



Background of the Hebrew Language and Scriptures

The Hebrew Language

The Hebrew language itself:

Biblical designations: It is called the “language of Canaan.” Isaiah 19:18. It is called the “Jews’ language.” 2 Kings 18:26, Neh. 13:24.

Characteristics: As to sounds, consonants carry emphasis over the vowels. As to roots, it is characterized by three letters to the root (consonants). As to style, it is simple, poetic, and pictorial.

The family origin of the Hebrew language: from the Semitic language family.

Babylonian-Assyrian:

Oldest known Semitic language - cuneiform type. This was adopted by the Semitic Babylonians in about 4,000 BC. It was simplified by the Assyrians in 1500 BC. It was sometimes called Babylonian, other times Assyrian. It was used by the Hittite empire from 2,000 to 800 BC. By 1,000 BC, Arameans used alphabetic writing and pen and ink. Indo-European Medes invaded in 700 BC and devised an alphabet of 38 letters. Persians in 500 BC used an alphabet of signs. Influence reached through Palestine and into Egypt for over 3,000 years with this Babylonian-Assyrian Semitic language.

Aramaic:

It is derived from “Aram,” one of the five sons of Shem. Gen. 10:22. When “Aram” is translated it is rendered “Syria.” It is referred to in 2 Kings 18:26 as “Syrian.” Ezra 4:7; Isaiah 36:11; Dan. 2:4.

Aramaic was the language of Syria. Aramaic was the language of Mesopotamia (Padan-Aram) in Laban’s time. Gen. 31:47. Abraham’s country. Gen. 24:4,10; Gen. 28:2,5.

It spread east into Assyria and south into Babylonia. It became the popular commercial language. Daniel and Ezra knew it. It spread throughout western Syria and Palestine and into parts of Arabia and Egypt and even into Asia Minor. The Hebrew leaders knew it in Hezekiah’s time. 2 Kings 18:26.

Jeremiah used it in Jer. 10:11. Daniel used it in Dan. 2:4 - Dan. 7:28. Ezra used it in quoting Gentile correspondence in Ezra 4:8 - Ezra 6:18 and Ezra 7:12-26. By the 1st Century BC, Aramaic had become the common language of the Jews and continued during the time of Christ.

Hebrew:

The alphabet has 22 consonants with square Assyrian-Hebrew script (later Aramaic). The Hebrew alphabet originated from the Old Phoenician alphabet from which all eventually came, Semitic and non-Semitic. The roundness of the Hebrew letters is a modification of Aramaic characters. Vowel points in modern Hebrew were added in 600-800 AD by Masoretic scholars, at Tiberias in Palestine.

Its geographical orientation: “The Canaanite origin of Hebrew is attested by Ugaritic and Phoenician,” quotes Dr. Unger. Hebrew is closely aligned with a Canaanite dialect. There were 11 tribes of the Canaanites, one of which became the most noted, the Phoenicians. They were Hamitic, but became Semitic in language. Hebrew was called “the language of Canaan” in Isaiah 19:18. Palestine (Canaan) is the native place of Hebrew. Some think Abraham brought Hebrew into Canaan. Others say that it is an adaption of his language with a dialect of Canaan.

The origin of the term “Hebrew” and its use as a title for language. “Hebrew” as a language designation



takes its name from the Hebrew people in the Old Testament who used it. Gen. 14:13; Gen. 40:15; Gen. 41:12. The term “Hebrew” may come from an ancestor of Abraham, Eber, a Semitic progenitor. Gen. 10:21-22; Gen. 10:25; Gen. 11:15-16. This is quite probable. The root idea of the term means to cross over or the cross-over man. It was first called Hebrew in the prologue of Ecclesiasticus in 130 BC. The term Hebrew in the New Testament refers to Aramaic. John 5:2; John 19:13; John 19:17; John 19:20; Acts 21:40; Acts 22:2; Acts 26:14.

The time orientation of the Hebrew language: It was already spoken and written by 1440 BC when Moses and the Israelites came out of Egypt (Dr. Unger). Early Hebrew goes back to the time of Abraham. The Gezer Calendar, in 925 BC, was written in perfect classical Hebrew. Old Hebrew was practically the same as Phoenician. There were two types of Script: Old Hebrew or Phoenician script and New Hebrew or Aramaic script.

Influences on the Hebrew language: Phoenician script: mainly the alphabet - pronged type. Aramaic script: square (roundness) script. Aramaic script had replaced the Phoenician script and influenced the Hebrew to the square letters.

