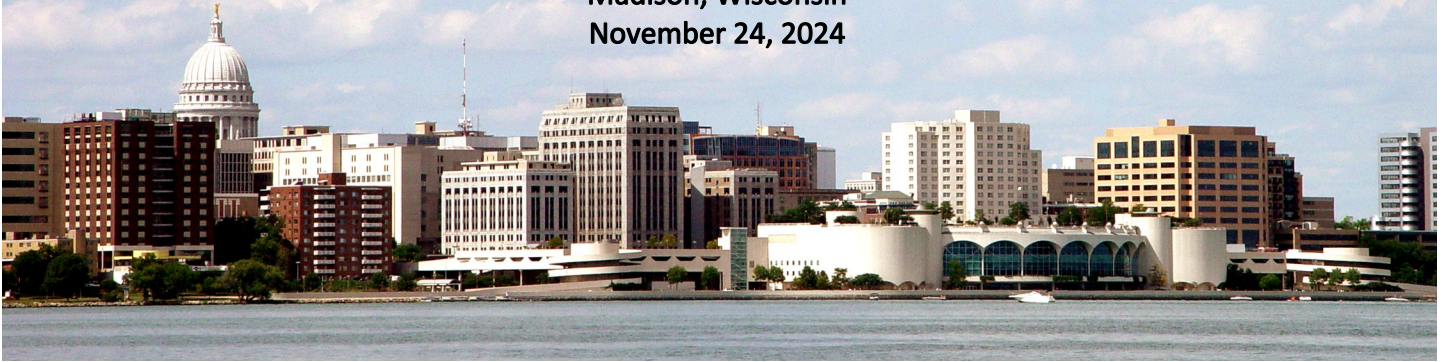


The Writing of Ancient Books

How We Got the Bible: Part 2

Baxter T. Exum (#1761)
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Good morning and welcome to the Four Lakes congregation! If you are visiting with us today, we are happy to have you with us, and we'd like to ask that you fill out a visitor card – either online or on a card from the pew in front of you. And we also invite you to pass along any questions or prayer concerns in that way.

Before we get to our study this morning, I wanted to take care of some housekeeping, and sometimes, when a speaker says something like that, he's speaking figuratively. Today, though, I am speaking literally. For quite some time, we have struggled with cleaning our facility. Finances are tight, and this seems like something we should be able to do ourselves. And we don't often think about it, until we come in and the trash is overflowing or there's no soap in the restrooms. When we rented the library down at Elvehjem Elementary School, a good portion of our rent of \$185 per week went to the custodian who would let us in and keep things clean for us. But when we bought this building back in 2001, we were excited to have a space of our own, and we joyfully kept it clean by taking turns. Ruth did it for many years, even before obeying the gospel. I know John and Denesha did it for a while. During COVID, our elders took turns sanitizing everything before, during, and after our two services. But now we're back to taking turns. A month or two ago, I was mulling over the possibility of selling our facility and going back to renting. Mowing, and blowing, and cleaning, and constantly fixing stuff has a way of getting old when we're only here for a few hours every week. But right about that time, Denise had a new idea: Instead of asking one person to do everything for a month, what if we split it up? Her reasoning was that it would lighten the load and make it more doable. And with her help, we've redone our sign-up sheet with this in mind. All of these things can be done fairly quickly, even before or after worship, to save you a trip over here. Most of this is not really physically demanding, and most of this can be done in 10-15 minutes or so. If you have any questions, please get in touch with Denise. But, like I said, we had some "housekeeping" to take care of this morning. Thank you to those who have already signed up. We have a mutual responsibility to maintain a clean and safe place where we can worship.

And I know we haven't mentioned it (other than in the bulletin, and by email, and in the announcement slides), but let's also remember the opportunity we have to support the children at Shults-Lewis Child & Family Services. This is an organization operated by members of the Lord's church, providing a home for children coming out of some tough family situations, many of whom have some severe behavioral or emotional struggles of their own. They live in several "homes," with houseparents in each home, and we have the privilege of providing food that is put in a central pantry. This year, they are asking us to collect tomato soup

as well as chicken and rice type soup. They also take old cell phones as well as used ink-jet and toner cartridges, which they sell to recyclers to help fund their operation down there. And this year they are also accepting gift cards to either Aldi or Walmart. And I love that option. It's much easier to transport a gift card from here to Valparaiso, Indiana, than it is to transport a van full of soup! I can see doing more of this in the future. But, they are coming in about a week and a half, so next Sunday is the deadline for this. I will be out of town next Sunday, so I wanted to mention it this morning.

