Language Name: Biblical Hebrew. Autonyms: In the Bible the language is called Șapīt Kana'īn, literally ‘lip (that is, language) of Canaan’, reflecting no distinction between Hebrew and other Canaanite dialects (see below); the specific dialect of Judah is called Yōhāḏît ‘Judahtite’. In the early postbiblical period we encounter the name Šīrîṯ ‘Hebrew’, and this name continues to be used in modern Hebrew when referring to the Hebrew language, whether ancient or modern. Jews of the early postbiblical period also called the language Lāḏōn haq-qôdeš, literally ‘the holy tongue’, a term that continued to be used in later periods.

Location: Israel. Also, because of the unique circumstances of the Diaspora of the Jews, Biblical Hebrew spread throughout the world. With the Babylonian conquest of Israel in general and Jerusalem, in particular, in 586 B.C., and even more so after the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in a.d. 70, Jews settled in other countries. In all cases they adopted the languages of these countries for everyday usage, both spoken and written, but they continued to read the Bible and other classical texts in Hebrew. (An important exception is the Jews of Ethiopia who read the Bible in Ge‘ez.) Thus, Hebrew spread as the language of Judaism into areas of Asia, North Africa, and Europe, and in more modern times to the Americas, South Africa, and Australia.

Family: Northwest Semitic subgroup of the West Semitic group of the Semitic branch of the Afro-Asiatic language family.

Related Languages: Most closely related to the other dialects of Canaanite (see below), then to Aramaic, Arabic, Akkadian, South Arabian and Ge‘ez.

Dialects: Biblical Hebrew is one of a number of closely related dialects of the Canaanite language, which, along with Aramaic constitutes the Northwest Semitic language group. Other dialects of Canaanite include Ugaritic1 (attested at a slightly earlier time), Phoenician, Ammonite, Moabite, and Edomite (all attested contemporaneously with Biblical Hebrew).

Biblical Hebrew, in turn, can be divided into two subdialects: Judahtite, referring to the subdialect of Judah in southern Israel, and Israelite, referring to the subdialect or dialect cluster of northern Israel (including the areas settled by those Israelite tribes east of the Jordan River). The evidence for these different varieties stems from an analysis of the biblical books themselves: about 80 percent of the Bible was written in Judah and reflects Judahtite Hebrew, while approximately 20 percent was written in northern Israel and reflects Israelian Hebrew.

There is also evidence for the existence of diglossia in ancient Hebrew. The Bible is written in a classical literary register (whether Judahtite or Israelian), but divergences from the grammatical standard are often colloquial uses that have crept into the text.

Origin and History

Hebrew is the dialect of Canaanite used by the people of Israel. The early history of Hebrew is thus part of a larger picture, the history of Canaanite. The earliest evidence for Canaanite comes from two sources: (a) Ugaritic, referring to the texts found at Ugarit (modern Ras Shamra on the Syrian coast), and (b) the Amarna letters (found at modern Tell el-Amarna, Egypt).

Ugarit was destroyed about 1200 B.C., so the majority of its texts, mainly administrative in nature, clearly come from the 13th century. The literary texts, mainly myths and epics, are probably older, and we can date their composition to the 14th century B.C., if not earlier. The Amarna letters are several hundred epistles written by local Canaanite kings to the pharaohs of Egypt in the mid-14th century B.C. They were written in Akkadian, but the scribes responsible for these letters typically used a pidgin Akkadian. The morphology and syntax frequently follow Canaanite grammar rather than Akkadian grammar, and often Canaanite words are used instead of their Akkadian equivalents.