Arabic:

Southern branch, language of northern Arabia. The best preservation of the original Semitic forms. It is rich, simple, and flexible. It gives much insight into sounds, grammatical forms and etymology. It is the language of the Koran and one of the principle languages of the world. By the 10-11th Century AD, it had virtually replaced Aramaic in Palestine. It is the only living representative of the Semitic family still used.

The Hebrew Text

Main Divisions:

The Law: first five books: the Torah, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

The Prophets: eight books, the N’bliim. Former: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings. Latter: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, The Twelve

The Writings: 11 books, K’tubhim. Poetical: Psalms, Job, Proverbs. Five Rolls: Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther. Three Books: Daniel, Ezra - Nehemiah, Chronicles.

Number of the books: 24, some have 22 with a couple books combined.

Order of the books of the Old Testament Hebrew text:

Genesis

Exodus

Leviticus

Numbers

Deuteronomy

Joshua

Judges



1 and 2 Samuel
1 and 2 Kings
Isaiah
Jeremiah
Ezekiel
Hosea
Joel
Amos
Obadiah
Jonah
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi
Psalms
Job
Proverbs
Ruth
Song of Solomon
Ecclesiastes
Lamentations
Esther
Daniel
Ezra
Nehemiah
1 and 2 Chronicles

Formation of the Old Testament Canon: Only the correct view is given.

The Old Testament books were written as being held sacred and divinely authoritative. Inspiration is the basis of canonicity. The prophets were conscious that they were giving the Word of God. There are



Scriptures too numerous to mention. The prophets had an established reputation as a prophet of God, office of a prophet and gift of a prophet.

Books were not made canonical by reason of being in a collection. They were collected because they were canonical.

The real basis for the three section division of the Hebrew text lies in the official position and/or status of the individual writer. Section one: the law from the lawgiver, Moses. Section two: the prophets authored by those having both the office of prophet and the gift of prophet. Section three: the writings authored by those having the prophetic gift, but not the office of prophet.

The three steps or facets requisite to canonicity: Divine inspiration recognized in each book as it was written. Human recognition by providential guidance under inspiration principles. Eventual collection into a canon.

Subdivisions of the text:

Division into words: Isaiah Scrolls of 125-100 BC contain word divisions.

Division into verse: indicated in Mishnah, about 200 AD.

The Soph Pasuq: the period - mentioned only after 500 AD.

Textual divisions: Parashah, also liturgical divisions: The law section was divided into 54 large portions called “parachah.” These sections were read every sabbath and enabled reading the Law once a year. The “parachah” were divided into 669 smaller sections. In Palestine, they divided the Law into 154 sections called S’dharim, to be read in three years. In the Maccabean times, the prophets were also divided into 54 sections called the “haphtarahs.” Chapter divisions as we know them were first noted in the Hebrew Bible (margin) in 1330 AD and first printed in 1571 AD. Arias Montanus was the first to break up the text into chapters. Verse divisions in the printed texts were made in 1547 by numbering every fifth verse.

Diacritical marks in the text: 135-500 AD

Heavy dot over a word or letter: indicated a word or passage in which a problem existed in the opinion of ancient scholars. Paseq or divider: vertical mark between two Hebrew words, occurring about 480 times. Meaning has become obscure in the passage of time. The inverted nun: the Hebrew nun is written upside down. Num. 10:34-36. The reason is not known.

Peculiar writing of certain letters: Raised letter: denotes a variant meaning. Judges 18:30. Enlarged letter: indicating the beginning of a book middle of the Pentateuch or famous passage. Gen. 1:1. Small letters: Gen. 2:4. Broken letters: Num. 25:12. Closed letters: Exodus 32:25. Final letters used in the middle: Is. 9:6. Non-final letters used at the end: Neh. 2:13.

A blank space sometimes to note an omission. Removal of so-called obscenities where indelicate words were substituted with euphemistic equivalents. Deut. 28:27; 1 Sam. 5:6; 1 Sam. 5:9; 1 Sam. 5:12; 2 Kings 18:27; Isaiah 36:12.

Other factors concerning the text will be noted in entire sections devoted to that phase of textual information. These will be further developed: Manuscripts, transmission, translations, and versions. Writers of the text. Chronological developments relating to the text.



The Pentateuch:

Its five-fold division: Philo and Josephus attest to the five-fold division in the 1st Century BC. The five-fold division exists in the Septuagint back to the 3rd Century BC. The meaning of Pentateuch comes from two Greek words, pente and teuchos. Pente means five and teuchos means a tool or implement. The latter was used later for a sheath or case such as used in carry the five books or scrolls.

