



ST ANDREWS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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A study of the Bible as God's revelation to man

THE WORD AND WHY GOD DETERMINED IT TO BE WRITTEN DOWN

WHY GOD CHOSE THE MEDIUM OF LANGUAGE

WHAT GOD CHOSE TO USE

It was no doubt desirable to speak to the prophets "in divers manners," but the best way to speak to the men of all ages through the prophets was to record the communication. Although no one can doubt that language, whether written or spoken, is not a "perfect" means of communication, it seems evident that it was the "best" means available, not that the best means was "adequate."

Can written language be adequate to preserve and communicate the will of God? It is absurd that the scholars who raise a voice against the adequacy of language have found language adequate enough to convey their view that language is not adequate!

The time-tested superiority of a written record of truth was the one God chose to use in order to make permanent and immortalize His message to men.

There were several decided advantages to this medium of revelation.

Precision

It is a common experience that thoughts become more precise as they are expressed. In this connection it may be said that a student can understand better with a pencil than with any other instrument; because, if a thought can be apprehended and expressed in writing, it must have been clearly understood.

The proof of that point is the fact that mankind's most treasured knowledge to date is in the form of written records and books. It is understandable, then, that God should choose to have His truth conveyed by books as precisely as is possible.

Propagation

It is possible to make more precise copies of a written medium than a spoken one. No one will disagree that a written copy can be, and usually is, a much more accurate reproduction than an oral tradition. No matter how careful the communication is made orally, there is always a greater chance for change and corruption of the original than with a written record.

READ JOHN 21:23. What does it tell us about misinterpretation of the spoken word?

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Thus, in order to transmit revealed truth accurately, written records were made and copied by hand, until the invention of movable type in the printing process. Once the movable type had been invented (in the fifteenth century), the advantage of the printed page, and ability to reproduce it on a mass scale, became most apparent.

Preservation

Even in our day we understand the significance of the written word: the proceedings of meetings are minuted in books as a reference; members of that meeting are bound by the approved minutes!

It is always better to “make a note of it,” or to “put it on record.” As a matter of fact, it is difficult to imagine the adjudication of justice in a court without a record of testimony.

A written record has one additional advantage as well, namely, it can stimulate memory and invoke within the individual’s imagination a host of personal implications that are latent within the given symbols or words of that record.

THE LANGUAGES – HEBREW AND GREEK

It could be expected that He who “works all things after the counsel of His will” (Eph. 1:11) and who brought forth Christ “when the fullness of time came” (Gal. 4:4), would have chosen languages that were particularly suited to the purpose of His revelation. Happily, such is the case with the biblical languages as the following examination will reveal.

Old Testament (Hebrew from the Semitic group of languages)

1. Divisions of Semitic languages

The Semitic group of languages includes four divisions.

The Eastern Division –

Akkadian: was the *common language* of all Southwest Asia during the height of the Old Babylonian and Assyrian empires. (Akkadian not used in the Old Testament.)

The Southern Division –

Arabic and Ethiopic: Ethiopic was the language of Ethiopia (Cush), and Arabic is the most widely spoken Semitic language in the modern world, being *spoken by large numbers* of people over a vast area. (Neither of those languages is used in the Old Testament.)

The Northern Division:

Amorite and Aramaic, the language of Jesus and the disciples. The Amorites inhabited Palestine before and during Israel’s occupation. (Language was not used in the writing of the Old Testament).

The Northwest Division:

This division of the Semitic family includes the Canaanite subdivision as well as Aramaic elements, and is represented by four dialects: Ugaritic, Phoenician, Moabite, and *Hebrew*. The contribution of the Phoenicians is a major one, because it was they who introduced the alphabet to other languages, making writing much less cumbersome than it was for the Akkadians (hieroglyphics).

Lot’s descendants developed two dialects of Hebrew: Moabite by way of his oldest daughter, and Ammonite by way of the younger. (Neither of these languages were used in the Old Testament)

Hebrew is by far the most important language of the Old Testament. Most of the Old Testament is written in it.

2. *Why Hebrew?*

a. *It is a pictorial language*

Hebrew is a pictorial speaking with vivid, bold metaphors that challenge and dramatize the story. The Hebrew language possesses a facility to present “pictures” of the events narrated. As a pictorial language, Hebrew presents a vivid picture of the acts of God among a people who became examples or illustrations for future generations (cf. 1 Cor. 10:11). Because the Old Testament was intended as a biographical book for believers, it was fitting for those truths to be presented graphically in a “picture-language.”

b. *It is a personal language.*

Hebrew is a language through which the message is felt rather than thought. As such, the language was highly qualified to convey to the individual believer as well as to the worshipping community the personal revelation of the living God in the events of the Jewish nation.

Biblical Hebrew does not deal with abstractions but with the facts of experience. It is the right sort of language for the record of the self-revelation of a God who does not make Himself known by philosophical propositions but by controlling and intervening in the course of human history.

c. *Geography*

Canaan was right in the middle between the major division of Semitic groups of languages. Most of the other groups would be able to read Hebrew and Hebrew would be understood by most of the other. Geographically Canaan also found itself on the major trade routes between countries north of it and the northern countries of Africa. The written text of the Old Testament could easily be carried along into all of these directions.

New Testament

a. *Greek was an intellectual language.*

It was more a language of the mind than of the heart. It was a language that could more easily render the credible into the intelligible than could Hebrew. Because Greek possessed a technical precision not found in Hebrew, the theological truths that were more generally expressed in the Hebrew of the Old Testament were more precisely formulated in the Greek of the New Testament.

b. *Greek was a nearly universal language.*

The truth of God in the Old Testament, which was initially revealed to one nation (Israel), was appropriately recorded in the language of that nation (Hebrew). But the fuller revelation given by God in the New Testament was not restricted in that way. In the words of Luke’s gospel, the message of Christ was to “be proclaimed in His name to all nations” (Luke 24:47). The language most appropriate for the propagation of that message was naturally the one that was most widely spoken throughout the world. It was the Greek language, which, at the time when the gospel began to be proclaimed among all the nations, was a thoroughly international language, spoken not only around the Aegean shores but all over the Eastern Mediterranean and in other areas too.

God chose the very languages to communicate His truth which had, in His providence, been prepared to express most effectively the kind of truth He desired at that particular time, in the unfolding of His overall plan.