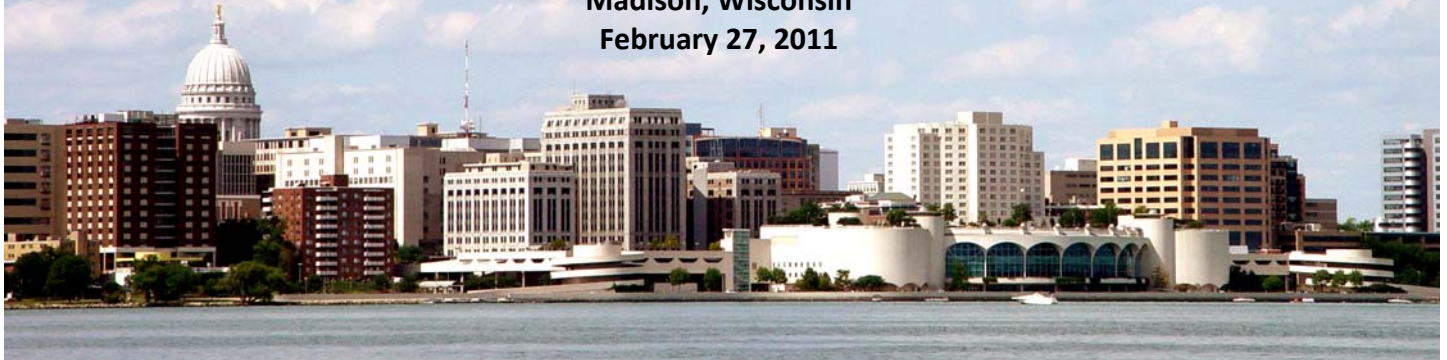


“The Writing of Ancient Books”

HOW WE GOT THE BIBLE #2

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For those of you who were here with us last Sunday, you know that we started a series of lessons based on a number of questions that have come up over the past several months. Over and over again, our members have been asking questions concerning how we got the Bible in its current form. One member has asked about the meaning of the word “Bible,” and others have asked how we know that the Bibles we have today are accurate even though we do not have a single original manuscript. What about the various translations? How do we know that there are really only 66 books? Did the Bible come from a printing press in heaven, and if not, then how did we come to have it in its current format? What about the apocrypha? How do we know that the original text of the Bible has been properly preserved through the years? And as we just started to consider last Sunday morning, all of these are some very important and very relevant questions.

Last Sunday, we started by looking together at the importance of God’s written word. We looked at some examples from the Old Testament; for example, we considered the fact that God very specifically commanded the Law of Moses to be written down, and He did this so that the Law could be accurately passed along to large numbers of people. We even learned that new kings were to make their own handwritten copy of God’s law immediately after taking their new position. God’s word was written down for a reason. We then looked at the same basic concept in the New Testament. We learned that John wrote the book of John so that those of us who have never seen the Lord face-to-face could read John’s eye-witness testimony and by reading what he wrote we would then be able to develop our own faith in the Lord. Peter and Paul and the others wrote so that their inspired messages could be very quickly passed along to other congregations in the First Century world. And then as we ended last Sunday, we considered the fact that God’s word has been accurately handed down for many generations, even centuries, and even across generations when God’s people were not even faithful. We studied last week, for example, how the Law was passed down, and even in New Testament times, when Jesus read from a copy of a copy of a copy, the Lord referred to that copy as ***“Scripture.”*** He read from Isaiah the prophet and said, ***“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”*** Even though He was not reading from the original document, the reading was still considered ***“Scripture.”*** And then we closed last week by looking at 2 Timothy 3:16-17, where Paul said that, ***“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”*** We learned that there is a tremendous value to the written word of God.

This morning, as we continue looking at how we got the Bible, I would like for us to consider a question, and that is: In the days before Microsoft Word, how did people write? We will be looking this morning, then, at the making of ancient books. And again, today when we need to write something, we whip out the computer and hit the print button. We have a keyboard, and a monitor, and a mouse, and spell-check, and a million formatting options. We can cut and paste, we can save it for later, we can put it online for millions of people to see almost instantly.

But to understand how we got the Bible in its current format, and in order to truly appreciate the Bible in its current form, we need to look at the various ways that messages in Bible times were written.

1. And probably one of the first and most obvious writing surfaces in the ancient world was STONE.

From the field of archaeology, for example, most of us are probably familiar with the Rosetta Stone. The Rosetta Stone was written (or perhaps we should say carved) in 195 BC, and it was a key discovery in modern times because it gave us some huge insight into Egyptian hieroglyphics. The stone was part of an ancient stele [stee-lay], a monument memorializing a great accomplishment. And the part that we have is a parallel statement made in hieroglyphics, followed by ancient Egyptian script, and then followed by ancient Greek. Well, we know Greek, so it allowed archaeologists to start to figure out hieroglyphics—a huge discovery! But this is just one example of how people in the ancient world were in the habit of writing things in stone.



