

As you may have noticed, on a number of occasions I get asked questions that I simply can't answer. I received one such question this week, about the history of the Hebrew language. Here is how the questioner phrased it:

What is our earliest evidence for Hebrew as a written language? I've been to apologetic seminars where they say it's long been said by atheists that the Hebrew Bible can't be trusted because the Hebrews didn't have a written language until well after the stories in the OT would've taken place. The evidence that the Hebrews had a written language in close proximity to the Biblical stories is based on pottery evidence and things of that nature. I'm sure these are topics you are very familiar with and I'd appreciate your take.

It's actually amazing how many topics I'm not familiar with at all! So, not knowing the answer, I asked a colleague of mine who is an expert in Hebrew philology, Joseph Lam (he teaches courses in my department in Hebrew and other Semitic languages, and on the religion, culture, and literature of the Ancient Near East, and in Hebrew Bible; his office is across the hall from mine). I simplified the question to get the heart of it. This is what I said in an email to him.

Joseph,

Someone has asked me the question below. Damn if I know! I don't need a long exposition, just a basic answer will do (some kind of inscription?)

What is our earliest evidence for Hebrew as a written language?

Here is his very helpful response.

It depends on what you define as Hebrew. We have a number of inscriptions from Palestine in the late 2nd millennium/early 1st millennium BCE (which is when Hebrew mostly likely branched off as a distinct language from the broader "Canaanite" family of languages), but early Hebrew and Canaanite are difficult to distinguish from one another, especially in short inscriptions (sometimes a single word). For a long time the standard answer was the Gezer Calendar from the late 10th century (900's) BCE, but I now think that text is better described as Phoenician or common Canaanite. Others would say the more recently discovered Khirbet Qeiyafa ostrakon (11th/10th century), but there are various oddities to that text that make it difficult to classify. There are also a number of short inscriptions from Tel Rehov that have been dated archaeologically to the 10th/9th centuries. The upshot is, there are a number of candidates from the 10th/9th centuries, but certainly by the 8th century we have many more unambiguously "Hebrew" inscriptions.

For more detail, I would recommend to your readers the following online article (and the article to which it responds):  
<https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-artifacts/inscriptions/what%E2%80%99s-the-oldest-hebrew-inscription/>

As a follow-up, I said/asked the following:

Fantastic. Just what I needed. The questioner was not a scholar, but an interested lay person, who was especially interested in the question of whether, if there was a Moses living in say the 13<sup>th</sup> c BCE, he would have been able to write. Do you have an opinion? (I myself don't think there **\*was\*** a Moses, but still, assuming there was...)

Here is Joseph's short and very interesting response.

If there was a Moses, raised in the Egyptian court, he probably would have learned to write in Egyptian! The texts of the Pentateuch, whoever wrote them, are NOT in 13th century language; they are in classical 1st millennium Hebrew. Whatever a hypothetical 13th century Moses wrote, whether in Egyptian or Canaanite or something else, that's NOT what we have preserved in the Pentateuch.

I regularly answer questions on the blog (or get someone else who actually knows answer them for me!). If you belonged, you would get all questions and answers, as well as numerous other posts, every week. So if you don't belong, JOIN!!!



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