

Exploring Ancient Mediterranean Languages and Their Cultural Importance

by Gary L. Hauck

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Gary Hauck deciphering hieroglyphics inside the Temple of Horus at Edfu, Egypt. (Photo by Jared Hauck)

It was midnight. I had just returned home from delivering a lecture at Siena Heights University. My wife, Lois, waited up to show me the front-page article in the *Grand Rapids Press*: “Message from the ages— Dead Sea Scrolls will be displayed at Public Museum.” Recharged with this information, we spent the next hour in reflection and anticipation. My mind raced back to 1986 when I had first seen the caves at Qumran where the scrolls were discovered in 1947, and had walked around the Khirbat Qumran, the excavated building ruins where the manuscripts were written before 200 BCE. I’ll never forget the feeling I had had later that same day when I first laid my eyes on many of the papyrus fragments in the contemporary-looking “Shrine of the Book” in Jerusalem.

Although I had seen close-up photos and carefully replicated facsimiles, there was something powerfully engaging in witnessing the actual papyrus scrolls in Jerusalem. Students, professors, pilgrims, and general visitors stood all around the biblical texts with hushed reverence and obvious enthusiasm. I marveled at the deep black ink lingering still on most of the papyri, the elegant look of the Hebrew, and sensed a connectedness with the scribe who penned these words over two millennia ago. Even though I’m not a member of the Jewish community, to connect with someone across time and place through the medium of words and language seemed like a miracle in itself. I could reflect on the meaning and significance of the values we shared.

Several years after those encounters, I took my daughter, Heidi, and a group of college students to participate in an archeological dig southwest of Jerusalem’s old city. Naturally, we made our way to Qumran. During this trip, we also took the short flight to Cairo and visited the famous Egyptian Museum that houses ancient papyrus scrolls written in hieroglyphics, many of them 3,000 years old. At the nearby Papyrus Institute, we saw a demonstration of how a papyrus reed would be thinly sliced into broad strips that were woven together like a mat, flattened with a wooden rolling pin, and put under the sun to dry. (By contrast, paper is made from ground-up plant materials. Invented in China, paper was not widely available in Europe until the 14th Century CE.) We were amazed by the strength and durability of the finished sheets of papyrus. These

were often woven together into one long scroll that was easily rolled up for storage. Our presenter also told us that the deep black ink of many of the ancient papyri might have been a mixture of myrtle berry juice, charcoal, and resin.

In May 2019, my son, Jared, and I led a new group of eager travelers back to Cairo, the Museum, and the Papyrus Institute, and added a trip to Alexandria to see the location of the ancient library that housed between 400,000 to 700,000 rolls of papyrus that spanned all the sciences. We marveled at the new library inaugurated there in 2002, and then journeyed to the subterranean library of 200 BCE adjacent to the Scrapeum near the so-called Pompey’s column, which once also housed hundreds of papyrus scrolls and was considered a “daughter” of the great Library of Alexandria. And now, we can even make sense out of the hieroglyphics, thanks to the discovery of the Rosetta Stone.

Seeing the Rosetta Stone

I had the privilege of leading a study-abroad group to Europe in 2004, which included time spent at the British Museum that had just been refurbished and remodeled for its 250th anniversary. Our major quest was to see the famous Rosetta Stone. Laughingly, we discovered that we had already walked by it, not realizing it was in a large glass box. When we quickly retraced our steps and saw it face to face, we immediately recognized it from all of the pictures in our textbooks, and began to take photos furiously, the white glare of the flash reflecting back off the glass.

The Rosetta Stone is a tablet of black basalt found by a French engineer near the town of Rosetta (Rashid) in 1799, during Napoleon’s occupation of Egypt. It contains a single text inscribed in three different scripts, one below the other: Egyptian hieroglyphic, Demotic (a modified form of the Egyptian), and ancient Greek. The text was in honor of the ruler



The Rosetta Stone in its display case in the British Museum, London. (Photo by Gary Hauck)

Ptolemy V Epiphanes, and was made in 195 BCE during the Greek rule of Egypt. By medieval times, Egyptians had forgotten how to read ancient hieroglyphics, and not until 1822 did a French scholar, Jean-François Champollion, begin to unravel the mysterious language. By carefully comparing the three scripts found on the Rosetta Stone, Champollion worked out the meanings of many hieroglyphic symbols (Fiero 2002, p. 11).