What about in the Bible? Do we have any examples of any writing on stone in the Bible? I hope we are all thinking about the Ten Commandments! In Exodus 31:18, the Bible says that when God had finished speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, “**...He gave Moses the two tablets of the testimony, tablets of stone, written by the finger of God.**” And so we have an example in the Bible of God writing on stone.

2. Secondly, we know that some people in ancient times also wrote on POTTERY SHARDS.

People would have this nice piece of pottery, but then it would maybe break in several pieces, and they hated to waste all of those nice little scraps, so people would use those little pieces of pottery just as we would use scratch paper today. Up on the wall we are looking at a tax receipt from the ancient world. After all, a pottery shard was the perfect size for a receipt. So, when you paid your taxes, the tax man would take a little scrap of pottery, and he would write on there a receipt for the taxes that you paid. That way, if he tried to collect from you again, you could say, “Wait just a minute! I have a receipt! I have a pottery shard with your signature on it saying that I have already paid this year!” Not only that, but we have these little shards from the ancient world that were also used for shopping lists. And so on your way out the door, your wife might hand you a piece of a broken pot, and this little shard would say, “Milk, bread, and eggs.” It was just the perfect size for doing that!



We do not have a reference in the Bible to writing on a pottery shard; however, some of these have been found that help us understand some of the events in the Bible. For example, several years ago, archaeologists found a shard that had been written on at some point right before the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. And when they looked into it, they discovered that it was written by a guard and it had a list of names on it. I don't think we know exactly what that was for, but we can certainly imagine a guy in charge of guard duty along the city wall as the city is under siege, and maybe at the end of his shift he says, "Alright, who's on for tomorrow?" And maybe he would write a list like that on a pottery shard.

By the way, in Greek these pottery shards are referred to as "ostraca." An ostraca is a little piece of broken pottery. Aren't we at least a little bit familiar with what it means to be "ostracized"? In ancient Greece, if someone was a threat politically, if someone was starting to get out of line, the people would hold an ostracism. Each citizen was given an ostraca (a little piece of broken pottery), they would write the name of the "victim" (if we want to put it that way) on their little ostraca, and they would put it in a big jar. If enough ostraca were collected, the politician (or whoever it was) would be asked to leave the area for a period of ten years. They could take their property, it was a peaceful process, but the shards had spoken! They could come back after ten years, but if they came back any sooner than that, the penalty was death. Again, the names were written on these little scraps of pottery.

3. Thirdly, we also know that people in the ancient world would write on CLAY TABLETS.

I think most of us can remember learning in school about cuneiform. It is one of the earliest forms of writing, and it was done in damp clay with a wedge-shaped stylus. In fact, the word "cuneiform" goes back to the Latin word for "wedge."

We have two examples of writing on clay tablets in the Bible. The first is found in Jeremiah 32:14, "***Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, 'Take these deeds, this sealed deed of purchase and this open deed, and put them in an earthenware jar, that they may last a long time.'***" My understanding is that these deeds were most likely written on clay tablets, and they were to be put in a jar so that they would not break.

The second reference comes in Ezekiel 4:1, where God said to the prophet Ezekiel, "***Now you son of man, get yourself a brick, place it before you and inscribe a city on it, Jerusalem.***" Again, the "brick" here is not necessarily a dry brick (as we might picture), but it was a wet brick, a piece of clay that could be inscribed. So, people in Bible times often wrote on clay tablets.



4. In the fourth place, we also know that people in the ancient world sometimes wrote stuff down on WOOD.



On the wall, we are looking at what is basically a toe tag, a wooden label that was attached to an ancient mummy. Well, there is a lot of wood in the world, so we can imagine that a lot of stuff has been written on wood down through the years, and the same thing is true in the Bible. In Numbers 17:1-3, for example, the Bible says that, "***...the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to the sons of Israel,***

and get from them a rod for each father's household: twelve rods, from all their leaders according to their fathers' households. You shall write each name on his rod, and write Aaron's name on the rod of Levi; for there is one rod for the head of each of their fathers' households." And of course, we remember that Aaron's rod sprouted, bloomed, and brought forth almonds overnight as a sign that God backed the Levites as the spiritual leaders of the people.