We are here this morning to preach the good news, that although we've sinned, God loves us and sent his Son Jesus to save us: He died on the cross, he was buried, and he was raised up from the dead on the first day of the week. We obey this good news by responding with faith, repentance, confession of Jesus as the Son of God, and by allowing ourselves to be buried with Jesus in baptism (an immersion in water for the forgiveness of sins). And, as usual, we do have several examples to share this week, starting with an update from the Madison Church of Christ in Madison, Alabama. They posted a few days ago, and they say, "Praise God! What a day! We have been blessed to witness the baptisms of Elizabeth, Tyler, and Connor. Lift up these precious souls and their families in prayer as they begin their new life in Christ!" They say that seven have been baptized in the last week and that 29 were baptized last month through their ministry at a local prison. Good news from Alabama!

These next two come to us from the Green Oaks congregation down in Arlington, Texas. They say, "Rejoice with us! Joshua Hays and Tiffany Sharp were baptized for the remission of their sins. Pray for our new brother and sister in Christ."

Our last one this morning comes to us from Uzhhorod, Ukraine, a city on the far western edge of Ukraine, right across the border from Hungary. And I don't even know how to pronounce the man's name. That's why I'm putting the text up here. But he says, "Another saved soul joined God's family today. Natalia took a step of faith, accepted baptism for the forgiveness of sins. Congratulations!" As a swimmer, I am somewhat concerned by the green water, but what a blessing, to know that this woman has obeyed the good news. As always, we share these pictures by way of encouragement and as our invitation to you to consider obeying the good news yourself. If we can help, if you'd like to study together, please let us know. Pull me aside after worship, or give me a call or send a text to 608-224-0274.

This morning, we are returning to our study concerning HOW WE GOT THE BIBLE. Last week, we started by taking a look at the written word of God. Today, we'll be looking at the writing of ancient books. We plan on being away next week, but when we get back, I'd like to have us ask: Are the manuscripts reliable? How do we know that the copies of copies of copies are accurate representations of the originals? Then we'll look at what is known as the "canon of scripture." How do we know what books should be regarded as Scripture? And then, finally, we'll take a look at what's involved in translating scripture from one language to another. We may pause or take a detour here and there, but this will be our general direction over the next month or so.

By way of very brief review, last week we asked ourselves: Why did God communicate in writing (as opposed to simply by word of mouth, as opposed to a never-ending series of miraculous revelations)? We had a grand total of around 72 verses in our study last week, and I am including those references here again this week, in case you missed it (or in case you would like to take a screenshot to review some of these). We looked at these in the order they appear in scripture, so in no particular order, we noted some of the benefits of God communicating with us in writing. The written word is precise, it is authoritative, it is permanent, and it can be translated and shared far and wide, spanning many generations without being changed or corrupted. This is last week's lesson in brief.

This morning, though, I want us to continue by thinking about the writing of ancient books. Yes, God communicated with us in writing, but how did people actually write in ancient times? This morning, then, I want us to just do an overview of how people wrote back then. We will take a look at writing materials and we'll note a few passages along the way where those materials are mentioned in scripture. To truly appreciate scripture in the form we have it today, we need to look at the various ways that messages in Bible times were written.

I. And we start this morning with one of the first and most obvious writing surfaces in ancient times: STONE.

From the field of archaeology, for example, most of us are at least somewhat familiar with the Rosetta Stone. The Rosetta Stone was created back 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 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 translating hieroglyphics, a huge discovery! But this is just one of the most famous examples of people in the ancient world writing things on stone.

But what about the Bible? Do we have any references to 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 do have a reference in the Bible to something being written on stone.

II. Secondly, we also know that people in ancient times sometimes wrote on POTTERY SHARDS.

People would have this nice piece of pottery, but it would break, and they hated to waste those nice little scraps, so people would use those little pieces of pottery just as we would use scratch paper today. On the wall up here, we are looking at a tax receipt from the emperor, written in Greek, from 152 AD. So, when you paid your taxes, the tax man would take a piece of broken pottery, he would write out a receipt, and if he tried to collect those taxes from you again, you could present that receipt as proof that you had already paid. We also have pottery shards from the ancient world that are basically shopping lists. And so, on your way out the door, your wife might hand you a piece of a broken pot, and the little shard would say, "milk, bread, and eggs," or something like that. A pottery shard was the perfect size for making a short list.

As far as I can tell, we don't have a Biblical reference to writing on shards; however, some of these have been found that help us understand some events from the Bible. For example, several years ago, archaeologists have found a shard that had been written on at some point right before the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. And when they translated it, they realized that it was written by a guard and it had a list of names on it. They assume that it might have been a duty roster, "Alright, who's on for tomorrow? Let me check my shard!" We might compare it to the sign-up sheet for cleaning this building I showed you a few moments ago.