As a result of that breakthrough, scholars could begin to read the thousands of surviving records from ancient Egypt. As we stared at the black rock slab and took pictures, we could see that it is a little over three feet tall, a couple feet or so wide near its base, and bears white letters in three distinct sections. The hieroglyphics at the top were the largest characters, the Demotic in the middle were a little smaller, and the Greek letters were smaller still although all in capital form. Yet, the stone tablet remained untouchable behind the glass.



Handling Biblical Manuscripts in St. Petersburg and the Vatican

While each experience with ancient writings grew more fascinating, the day happened when I actually handled ancient sacred documents. It came in 1995 when teaching with the late Dr. Harold Van Broekhoven, Sr., of Grand Rapids at the St. Petersburg Christian University in Russia. Along with my colleague Russell Blowers, we received permission from Moscow to enter the inner chamber of the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg. There, we were allowed to see and handle the famous Firkowitsch Collection of ancient biblical manuscripts, including the oldest complete Hebrew Old Testament *codex*, or bound manuscript, in the world today, which is written on *vellum*, or animal-skin parchment. Among the other documents we handled was the so-called Babylonian Codex of the Prophets, written with Babylonian vowel pointing above the line; and a fragment of an illuminated gospel manuscript written in Greek on purple-dyed vellum around 600 CE, known as the Purple Codex. Other fragments of the Purple Codex are located in Athens, Thessalonika, Vienna, and Rome.

In 2001, while my son, Jared, and I were in Rome, I received permission to study more carefully the fragment of the Purple Codex and other manuscripts housed in the Vatican Library. The library has about 75,000 ancient manuscripts and fragments. I had access to eight or nine Greek manuscripts dating from the 6th to the 10th Centuries CE, including Byzantine *uncials* (written in all capital letters). But the most famous *uncial* I saw was *Codex Vaticanus*, written in the 300s CE. I used two provided wooden sticks that looked like old rounded chopsticks. At first it felt cumbersome. But with the manuscripts leaning on a wooden desktop lectern, the turning of pages quickly became somewhat of an art.

I passionately went from manuscript to manuscript until the famous portion of the Purple Codex was brought to me in the special reading room from a climate-controlled chamber. The experience far exceeded my expectation— not in the size or quantity of words (it was a much smaller fragment than I had seen in Russia), but in the remarkable beauty and quality of so old a manuscript. Taking more time now with this document than I had in St. Petersburg, I observed that it was a purple-dyed thin sheepskin with elegant silver lettering for most of the text, and gold lettering for the names of God and Christ. Even the letters were rounded artfully, a practice of scribes in Western Europe from the 4th to the 8th Centuries. Again, I felt a connectedness with the scribe who had so carefully penned each word centuries ago.

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Dr. Gary Hauck (right) with Dr. Russell Blowers, and the late Dr. Harold VanBroekhoven, Sr., examining the ancient Firkowitsch Codex of the Hebrew Old Testament in the inner chamber of the Russian National Library archives. (Photo by Curator)

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Later, in 2004, after viewing the Rosetta Stone in the British Museum and the Sumerian basalt *stèle* (stone slab) in the Louvre of Paris that bears the Code of Hammurabi, we had the opportunity to see other priceless Greek manuscripts in the British Library in London, including the Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Alexandrinus, dating to the 300s CE. These were on display near such English works as the Magna Carta, Beowulf, and the writings of Shakespeare, in addition to music scores by Mozart and Handel, and a notebook of Leonardo da Vinci. In 2007, Lois and I saw a rare collection of ancient manuscripts on the Greek Isle of Patmos, stored inside the famous Monastery of St. John.

Ancient Papyri at the University of Michigan

The greatest irony of my growing interest in ancient manuscripts was my discovery that the largest collection of papyrus manuscripts in the Western Hemisphere is located right at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor— just two hours from our home!