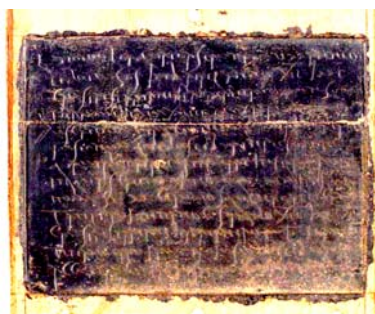
Another reference to writing on wood is found in Ezekiel 37:16-17, where God said to the prophet, **"And you, son of man, take for yourself one stick and write on it, 'For Judah and for the sons of Israel, his companions'; then take another stick and write on it, 'For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim and all the house of Israel, his companions.' Then join them for yourself one to another into one stick, that they may become one in your hand."** And another reference to writing on wood is found in Isaiah 30:8, where God said to Isaiah, **"Now go, write it on a tablet before them and inscribe it on a scroll, that it may serve in the time to come as a witness forever."** My understanding is that the word **"tablet"** does not refer to an i-Pad, but rather, it goes back to a word meaning **"plank"** or **"board."** So, Isaiah was told to write his message on a board.

5. There is another writing material that was sometimes used in the ancient world. Sometimes people wrote on METAL.

In fact, we have a reference to this in Exodus 28:36. God was telling Moses how to make the various garments for the priests, and as the Lord described the turban (the headgear), the Lord said, **"You shall also make a plate of pure gold and shall engrave on it, like the engravings of a seal, 'Holy to the LORD.'"** Moses, therefore, was to write on a plate of pure gold. And as you can see from the picture on the wall, we actually have a passage written on a silver scroll. The tiny little scroll was rolled up and was probably worn inside some kind of jewelry. It was discovered near Jerusalem back in 1979 and it is currently the oldest copy of any Scripture that we have. It was found by an Israeli schoolboy who was helping clean out an old burial cave. To give you an idea of how fragile this little roll of silver is: It took archaeologists three years to unroll it! Can you imagine trying to explain to your friends what you do for a living? "What do you do?" "Well, for the past few years I've been unrolling a tiny little scroll!" To give you an idea of how small this is, the largest of the two scrolls they found was three inches long. But this was (and continues to be) an amazing find. My understanding is that this scroll contains the first reference to the name of God in Jerusalem ever found by archaeologists in modern times.



6. We know that people in ancient times also wrote on WAXED TABLETS.



These started to be used in times before Christ. Basically, people would hollow out a piece of wood or ivory, they would fill it with a thin layer of wax, and then they could write on it with a stylus. We might even describe this as the first word processor, because it was erasable! You could write something and then when you were done with your little note, you could smooth the wax back out and use it again—almost like we would use a whiteboard today. Sometimes they would use these for legal documents, only they would have a cover and leather straps for protection. We actually have a reference to this

type of tablet in Luke 1:63. You might remember that Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, used this kind of tablet to write his son's name. Please look with me at Luke 1:59-64. The Bible says,

And it happened that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to call him Zacharias, after his father. But his mother answered and said, "No indeed; but he shall be called John." And they said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who is called by that name." And they made signs to his father, as to what he wanted him called. And he asked for a tablet and wrote as follows, "His name is John." And they were all astonished. And at once his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he began to speak in praise of God.

Again, the word **"tablet"** (in verse 63) is almost certainly a reference to the kind of waxed tablet we are looking at up here on the wall; basically, a piece of wood with a depression that is smeared with wax.

7. And with that, we move on to probably the most famous example of writing material in ancient times, and that is: PAPYRUS.

Papyrus is a plant that grows along the Nile River in Egypt, and it is obviously the basis for our English word "paper." The oldest papyrus fragment we have is from Egypt and goes back to 2400 BC, nearly a thousand years before Moses wrote the book of Genesis. Years ago, critics of the Bible claimed that people couldn't write that long ago. And yet now we have a writing sample from a thousand years before Moses! Papyrus is rather inexpensive. When we studied this subject in our Wednesday evening class several years ago, I purchased a dwarf papyrus plant at Johansen's Greenhouse on Todd Drive at the Beltline, and amazingly, the plant has survived in my office! Before worship began, I cut off a stalk so that all of you could get a chance to feel it, and as you will be able to feel in just a moment, each stalk is filled with a pulpy almost Styrofoam consistency material. And by the way, the Greeks referred to that white, pulpy material as "BIBLOS," which came to be defined as "book." It is the basis for our English word "bibliography," the list of books that you consult while writing a term paper. It is also the basis for our English word "Bible." One of our members asked where we got the word Bible. The word means "book," and it goes back to the Greek word for the white pulpy stuff in the middle of a stalk of papyrus.



You can take a stalk of papyrus, you can strip off the green outer layer, and you can then cut the guts into very thin narrow strips. Those strips can then be soaked in water, they can be laid perpendicular to each other in two layers, and then pressed, dried, and smoothed with a stone or a shell. When those sheets are dry, they can be written on with ink.