By the way, in Greek, these pottery shards are referred to as "ostraca." An ostraca was a piece of broken pottery. Aren't most of us somewhat familiar with what it meant to be "ostracized"? In ancient Greece, if someone got out of line, if they offended the community, if they were a threat politically, that guy could be "voted off the island," so to speak. Everybody was given a piece of broken pottery, you could write the person's name on it, and they could be "ostracized," 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 before that, the penalty was death.

Some of you know that I attend the meetings of the Madison Biblical Archaeological Society. It's a group of people interested in Biblical archaeology, led by some people from UW Madison. At one of their meetings a few years ago, I noticed a car in the parking lot with an interesting license plate. These people are fanatics, and I love it! "Sherd" is short for "potsherd," and is the same as a "shard." When archaeologists dig for stuff, they probably find more potsherds than anything, and those "sherds" can speak volumes.

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

I think most of us can remember learning about "cuneiform" when we were in school. It's one of the earliest forms of writing and was done in damp clay with a wedge-shaped stylus. In fact, the word "cuneiform" goes back to the Latin word for "wedge." I find it interesting that we are back to using styli! My Samsung Galaxy S22 came with a stylus! And we have at least 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 almost certainly written on clay tablets, and they were to be put in a jar so they would not break. The second reference comes in Ezekiel 4:1, where God says 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 imagine), but it was almost certainly a wet brick, a piece of clay that could be inscribed. So, people in Bible times often wrote on clay tablets.*

IV. We also know that people in the ancient world would often write things on WOOD.

On the wall (or on your screen at home) we are looking at what is basically a toe tag, a wooden label that was attached to an ancient Egyptian, making sure that the embalmer put the correct dead guy in the right coffin. And this dates back to within about a hundred years of Moses, give or take. This one belongs to one of the daughters of a pharaoh. Well, there was quite a bit of wood in the ancient 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.

As far as I can tell, the first Biblical reference to writing on wood comes in Numbers 17:1-4, where God is putting down a rebellion and tells Moses to take a "rod" (a walking stick) from each of the twelve tribes and to have each man write his name on the rod. And that's where they put those rods in the tent overnight, and Aaron's rod ends up budding and bearing almonds as a sign that Aaron is God's appointed leader.

We have another reference to writing on wood in Ezekiel 37:16-17, where God says to the prophet Ezekiel, *"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 other reference to writing on wood is found in Isaiah 30:8, where God says 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 translated "tablet" in this passage does not refer to an iPad, but rather, it goes back to a word meaning "plank" or "board," almost certainly a reference to writing on wood.

V. Beyond this, sometimes people in ancient times would write on METAL.

In fact, we have a reference to this in Exodus 28:36, where God is telling Moses how to make the various garments for the priests, and as the Lord describes the turban (the headgear), he says, *"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 told to write on a plate of pure gold.

As you can see from the picture on the wall up here, we actually have a tiny piece of scripture written on a silver scroll. This is part of the "Aaronic Blessing," as it is sometimes referred to. It's a copy of the passage I read at KT's wedding, where God told Moses to tell Aaron the high priest (in Numbers 6:24-26) to say to the people, *"The Lord bless you, and keep you; the Lord make His face shine on you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance on you, and give you peace."* And this scroll up here is widely acknowledged as being the most significant Biblical discovery of all time. To give you some perspective, this thing is roughly three inches long by half an inch wide. It was discovered near Jerusalem back in 1979 and is currently the oldest copy of scripture that we have. It was found by an Israeli schoolboy who was helping clean out an old burial cave. The tiny scroll was rolled up and was probably worn in some kind of amulet on a necklace. And to give you some idea of how fragile this little silver scroll is: It took archaeologists three years to unroll it! Can you imagine trying to explain to your friends what you do for a living? "Well, for the past three years I've been unrolling a tiny silver scroll the size of a thimble!" But, I share this to make the point that people in ancient times would sometimes write on metal.

VI. We also know that people in Bible times would sometimes write on WAXED TABLETS.

This goes way back, even before the time of Christ, but basically, people would create a shallow indentation in a piece of wood or ivory, they would fill it with a thin layer of wax, and they would write on it with a stylus. And we might even describe this as the first word processor, because it was erasable. You could write something and then when you were all done with your little note, you could smooth the wax back out and use it again, almost like we might use a whiteboard today. In the image up here, you might notice that the back end of the stylus is shaped almost like a tiny little spatula. You could use that to flatten out what you had written, almost like an eraser. And the tablet itself was hinged, so you could close it and protect what you had written.