Upon this discovery, Jared and I ventured to the Special Collections Library inside the UM Harlan Hatcher building. There we observed manuscripts of material ranging from a census declaration dated 119 CE to a Greek certificate of arrest during the persecution of Christians under Decius, the Emperor of Rome in 249-251 CE. For us, the highlights were two ancient biblical papyri— a Greek fragment of Matthew 26:19-52 dating to the 200s, and a Greek fragment of Paul's letters dating to 125-150 CE. This portion of the Matthew text describes the Last Supper, the betrayal by Judas, and the beginning of the Arrest of Jesus. The leaf, purchased by UM personnel in Cairo, Egypt, in 1924, shows where the scribe crossed out a mistake and wrote in the correction. In the manuscript of Paul's letters, one can clearly see that the book of Hebrews immediately followed the book of Romans, an evidence that some early scribes believed in the Pauline authorship of Hebrews.

In total, the UM Special Collections Library contains more than 7,000 inventory numbers and 10,000 individual fragments of papyrus text. This was one of the largest collections of papyri that I saw until our later trip to the Papyrus Museum in Vienna, Austria, one of the world's most significant.

The Earliest Pictographs, Ideographs, and Alphabets

As a result of the experiences described above, I have become quite fascinated with the history of writing and how humans have been able to communicate from one generation to the next. I have also been intrigued by how these crucial texts have inspired and continue to inspire the reflections and musings that we write today, passing our own stories on to future generations. The power of the written word across the globe is almost unfathomable, and the way in which the earliest forms of writing arose is a fascinating story in its own right.

In February 2019, Jared and I made a trip to Iraq and saw the cuneiform ("wedge-shaped") characters that were chiseled onto stones in Sennacherib's aqueduct around 705 BCE. We explored other ancient writing-bearing artifacts at the Erbil Civilization Museum, in Iraqi Kurdistan. From there, we flew



The front (recto) side of a papyrus fragment showing the New Testament verses of the Gospel of Matthew 26:19-52, written in cursive Greek script, from the 3rd-4th Century CE. Photo by Gary Hauck, and used with permission of the Michigan Papyrology Collection, inventory no. P. Mich. Inv. 1570 (Papyrus 37).

to Lebanon and visited several sites of ancient Phoenicia, where an alphabet and language had developed and then made its way around the Eastern Hemisphere, often carried by Phoenician ships and sailors.

Long before alphabets were created, people had used pictures of objects (pictographs) to communicate their thoughts. They went further and idealized those pictures into characters and geometric symbols (ideographs) to represent words and phrases. In time, many of these became standardized into hieroglyphic signs used as letters. The earliest Sumerian and Egyptian records were written in pictographs, but the later Sumerians, Babylonians, and Assyrians used ideographs such as the cuneiform symbols that we saw in Iraq and in the Code of Hammurabi at the Louvre.

Many scholars believe that the world's first alphabet was developed by Semitic-speaking individuals from the land of Canaan (in present-day Lebanon and Israel) who were employed by the Egyptian pharaohs in about the 15th Century BCE (Goldwasser 2010). These Canaanites may have taken from the Egyptian system of hieroglyphs a number of signs, which they used as letters to spell out words in their own language. Thus, a hieroglyphic sign for the word "house" was called by the Semitic name *beth* (house), and was used to



Gary Hauck points to a cuneiform inscription on Sennacherib's Aqueduct near Mosul, Iraq.

indicate the sound of its first letter, "b". A sign meaning "mouth" was given the Semitic name *pe* and used to indicate the sound "p". As one scholar of Middle Eastern languages has summed up, "By 1500 BCE the alphabet, as distinct from cuneiform and hieroglyphs, came into use in Palestine" (Martin 2009, p. 2). Since these "proto-Semitic" inscriptions were discovered in 1903-1904 on a mountain in the Sinai Peninsula known as Serabit el-Khadim, the alphabet is sometimes labeled as "Serabit Sinai" (Goldwasser 2010).

Interestingly, these migrant workers from Canaan did not make use of all of the Egyptian symbols, and they seem to have created some new ones. Their alphabet consisted of 22 letters, all consonants, making it necessary for the reader to supply the missing vowel sounds as he or she read. Writing and reading ran from right to left. The Phoenician alphabet, which the Phoenician traders carried around the Mediterranean world, was similar to this proto-Semitic form of writing, and seems to be either another derivation, or an evolutionary bridge between the Serabit Sinai script and Hebrew.