Not long after I got my papyrus plant several years ago, I was opening the window or something, and I knocked it on the floor. When it hit the floor, several stalks broke off, and I was just heartbroken. But then I thought, "Hey! I can make paper!" So, I got out a knife, stripped off the outer layer, cut the guts into strips, soaked them in water, laid them out just like the diagram, and then I put them between two pieces of wood and just crushed them in a vice for a few days. When it was all dry, this is the result...be careful with it, but at the same time please also notice that it is rather tough.

A single sheet of papyrus paper was referred to by the Greek word “chartes.” Does that sound familiar? It is the basis for our English word “chart.” Literally, then, a chart is something that is one sheet. In the Bible, this word is used only one time and is found in 2 John 12, where John was writing to the “chosen Lady” and said, **“Though I have many things to write to you, I do not want to do so with paper and ink; but I hope to come to you and speak face to face, so that your joy may be made full.”** The word that we translate as “paper” is the Greek word **“CHARTES,”** a reference to a single sheet of papyrus. I don’t know if you remember this from our study of 2 John several weeks ago, but we briefly discussed the idea that the book of 2 John was so short that it was probably written on a single sheet. Remember that? John was basically saying, then, “I have so much to write, but it is hard to keep all of my thoughts on this one page (on this chart). So, I want to come and speak with you face-to-face.”

Well, these sheets could then be glued together to form long rolls (or scrolls). By the way, during the time of the Roman Empire, the government controlled the papyrus trade. The names of the officials responsible for this trade would be written on the first sheet of every blank roll before it could be sold. This was known as the “first glued sheet,” or in Greek, the “PROTOKOLLON.” And maybe that sounds familiar, because it is the basis for our English word “protocol.” When we talk about protocol, we are normally talking about a formal agreement or a detailed plan about how to handle various situations, a summary, a table of contents outlining what comes next. Among computers, my understanding is that protocol refers to the rules governing how computers talk to one another. But literally, a protocol is the “first glued sheet” of a long scroll, almost like a table of contents, a preview of the rest of the scroll.



A book written on one of these papyrus rolls was called a “biblos” or a “biblion.” It was not really a book as we think of it, but it was a roll of papyrus. The word is used in Matthew 1:1. Matthew starts his scroll by saying, **“The record of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.”** The word **“record”** is the word **“biblos,”** literally, a scroll made out of papyrus, a scroll made out of that white mushy stuff in the middle the papyrus stalk. The word is also used in Luke 3:4 where Luke says, **“...as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, ‘THE VOICE OF ONE**

CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, ‘MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT.’” Again, literally, Luke was referring to the scroll of Isaiah, a scroll that was made from the guts of the papyrus plant. And this word is used a number of times throughout the New Testament.

If a book was so long that it required several rolls, each volume was called a “tomos,” which literally means a “cutting.” In other words, the long scroll had to be cut in pieces. And perhaps “tomos” sounds a little familiar, because it is the basis of our English word “tome,” a reference to a large, weighty, or scholarly book. Normally, writing was done on the side of the scroll where the strips were laid horizontally (almost like ruled paper), but very rarely a scroll would be written on both sides (even though it was much more difficult to write across the vertical strips). So, if someone had to write on both sides, it was almost a way of saying that it was an urgent message, an emergency. You might remember the passage in Revelation 5:1 where John said, **“I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a book [literally, a “scroll”] written inside and on the back, sealed up with seven seals.”** And John, of course, was distraught because no one was worthy to break those seals. In fact, he started weeping, but then one of the elders in heaven spoke up and said to John and said, **“Stop weeping; behold, the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has overcome so as to open the book [literally, the “scroll”] and its seven seals.”**

manuscript on vellum. And if you look very carefully, you can even see where the acidity of the ink that was used has actually eaten completely through the parchment. I don't know if you can see that, but there are some very fine lines where the ink itself has destroyed the parchment.

Conclusion:

There is so much more we could consider, but the basic idea (as we learned last week) is that God has communicated to us through His written word. And we have learned this morning that God had many options when He set out to make sure that His written word was accurately passed down through the generations.

If the Lord wills, I would like for us to continue next Sunday morning by looking together at the question of how we can know that the manuscripts we have today are reliable...even though we do not have any originals.

I would simply close this morning with the passage that brother Eddie read for us earlier from 1 Thessalonians 2:13, where Paul said, ***“For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.”***

The Bible teaches that all of us will be held accountable for our sins. God sent His only Son as a sacrifice, and we accept the offer of salvation by obeying the good news about His Son. We accept the Bible as the word of God (as this verse indicates), we reject sin, we allow ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins, and then we resolve to do the best we can to live like Jesus. If you have any questions, please let us know, but if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com