About a century and a half after the Ugaritic literary texts and the Amarna letters come our earliest biblical texts. Biblical Hebrew is typically divided into three chronological periods: Archaic (about 1100–1000 B.C.), Standard (about 1000–550 B.C.), and Late (550–200 B.C.). Archaic Biblical Hebrew is represented by only a handful of ancient poems in the Bible. Standard Biblical Hebrew makes up most of the corpus and includes such familiar works as the Torah; the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings; prophets such as Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah; and poetic compilations such as Psalms and Proverbs. Late Biblical Hebrew, which is characterized most of all by influences from Aramaic, the lingua franca of that period, is represented by books such as Chronicles, Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Qohelet (Ecclesiastes).

Archaeological fieldwork in the last century has uncovered hundreds of Hebrew inscriptions from the biblical period, most extremely short.

1Many scholars consider Ugaritic to be an independent language and not a dialect of Canaanite.
Technically, Biblical Hebrew should refer only to the Hebrew of the Bible (and perhaps the contemporary inscriptions). But postbiblical compositions are written in the same language, typically in the natural continuation of Late Biblical Hebrew. Among these are the literary work Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus), dated about 180 B.C., and most importantly, the Dead Sea Scrolls (found at Qumran), dated about 150 B.C. to about A.D. 50. Eventually Hebrew died out as a spoken language; the best estimate is approximately A.D. 220. But Jews continued to write texts in Hebrew, although not in Biblical Hebrew, even in its latest stage, but in a more colloquial variety known as Mishnaic Hebrew (named after the Mishnah, a classic text of law and practice dated about A.D. 220).

Orthography and Basic Phonology

Hebrew is written in a 22-letter alphabet that was invented by the Phoenicians. The 22 letters indicate consonants only, and the direction of writing is right to left.

The letter forms evolved over time. In the alphabet table appear both the ancient Hebrew letters, as originally borrowed from the Phoenicians, and the more familiar Hebrew alphabet still in use to this day. The latter alphabet includes five additional graphemes used in final position only.

At first, Biblical Hebrew orthography did not express the vowels. In time, the letters y, w, and h came to be used to indicate final vowels (quite regularly) and medial long vowels (sporadically). When used in this manner, these letters are called matres lectionis, or 'vowel letters'. This process is seen more fully developed in the Dead Sea Scrolls, where almost all long vowels are marked by vowel letters. In the transliteration system adopted in this chapter, matres lectionis are indicated by superscript letters.

In about A.D. 850 Jewish scholars known as the Masoretes (traders) developed a series of markings to indicate the vowels. These markings typically are dots and dashes placed either above or below the line. Actually, three different systems were invented, although in time the one developed at Tiberias (in northern Israel) became the standard system utilized by Jews. In addition, the Masoretes developed diacritical marks to indicate distinctions not shown by the 22-letter alphabet, such as a dot inside a letter to indicate a doubled consonant. The text that the Masoretes produced is known as the Masoretic Text. It reproduces in writing the traditional pronunciation of the received biblical text of the late first millennium A.D. At the same time, however, scholars agree that the traditional pronunciation harks back to a much earlier period.

There were 25 distinct consonants in Biblical Hebrew, even though the alphabet had only 22 letters. A single letter h was used to indicate both /h/ and /x/; ? was used to indicate both /f/ and /g/; and ? was used to indicate both /s/ and /z/. In the other 19 instances, there is a one-to-one correspondence between orthography and consonantal phonology. In the course of time, /s/ merged with /z/. When scribes wished to use a historical orthography, they continued to write ?; when they wished to use a more phonetic orthography, they used s. Also, /x/ eventually merged with /h/, and /g/ with /y/.

The phonemes /h/ /k/ /s/ are known as emphatics. The exact articulation of these consonants in Biblical Hebrew is unknown. The corresponding consonants in Arabic are velarized or pharyngealized; the corresponding consonants in South Arabian and Ethiopian Semitic are glottalized.

At some point in ancient Hebrew, the six stops /b/ /p/ /d/ `/l` /g/ /f/ developed a two-fold realization. Following vowels, they came to be pronounced as fricatives /v/ /f/ /f/ /b/ /g/ /s/; otherwise, they remained stops.