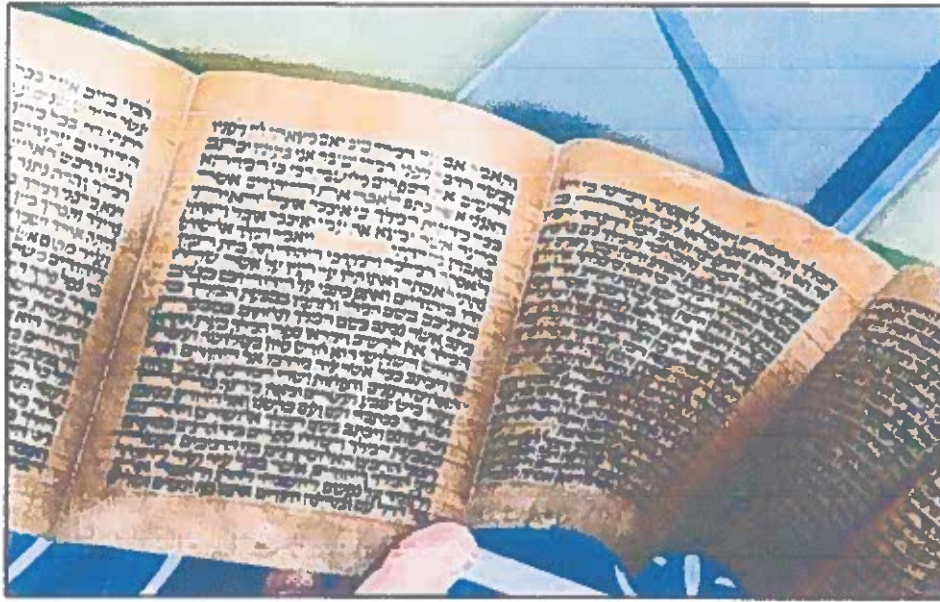
	EGYPTIAN HIEROGLYPHIC	SERABIT SINAI	PHOENICIAN	HEBREW LETTER	HEBREW NAME	MEANING	GREEK		ENGLISH	
							EARLY	MODERN		
1					ALEPH	OX	Α	α	A	A
2					BETH	HOUSE	Β	β	B	B
3					GIMEL	CAMEL	Γ	γ	Γ	C, G
4					DALETH	DOOR	Δ	δ	Δ	D
5					HE	Hallelujah	Ε	ε	E	E
6					YAU	NAIL (HOOK)	Υ	υ	Υ	F, U, V, W, Y
7					ZAYIN	SICKLE?	Ζ	ζ	Z	Z
8					CHETH	FENCE	Η	η	H	H
9					TETH	?	Θ	θ	Θ	(TH)
10					YOD	HAND	Ι	ι	I	I, J
11					KAPH	PALM	Κ	κ	K	K
12					LAMED	OX GOAD	Λ	λ	Λ	L
13					MEM	WATER	Μ	μ	M	M
14					NUN NANASH	FISH SERPENT	Ν	ν	N	N
15					SAMEKH	PROP	Ξ	ξ	Ξ	X
16					AYIN	EYE	Ο	ο	Ο	O
17					PE	MOUTH	Π	π	Π	P
18					TSADE	SNARE?				(S)
19					GOPH	KNOT	Ϟ	ϟ		O
20					RESH	HEAD	Ρ	ρ	Ρ	R
21					SHIN	TOOTH	Σ	σ	Σ	S
22					TAU	MARK	Τ	τ	Τ	T

In Beirut, we saw artifacts bearing the cursive Phoenician script. We also examined Aramaic texts in Iraq that bear evidence of another descendant alphabet from the Phoenician. Hebrew and Aramaic are Semitic languages important to those who study religion, since Hebrew is the language of the Jewish Tanakh, which is the equivalent in content to the Christian Old Testament, and portions of both are written in Aramaic. Those sections include

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"The Background of the English Alphabet" from *The American Educator Encyclopedia* (1967).