Well, we actually have a reference to a tablet in Luke 1:63. You may remember how Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, was mute, but they asked him what he wanted to name his son, and the Bible says that, *"...he asked for a tablet and wrote as follows, 'His name is John.' And they were all astonished."* Again, the word *"tablet"* (in Luke 1:63) is almost certainly a reference to the kind of waxed tablet that we are looking at on the wall up here; basically, a piece of wood with a depression in it that is smeared with wax.

VII. This brings us to what is probably the most famous example of writing material in the ancient world, and that is: PAPYRUS.

On the wall up here, we have the oldest known piece of a manuscript of a passage in the New Testament. It's known as P52. This fragment is roughly the size of a credit card and is dated to somewhere between 100-175 AD. We'll get back to that in two weeks, but the "P" stands for Papyrus. Papyrus is a plant that grows along the Nile River in Egypt and is obviously the basis for our English word "paper." And the good news is that compared to some of these other materials we've looked at today, papyrus is relatively inexpensive. Some of you may remember that when we studied this in our Wednesday class many years ago, I purchased a dwarf papyrus plant over at Johansen's on Todd Drive just off the Beltline – a beautiful greenhouse that I believe is now a Nissan dealer. Nissans are a bit more profitable than papyrus, I suppose. When we brought it home, though, we had a massive outbreak of the most ginormous black flies that you have ever seen. These things were the size of my thumb! It was like one of the plagues of Egypt down in my office. We had to go to war with those creatures. However, at some point in the process, I knocked the plant over, and one of the larger

stems broke off. At that point, I decided to make paper! And this is it. I want to pass this around, and I would ask you to be careful with it. But I hope you'll notice a few things. First of all, notice how the lines go one way on one side and the other way on the other side (we will get back to that in a moment). Also notice that it is fairly light and thin. And, it is fairly tough.

That papyrus plant is long gone, so last week I told you I was looking for a papyrus dealer. It's not really papyrus season around here (ever), but last Sunday I went on Facebook Marketplace and did a search for a papyrus plant. There was one guy on the north side of Mount Horeb who was selling clumps of papyrus. So, we set up a meet, and when I got to his house he had a nice clump of papyrus roots laying out there on the driveway for me, but they had been whacked to about an inch tall for the winter. I told him I'd take it, but I asked, "Do you happen to have any that are still alive?" He got a gleam in his eye and said, "Sure! Let me show you my basement!" At this point, I'm thinking, "This is how I get murdered! I'm on a dead-end road on the north side of Mount Horeb, and this is how it ends. Nobody knows where I am." But, I go in, and this guy is a fish breeder. The whole house is full of stock tanks, and aquariums, and swimming pools. He shows me a 5-gallon bucket full of papyrus, and we make a deal: \$5 for the whole bucket! I ask his permission to take some pictures. We get to talking, I tell him what I'm doing, and he says, "Oh, I was baptized into the church of Christ many years ago down in Illinois." We had an interesting conversation, and I made it out very much alive.

I got home and repotted everything, and here it is. No flies yet! These are tiny stalks compared to what I had last time, but if you look inside one of these, you'll notice that almost looks like styrofoam in there. It's pulpy. The Greeks referred to that white, pulpy material as "BIBLOS," which came to be defined as "book." It's the basis for our English word "bibliography," the list of resources at the end of a term paper. It's also the basis of our English word "Bible." The Bible is the greatest of all books; it is "the Book." And it all goes back to the Greek word for the white pulpy stuff in the middle of a stalk of papyrus.

Basically (and I have done this), 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 in two layers, perpendicular to each other, and then pressed. I put mine between two 2x4's and crushed them in a bench vise for a few days. When those sheets are dry, they can then be written on with ink.

A single sheet of papyrus paper was referred to by the Greek word "CHARTES." And that sounds familiar, because it's the basis for our English word "chart." Literally, a chart is one sheet. In the Bible, this word is used only one time and is found in 2 John 12, where John is writing to this woman and says, ***"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 we translate here as ***"paper"*** is the Greek word "CHARTES," a reference to a single sheet of papyrus. And I try to mention this whenever I teach or preach from 2 John, giving the reminder that 2 John literally fit on one sheet of paper. John is basically saying, then, "I have so much to write, but it's hard to keep all of my thoughts on this ONE PAGE (on this CHART), so I want to come and speak to you face-to-face."