Consonant gemination was phonemic in ancient Hebrew. In theory all consonants could be single or geminate except that in the Masoretic Text, /f/ /h/ /s/ /l/ /h/ /h/ can occur only single. When morphological processes would have geminated one of those seven consonants, the quality of the vowel in the preceding syllable generally changed instead.

### Table 1: Consonants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Labial</th>
<th>Dental/Alveolar</th>
<th>Alveopalatal</th>
<th>Velar</th>
<th>Pharyngeal</th>
<th>Glottal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stops</td>
<td>Voiceless</td>
<td>p</td>
<td>t</td>
<td>k, q</td>
<td>?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Voiced</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>d</td>
<td>g</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fricatives</td>
<td>Voiceless</td>
<td>s</td>
<td>y</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>h</td>
<td>h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Voiced</td>
<td>z</td>
<td>?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nasals</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>n</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laterals</td>
<td>Voiceless</td>
<td>y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Voiced</td>
<td>l</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trill</td>
<td>t</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glides</td>
<td>w</td>
<td>r</td>
<td>y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2: Vowels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Front</th>
<th>Central</th>
<th>Back</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>i i</td>
<td>u u</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid</td>
<td>e</td>
<td>o</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>a a</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Historically, there were three simple vowels in Semitic, short /a/ /i/ /u/ and long /ā/ /ā/ /ā/. In the course of time, the Hebrew

...
short vowels developed various allophones, depending on the kind of syllable in which the vowel occurred (open or closed) and depending on syllable stress. The Masoretic notation system (described above) indicates all these fine differences. In the transliteration system used in this chapter, some of these allophones are marked by a macron (for example, ā). The original long vowels, marked by a circumflex, are not affected by type of syllable or by placement of accent.

Ancient Hebrew also had two diphthongs, ay and aw. Generally in unaccented syllables and occasionally in accented syllables, these diphthongs became monophthongs /e/ and /o/.

Stress in Biblical Hebrew was generally on the final syllable in a phrase. Short vowels in unstressed open syllables typically were reduced to [ə].

Basic Morphology

As with all Semitic languages, Hebrew morphology is characterized by the interplay of root and pattern. Most roots consist of three consonants, and they may occur in any number of typical verbal and nominal patterns. For example, the root Z-K-R appears as a simple verb zākar ‘he remembered; in a derived verb hizkîr ‘he caused to remember, he reminded’; in a participial form of the latter maszkt ‘recorder, secretary’; and in the noun forms zēker ‘remembrance’, zikkārōn ‘memorial’, and ḥazkārāh ‘memorial-sacrifice’.

Hebrew nouns are inflected for number (singular, plural [and, in some cases, dual]), gender (masculine, feminine), and definiteness (definite, indefinite). There are numerous nominal patterns, often with associated semantic qualities. For example, CjCjCjCj is used for nouns representing people with bodily defects (such as a blind person, lame person, or hunchback); CjCjCjCj is used for professions (such as a cook, archer, or horseman).

The definite article is ha- with the following consonant geminated: melēk ‘king’, hammelek ‘the king’. There is no indefinite article.

Table 3: The Hebrew Alphabet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ancient Form</th>
<th>Familiar Form</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>א</td>
<td>א</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ב</td>
<td>ב</td>
<td>b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ג</td>
<td>ג</td>
<td>g</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ד</td>
<td>ד</td>
<td>d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ה</td>
<td>ו</td>
<td>w</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ז</td>
<td>ז</td>
<td>z</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ח</td>
<td>ח</td>
<td>h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ט</td>
<td>ט</td>
<td>t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>י</td>
<td>י</td>
<td>y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ב</td>
<td>ב</td>
<td>b (final)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ה</td>
<td>ה</td>
<td>h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>י</td>
<td>י</td>
<td>y (final)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hebrew adjectives agree with the nouns they modify in number, gender, and definiteness:

mišteḥ feast:masc.indef 'a feast' (Genesis 21:8)
ḥa-ṣpr the-city:fem the-large-fem 'the large city' (Jonah 1:1)