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Gary Hauck holds a centuries-old Hebrew Tanakh handwritten on vellum. (Photo by Gary Hauck)

Ezra 4:8-6:18 and 7:12-26, Daniel 2:4b-7:28, Jeremiah 10:11, and some proper names and words scattered throughout. These were written during the “Babylonian captivity” (597-539 BCE), the period when many Jews from what is now Israel were exiled to Babylon, in what is now Iraq. Aramaic was widely used there, and written Aramaic, with its noncursive (disconnected block-like or “square”) letters, would eventually influence Hebrew to shift from cursive to noncursive script (Martin 2009, p. 3).

How Greek, then Latin, Rose to Dominate the Mediterranean

Between the 13th and 8th Centuries BCE, the Greeks adopted most of the characters of the Phoenician alphabet. This is especially significant because Greek is a “Western” or Indo-European language, whereas Phoenician is an “Eastern” or Semitic language. The ancient Greeks did make some changes in the shapes and values of the letters, and they added vowels to the alphabet, but the names and forms of the early Greek letters show the kinship between the Greek alphabet and that of the Semitic-speaking people of Palestine and Syria. After first adopting the right-to-left system of writing the Greeks tried a sort of *continuous script called boustrophedonic*, which runs from right to left and then left to right on alternate lines. They finally settled on the left-to-right direction, which is still commonly used in the Western world.

The two oldest Greek writing systems that we know of are called Linear A and Linear B. They arose in the Minoan-Mycenaean civilization that flourished in the Aegean Sea, roughly 3000 - 1100 BCE during the Bronze Age. Because these scripts were more efficient for organizing the thriving sea trade in goods such as wine, olive oil, pottery, and wool, they supplanted the earlier Minoan pictorial writing.

During our trips to Greece in 2003 and 2009, we explored the ruins of the Minoan civilization at Knossos on the island of Crete, and Mycenae on the Greek mainland. Archeologists discovered over 150 clay tablets of Linear A and more than 4,000 clay tablets of Linear B in Crete alone. We examined

numerous text-bearing artifacts at museums near both locations, as well as the National Archeological Museum in Athens. Sheldon summarizes well what we saw and learned about Linear A and B:

Archaeologists have found both these scripts on a number of Cretan artifacts, ranging from religious objects to official records. The scripts appear to have been used by artists as signatures. Both forms of writing appear across the Aegean as far as the Greek mainland, spread by the far-reaching influence of Cretan trade. In this way, Linear A and B show the impact of Minoan culture on the early Greek World (Sheldon 2018).

Greek evolved into a magnificent linguistic system that would give us the plays of Sophocles, the epics of Homer, the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, and the Koine Greek of the Christian New Testament. Interestingly, the term “alphabet” is a combination of the first two letters of the Greek writing system, alpha (A, α) and beta (B, β).

The Greek language spread via the influence of trade and ultimately of conquest, with various Greek city-states establishing colonies that lined much of the coast of the Mediterranean Sea as well as its islands. Those peoples who lived beyond this sphere of influence and who continued to speak non-Greek languages were called *barbaroi* (barbarians). Because of further conquests and settlements during the 4th Century BCE by the Macedonian kings Philip and Alexander the Great, the influence of Hellenism (Greek language and culture) spread dramatically further, encompassing much of southeastern Europe, northeastern Africa and, in the Asian continent, all the way to northwestern India.

Italic peoples of the lower Tiber River region borrowed the Greek alphabet as early as the 7th Century BCE and made some changes to fit their needs in a newly emerging Latin language, including an alphabet of 23 letters. Roman rulers adopted this language and spread it throughout their growing Empire. Latin was not only the language of oratory, statesmanship, military affairs, and scholarly writing, but in addition, in commerce and

other practical matters it became the *lingua franca*, i.e., the mode of communication among people whose native languages differed. Latin maintained its dominance in European religion and sacred literature throughout the Middle Ages, and in science and medicine throughout the Renaissance and into the early modern era.