Well, these sheets could then be glued together to form long rolls (or scrolls). By the way, the Roman Empire controlled the papyrus trade, and the names of the officials responsible for the transaction 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 that may sound familiar, because it is the basis for our English word "protocol." When we're talking about a protocol, we are normally talking about a summary or a series of steps on how to handle something, almost like a table of contents outlining what comes next. But literally, a protocol is the "first glued sheet" of a long scroll, almost like a table of contents.

A book written on one of these papyrus rolls was called a “biblos” or “biblion.” It wasn’t really a book as we think of it, but it was a roll of papyrus. The word is used in Matthew 1:1, where 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 of a 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, Luke is literally 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 refers to a “cutting.” In other words, the scroll was so long that it had to be cut in pieces. And “tomos” might sound somewhat familiar, because it’s the basis of our English word “tome,” a reference to a large, weighty, or scholarly book.

Normally, people would only write on one side of the papyrus. Remember how I said those strips were perpendicular? Normally, people would write on the side where the strips were laid horizontally. It was almost like ruled paper (like we have today). However, if the message was urgent, someone might write on both sides (even though it was more difficult to write on the vertical strips). You may remember the passage in Revelation 5:1, where John says, ***“I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a book written inside and on the back, sealed up with seven seals.”*** And John is so distraught that he starts weeping, but then one of the elders speaks up and explains (down in verse 5) that Jesus has overcome so as to ***“open the book”*** (the SCROLL) and its seven seals. The point is: It was unusual for a scroll to be written on both sides, but we do have that reference in Revelation.

From a practical point of view, the longest functional scroll would be somewhere around 30 feet long. In a few weeks, I want to mention the Dead Sea Scrolls. One of the most famous of those scrolls was the Great Isaiah Scroll, which was around 24 feet long. To try to illustrate this, I did some math (which can be dangerous for me), but I multiplied 24 feet by 12 to put it in inches and then divided by 8.5 (the width of a standard piece of paper here in the US) to figure out that I would need to print the book of Isaiah on 34 sheets of paper. I then took the text of Isaiah and adjusted the font to Courier New 9.7 to get it to fill those 34 sheets. And then I taped it all together. This is a scroll of Isaiah. And they didn’t have chapter and verse divisions back then. So, I want you to imagine trying to find something in here. Imagine me handing you this scroll and asking you to find that one passage about Jesus being led as a sheep to the slaughter. Do we see any challenges there? First, I guess, we’d have to find the Isaiah scroll in our refrigerator-size box of scrolls. And then we’d need a place to set this thing. And then we would need to do a whole lot of scrolling. We scroll on our computers and phones today, don’t we? And then, this thing would start wearing out if we did that too many times. Scrolls had some downsides.

So, after a while, with better technology, people stopped gluing sheets together in long scrolls, and they started stacking up a bunch of single sheets and binding them along the edge. This set-up is referred to as a “codex,” and writing would then be found on both sides of the sheet. You could fit a lot more information in a much smaller space, you could find stuff much faster, you could actually flip through it, and it was quite a bit more portable. We’ll get back to another challenge of the scrolls in a few weeks. But the point here is: Papyrus was a very common writing material in the ancient world.

VIII. Before we close our thoughts on the making of ancient books, I should also at least briefly mention the use of VELLUM or PARCHMENT.

We are talking here about the use of animal skins. The word “vellum” is related to the word “veal” and is a reference (technically) to calf skin. Sometimes they would use other animals: goats, antelope, and even unborn or stillborn animals (their skin was very smooth and thin). Sometimes, even today, peel will refer to a college degree as a “sheepskin,” a reference back to the days when college degrees were originally printed on parchment. Parchment is more durable than papyrus, but it is more expensive. On the wall, we’re looking at a German depiction of someone scraping an animal skin to be used as vellum. And the Biblical reference here is 2 Timothy 4:13, where Paul is basically on death row in Rome and writes to Timothy and says, *“When you come bring the cloak which I left at Troas with Carpus, and the books, especially the PARCHMENTS.”* So, some of Paul’s personal study materials were written on parchment, a reference to animal skins.

Conclusion:

There is so much more we could consider on this subject, but the basic idea this morning is that God has communicated to us through his written word. And we have learned this morning that God had many options available when he set out to make sure that his written word was accurately passed down through the ages. If the Lord wills, I’d like for us to pick up in two weeks by asking: Are the manuscripts reliable? How do we know that the copies of copies of copies we have today are an accurate representation of the originals?

Let’s close our study today by going to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

We are thankful this morning for your written word. We are thankful for all the ways you have communicated to us, and we are thankful for those who have given their lives to copy and translate and print your word so that we can have it available to us today.

We come to you this morning in Jesus’ name. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com