

Dr. Don Fowler, Old Testament Backgrounds, Session 3, Cultural Essentials: Writing, Kingship, 6-min. Video Overview

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Alright, let's dive into two massive mysteries from the ancient world. First, how did a land that was famously fertile turn into a rocky wasteland? And second, how did the single most important invention in human history come about? Turns out, the timing of that invention is way more significant than you might think. Our story kicks off with a phrase you've probably heard before.

It's an old Canaanite proverb describing the land of Israel. And it paints this incredible picture, right? You just imagine this lush, green, super abundant paradise. The kind of place anyone would want to call home.

But there's a catch. If you go visit that same region today, you're not going to see endless green fields. You're going to see miles and miles of bare, hard rock.

So what on earth happened? How does a land flowing with milk and honey basically turn into something that looks like the surface of the moon? To solve this, we've got to become ecological detectives. And that means we need to look beneath the surface. Literally.

So the first clue is actually deep underground. The whole region sits on this gigantic limestone dome. Now this geology is what gives the soil a really high mineral content, which is awesome for fertility.

But it also sets up this kind of hidden danger, like an ecological tripwire just waiting to be sprung. And that tripwire? It led to the creation of something called marl. Now here's the crazy part.

Marl isn't the original bedrock. Get this. It's the former topsoil, the good stuff that hardened and calcified into this solid rock-like layer you can't grow anything in.

So how did this happen? Well, it was a chain reaction, really, in four pretty tragic steps. First up, widespread deforestation. By King Solomon's time, a lot of the ancient forests were gone.

That led to step two, a loss of root activity. See, the ancients didn't know it, but those tree roots were constantly churning the soil, keeping it from hardening up. So step three: without the roots, that mineral-rich soil started to calcify, turning into that hard marl.

And the final step? The land's fertility was lost, basically sealed away under a thick layer of rock that it made itself. But, you know, the story doesn't quite end there. Today, modern Israelis are actually trying to reverse thousands of years of this damage.

They're using heavy machinery to drill right through that marl, planting new trees so their roots can start breaking up that hardened layer, and very, very slowly begin to bring that soil

back to life. Okay, so that's the story of the land. But what about the people who lived on it? Let's switch gears from ecology to technology and tackle our second mystery, the birth of writing, and why it developed the way it did.

So now we're shifting our focus to Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilization. You have the first cities popping up, and with them a whole wave of new technologies. But here's the thing that's so fascinating.

This was a deeply conservative culture. Change didn't happen overnight. In fact, it could take centuries or even millennia.

And nothing shows this better than the humble brick. I mean, you'd think making a rectangular block would be simple, right? Well, the very first bricks were shaped like loaves of bread. It took them nearly 2,000 years to invent the simple wooden mold needed to mass-produce the rectangular bricks we know today.

Two millennia! That really tells you how slowly progress could move. And that snail's pace is exactly why this next invention was such a revolution. You could argue that writing is the single most important human achievement ever, because it was the one technology that let all other technologies speed up.

It meant ideas could finally be shared accurately across huge distances and across time. It broke the cycle. But of course, writing didn't just appear overnight, fully formed.

It had its own evolution in three major stages. It all started around 3200 BCE with pictograms. You know, simple pictures of things.

From there, it developed into cuneiform, a much more abstract system of wedge-shaped marks. But the final step, the truly revolutionary one, was the alphabet. And to really appreciate just how much of a game-changer the alphabet was, we first have to understand what it replaced.

We have to talk about the challenge of cuneiform. This was not a system for your average person. This was a complex code for highly trained professional scribes.

In its earliest days, it was pretty intuitive. If you wanted to write eat, you just drew a picture of a head next to a bowl of food. Simple enough, right? But what about more complex, abstract ideas? Well, that's where the system had to evolve.

And boy, did it get complicated. Five hundred and ninety-eight. That is how many different cuneiform signs a professional scribe in Old Babylon had to memorize.

And that's not even the whole story. Many of those signs also had multiple phonetic values depending on the context. So we're talking about thousands of variations you had to keep in your head.

I mean, just look at the comparison here. On one side, you've got cuneiform. Almost 600 signs, tons of different values for each one, and years of professional training.

Literacy was an elite skill. Period. But then you have the alphabet.

Just 22 to 30 letters. Each letter represents a sound. You could learn the basics in a few hours.

This was the invention that democratized information. It put the power of writing into everyone's hands, not just a select few. So we've seen how the land changed.

And how technology took this incredible leap forward. Now, let's connect these two threads. Because there's a fascinating theory out there about the link between the invention of the alphabet and the timing of divine revelation.

OK, check out this timeline. This is where things get really interesting. The very first alphabet shows up around 1700 BCE.

Then, just a few centuries later, around 1446 BCE, we have the traditional date for the Exodus, when the Bible says Moses received the Ten Commandments, a written law meant for an entire nation to read and understand. The argument from our source is captured perfectly right here. The idea is that this timing was no accident.

Think about it. For a divine law to be given to an entire people, not just a handful of elite scribes, you'd need a communication technology that was actually accessible to everyone. The alphabet was that technology.

And this brings us to one last big question for today. The story of ancient Israel seems to suggest that a culture's environment and its communication tools are deeply connected to its history and its beliefs. So it makes you wonder, right? How are the technologies and the environmental challenges of our own time shaping what we believe and how we choose to share it with the world?