The Hebrew verb can appear in two conjugations, one utilizing suffixes and one utilizing mostly prefixes (accompanied by a few suffixes). Scholars still debate whether these conjugations reflect different tenses (present/future versus past) or aspects (imperfect versus perfect). Hence, they are often simply referred to as the suffix and prefix conjugations, respectively. The suffixes and prefixes indicate the person, number, and gender of the subject (gender distinctions are not made in the first person).

Hebrew verbs occur in a limited number of patterns, with the following the most common. The simple pattern is, as with zākar above, CjCjCjCj, A pattern CjCjCjCj, with the middle root consonant doubled, often has a resultative meaning. The pattern hiCjCjCj, with prefixed hi-, generally has a causative meaning, as with hizkîr above. The pattern hihatCjCjCj, with prefixed hii-, has a reflexive force. (All forms cited are third person masculine singulars from the suffix conjugation, the typical citation form.)

Hebrew has two sets of pronouns: free or independent forms, and bound or suffixed forms. They are inflected like the verb. The free forms serve as subjects. The bound forms have possessive meaning when suffixed to nouns and objective meaning when suffixed to verbs or prepositions. An unusual feature of Biblical Hebrew is the presence of two first person singular pronouns pron and ṭanōkht, apparently used interchangeably, although some scholars have detected syntactic or stylistic criteria determining which form is used.
294 Biblical Hebrew

The conjunction wa- ‘and’ and several common prepositions (la- ‘to, for’, ba- ‘in’, ka- ‘as, like’) do not appear as independent forms, but instead are prefixed to the following word.

Basic Syntax

The basic word order in Biblical Hebrew was VSO. However, for emphasis, the subject or object could occur in initial position.

Biblical Hebrew has a special compound verb form used regularly for past-tense narration. Its third person masculine singular form appears as wayyiqqt, comprising of the conjunction wa- (serving here as a copula), the agreement marker y (doubled, most likely because a special past-tense marker n has been absorbed), and the verbal stem.

Verbless clauses and sentences (for identification or classification) occur frequently because there is no copula. For example:

nà? ?à'dôn-y
he master my ‘He is my master.’ (Genesis 24:65)

Adjectives follow the nouns they modify (see examples below).

Two nouns are often juxtaposed to create a construct phrase. This construction may indicate possession, or it may best be rendered by an adjectival phrase in English. If the construct phrase is definite, the definite article is prefixed to the second of the two nouns only. If the construct phrase is plural, only the first of the two nouns is so marked:

bigàd-¥ haq-qodeš
garment-pl.construcr the-holiness ‘the holy garments’ (Exodus 29:29)

A special form ?et, with no translation equivalent, appears before definite nouns serving as the direct object.

Negation is accomplished by placing one of three different words, là?, ?at, or ?ë n, all essentially ‘no’ or ‘not’, before the word or phrase being negated. The choice depends on which part of speech follows.

Contact with Other Languages

Israel is at the crossroads of the ancient world, situated on the land bridge uniting Egypt and Mesopotamia, and with access to both the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. In addition, mighty empires such as the Egyptian, Persian, and Greek ones ruled the land for centuries. Accordingly, Hebrew is in a unique position to have borrowed loanwords from a variety of languages. Among the best examples are the following:

From Egyptian: gòmê ‘papyrus’, ?à'tôn ‘linen’
From Sumerian: kissê ‘chair’, mallâh ‘sailor’
From Akkadian: sàtû ‘eunuch’, sêgal ‘queen, consort’
From Aramaic: k'tâb ‘writing’, q'râb ‘battle’
From Persian: dât ‘law’, pârdâs ‘garden’
From Greek: lâppî ‘torch’, mokêrà ‘sword’

The Sumerian loanwords require a special comment. By the time of the earliest attestation of Hebrew, Sumerian was already a dead language for centuries. These loanwords presumably reached the West Semitic world at a very early date, in the third millennium B.C.E., and Hebrew simply inherited them from earlier Canaanite. Alternatively, although less likely, they might have entered Hebrew through Akkadian.

