abraham's children and grandchildren grew up speaking Canaanite, that is, Hebrew, so in Genesis 31:47 when Jacob and Laban make a treaty and set up their "witness heap", Laban calls it "witness heap" in Aramaic (*Jegar Sahadutha*), and Jacob calls it "witness heap" in Hebrew (*Galeed*).

All of Abraham's and Lot's descendants would then have initially spoken Canaanite/Hebrew, including the Edomites south of the dead sea and their offshoot the Amalekites in the Sinai, the descendants of Ishmael, and Abraham's other descendants through Keturah, including the Midianites who moved a long ways south, and Lot's descendants the Ammonites and Moabites.

In addition, of course, all of the Canaanites spoke Canaanite, and this included the area of Bashan, though it was right on the eastern edge of the Canaanite-speaking area.

However, eventually many of the descendants of Ishmael and Keturah moved out into the Arabian Desert, as we are told in Genesis 25:6 and Genesis 25:18. We can locate some of these, as the map below shows. The northern part of this area was occupied by people who spoke the now extinct Ancient North Arabian language, and we know that eventually those of Abraham's descendants who moved into this area adopted this language, because we have inscriptions from throughout the area. However, as early as the time of Job it is likely that they still retained the memory of Hebrew. (This would apply to Bildad the Shuhite, and possibly also to Elihu if Buz was as far south as some propose, although I still think it just as likely that he also lived in Uz, which may have been named for his relative Uz, as I mentioned above.)

But the location of Uz in southern Mesopotamia would not fit this situation at all: no Hebrew was ever spoken there, but instead it was at the border of several different language areas, as the map below shows. For this reason it again seems most plausible to locate Uz in Hauran/Bashan.

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<sup>24</sup> It might seem that we have no information about how much time ensued between the second stage of Job's affliction and the coming of his three friends, since this information is not provided in Job 2. However, the Wycliffe Bible Commentary points out:

After the second crisis of temptation and before the arrival of the friends, there was an interval of some months (7:3)... (*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 464.)

They base this on Job 7:3:

...so I have been allotted **months** of futility, and nights of misery have been assigned to me.

This is probably a fair conclusion. Does this have any implications for our assumptions about the locations of Job and his three friends? Not really: news would have travelled slowly in those days, and by the time they heard about Job's affliction and made the trip, it would make sense that several months would have passed.

Ebla's situation is unclear: it seems to have had a native West Semitic population, though its literary language in the 3rd millennium B.C. was closer to Akkadian, and this also changed through time.



### 5.5. A Potential Problem with the Oral Culture Theory

One possible argument against the theory that the language was not written yet is that the Hebrew word כָּתַב /kā'tab/ “write” is used three times in Job: 13:26, 19:23, 31:35, and the Hebrew word סֵפֶר /'sēpēr/ “book, scroll, written account” is used twice: 19:23, 31:35. All of these are in Job’s discourses.

However, I still consider that all of the other arguments I have given remain convincing, and we must remember what *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* said:

...the magnificent poetry of the several discourses has compelled general assent to the conclusion that the treatment of the account here is not literal but free. (*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 459.)

So we must simply conclude that these occurrences are cases of poetic license on the part of later editors.