Latin is now “extinct” because it is no longer anyone’s first language. Yet, there are about two dozen “Romance” or “Romantic” languages spoken today, so called because they evolved from the Latin language that Roman rulers had imposed in lands they conquered and settled. These Romance languages, such as Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian, and Romanian, are the primary languages of roughly 800 million people today. In other cases, Latin influenced languages being spoken in the Roman Empire, but ended up not displacing them. Notable examples include Greek; some Celtic languages such as Irish and Welsh; and Germanic languages, including German itself and the English that had arisen among the Anglo-Saxon and other tribes that had settled in England. The Germanic tribes adopted and modified the Latin alphabet for their own use, adding a few letters to make a total of 26 (in the case of English, the added letters were *j*, *u*, and *w*). Analogously, Slavic-speaking peoples adopted a modified form of the Greek alphabet, called Cyrillic. The Cyrillic alphabet is named after the 9th-Century Byzantine missionary St. Cyril, who created it in order to translate Greek biblical and other religious texts into the Slavic language(s).

The Arab Contribution

Ancient Semites, Greeks, and Romans all used letters of the alphabet to represent numbers. Roman numerals are still used in English for special purposes today, but the place-value numeration system created in Asia and brought westward by the Arabs is much more efficient and easy to use. These “Indo-Arabic numerals” entered Europe as early as the 700s among the Muslims, and in the late 900s among some of the early Christian scholars. By the 15th Century they were adopted for common usage, displacing their Roman counterparts.

Scholars trace the earliest forms of Arabic, a Semitic language, to the Nabateans of the 2nd Century BCE, who occupied a region that today lies in southern Jordan. Their language derived from ancient Phoenician and Aramaic. After the birth of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula in the 7th Century CE, the far-flung trade, conquest, and settlement by Muslims spread the influence of the Arabic language throughout the Western world. Those lands and peoples, such as in Egypt, where Arabic was made the primary language came to be called “Arab”. Thus, just as Greek and Roman settlement had exercised a Hellenizing and Latinizing influence, Muslim settlement similarly exercised an Arabizing influence in much of the Middle East and North Africa.

One of the duties of all Muslims, no matter their first language, is to prayerfully recite verses of the sacred book, the Qur’an, in the original Arabic; translations of the Qur’an are not considered to be the Qur’an. Thus, the reach of Arabic extended well beyond Arab lands to huge parts of Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Balkans, and Iberia. Arabic has a beautiful, artful, and calligraphic script, with cursive letters always joined together, and flowing from right to left as with other Semitic

languages. I have seen the beauty of this script in medieval handwritten manuscripts of the Qur’an in Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, and Qatar, and even on the walls of the Taj Mahal in India.

Ancient Languages in a Fast-Changing World

Writing is one of the greatest inventions of the human family. With written letters and numbers, we can exchange our thoughts and ideas, record our histories, create our poetry, document our transactions, and share our stories. We can put our sacred and philosophical literature into permanent form and transmit all these to future generations.

We are fortunate today to have the Internet, e-books, e-library databases, and tools like Google Translate and “Rosetta Stone”. These give us ready access to the words of past eras that were etched in stone, clay, wood, or wax, or written on papyrus or animal-skin parchment.

However, the ease of modern communications is due not just to the inventions of the alphabet, printing press, and later the computer and Internet, but also to the growing use of English. Due to the legacy of the British Empire, the continuing dominance of the U.S. economy, and the passion for international tourism, English has become a global language—the new *lingua franca*. With English being the first language of over 400 million people around the world, and a secondary language of roughly 1.1 billion more, there are English speakers in most countries. Thus, during my travels to 82 countries over the past 30 years I have never experienced language as a barrier or obstacle. The dominance of one language, English, over all other languages certainly cases international communication—at least for English speakers.

But there is also a downside to the modern world’s increasing reliance upon English at the expense of other languages, especially the threatened or extinct ones. For those who invest the time and energy to learn ancient Mediterranean languages, for example, the classical and sacred texts are much better understood in the original words. More generally, being conversant “only in English” interferes with the possibility of a deeper understanding and insight into one’s own culture and well as other cultures.

As I seek out the world’s greatest literature for my ongoing enrichment and lifelong learning, the treasures that I discover from all time periods and cultures seem limitless. Such is the impact of the Mediterranean languages. Their cultural importance today cannot be overestimated. •

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