The Greek loanwords above are early borrowings into Hebrew, the result of trade and contact in the east Mediterranean during the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages. Later, after the conquests of Alexander the Great, many more Greek words entered Hebrew. And still later, although well beyond the biblical period, Latin loanwords entered Hebrew.

Also, trade contacts to the east brought the names of exotic spices, gems, woods, and animals into Hebrew. Most of these probably came from sanskrit, such as tukkë ‘type of bird (parrot?)’, while for others the exact origin cannot be determined, for example, qinnâmōn ‘cinnamon’.

In the opposite direction, hundreds of Canaanite words entered the Egyptian language during the Late Bronze Age when many West Semites settled in the Egyptian delta. The biblical portrayal of the Israelites in Egypt (end of the book of Genesis and beginning of the book of Exodus) is part of this picture. Clearly the Israelites were not responsible for the introduction of all the words into Egyptian since they were but one among many groups of West Semites resident in Egypt then. But Hebrew is the best-attested Canaanite dialect. In the same way, we are able to point to a considerable number of Hebrew words present in the ancient Greek lexicon, probably transmitted by the Phoenicians through their contacts in the Aegean. Examples include (in their familiar English forms) griffin, nectar, and balsam.

In more recent times, Hebrew words were borrowed into numerous languages of the world, because of the Jewish Diaspora, and perhaps more importantly resulting from the spread of Christianity. Since Christianity adopted many ideas of Judaism and canonized the Bible of Judaism (to which it added other books, most importantly the New Testament, itself containing many Hebraisms), Hebrew words naturally entered the languages of Europe and elsewhere. Examples in English are amen, jubilee, manna, Sabbath, and of course many familiar personal names.

Common Words

man: ?]?$ long: ?trôk
woman: ?išâ small: qâtn
water: mayîm tree: ?ês
sun: šemeš three: šîlôš
good: ?o'îb fish: âg
bird: šippîr big: gâdôl
dog: keleb no: là?
yes: no true equivalent; ?âk = ‘indeed’

Example Sentences*

(1) wa-y-y-îqqâb ?abrâm ?et sâray ?îšt-ô
and -past-3M.SG-takes Abram ACC Sarai wife-his

wo-?et lô'ì ben ?a'h-iw.
and-ACC Lot son-pl.construct brother-his
‘Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his brother’s son.’

Note the typesetting error in the first word of (1), where the thorn (b) should be h.
and-PAST-3M-see-PL  Ace-her of:Officer-PL  of  Pharaoh
'Pharaoh's officers saw her.'

And Sarai the wife of Abram had not borne to him (a child).

*All sentences are from the book of Genesis.

**Efforts to Preserve, Protect, and Promote the Language**

Throughout their history Jews have continued to read the Bible in Hebrew, thus transmitting the language without interruption for 3,000 years. In the Middle Ages, Jewish scholars wrote grammars and dictionaries of Biblical Hebrew. Christian scholars also learned Hebrew during different historical epochs and made important contributions to the study of the language.

Hebrew was revived as a language for everyday use in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Individuals such as Eliezer Ben-Yehuda looked to the Biblical Hebrew lexicon for roots from which to build new words necessary to express modern concepts and technological advances. For example, Biblical Hebrew bārīq 'lightning' provided the root for Modern Hebrew mivra’āq 'telegram'. The Academy of the Hebrew Language, an official arm of the State of Israel, is responsible for monitoring linguistic development and for coining new words today, and it continues the same process of mining the ancient Hebrew lexicon.

**Select Bibliography**


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