Its designation throughout the Scriptures: “The Law.” Josh. 1:7. “The book of the Law.” Josh 8:34. “The book of the law of Moses.” Josh. 8:31. “The book of the law of God.” Josh 24:26. “The law of Moses.” 1 Kings. 2:3. “The book of the law of the Lord.” 2 Chron. 17:9. “The book of the law: Gal. 3:10. “The law.” Matt. 5:17; Luke 10:26. “The law of the Lord.” Luke 2:23. “The law of Moses.” Luke 2:22.

The names of the five books:

Genesis: Hebrew: בְּרֵאשִׁית “in the beginning.” Greek: η βιβλος γενεσεως “the book of beginning.”

Exodus: Hebrew: מִצְרַיִם וְאֵלֶּיךָ אֵלֶּיךָ Greek: ἔξοδος (exodos).

Leviticus: Hebrew: וַיִּקְרָא Greek: λεβιτικον.

Numbers: Latin Vulgate: Liber Numeri Hebrew: בְּמִדְבָּר Greek: αριθμοι

Deuteronomy: Hebrew: הַדְּבָרִים אֵלֶּיךָ Greek: δευτερονομιον.

The structure of the Pentateuch:

Genesis was built around a ten-fold genealogical structure. Generations of the heavens and the earth in Gen. 1:1 - Gen. 2:4. Generations of Adam in Gen. 5:1- Gen. 6:8. Generations of Noah in Gen. 6:9 - Gen. 9:29. Generations of the sons of Noah in Gen. 10:1 - Gen. 11:9. Generations of Shem in Gen. 11:10-26. Generations of Terah in Gen. 11:27 - Gen. 25:11. Generations of Ishmael in Gen. 25:12-18. Generations of Isaac in Gen. 25:19 - Gen. 35:29. Generations of Esau in Gen. 36:1 - Gen. 37:1. Generations of Jacob in Gen. 37:2 - Gen. 50:26.

Exodus: built around redemption. Hebrews in Egypt: Exod. 1:1 - Exod. 12:36. Hebrews in the wilderness: Exod. 12:37 - Exod. 18:27. Hebrews at Sinai: Exod. 19:1 - Exod. 40:38

Leviticus: “Law of the Priests” Hebrew: “and He called.” Prescriptions for access to God: Lev. 1:1 - Lev. 16:34. Prescriptions for fellowship with God: Lev. 17:1 - Lev. 27:34.

Numbers: “And He (Jehovah) said, In the wilderness.” Preparation for departure from Sinai. Journey from Mt. Sinai to Moab. Events in the slain of Moab.

Deuteronomy: “Words” “These are the Words” Ellah-hadde-variim. Historical, Legal, Prophetical and minatory, Historical appendices.

Manuscripts and Transmission of the Text:

The Two Classes:

Synagogues rolls: three rolls. Pentateuch, Prophets, and Megilloth with five rolls - Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther.

Private copies.



Rules for preparing the Old Testament manuscripts: taken from Talmud

Parchment must be of the skin of a clean animal. Each column must be at least 48 lines and no more than 60 lines. Pages must be lined first before copying takes place. Ink must be black. No word or letter could be written from memory. Scribe had to have authentic copy before him at all times.

Scribe had to pronounce the word before writing it. Scribe had to wipe the pen before writing the word for God each time. Scribe had to take a bath each time before writing the word “Jehovah.” Any revision had to be made within 30 days from writing. One mistake per sheet condemned the sheet. Three mistakes on a page ruled out the entire manuscript. Every word and letter were counted and if one letter was left out, the manuscript was destroyed immediately.

The quantity and identity of important Hebrew manuscripts:

The oldest known manuscript up to about 1937 was dated back to only 916 AD. The Dead Sea Scrolls have pushed back that date. Number of Old Testament manuscripts: about 1700 known today.

Oldest manuscripts of repute: The Leningrad Codex: Codex Babylonicus dated 916 AD. Includes Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiah, and The Twelve. It is at the Royal Library at Leningrad, Russia. It is written on vellum, three columns, 21 lines per page. It has vowel points and accents.

The oldest manuscript of the entire Old Testament dates 1010 AD. It is also in Leningrad, Russia, brought there from Crimea.

Oriental 4445 manuscript: this is on the Pentateuch, located in the British Museum in London. The date is 820-850 AD but is held in question.

Papyrus Nash Fragment: Little scraps of Hebrew Old Testament. Contains four fragments, the Ten Commandments and the Shema. Dated around 150 AD.

Versions of the Hebrew Text:

Versions with the Old Testament only:

Samaritan Pentateuch: 430 BC

The Targums: Aramaic - for Jews speaking Aramaic, returning after exile. 450 BC

The Septuagint: Greek - 280-180 BC for Greek speaking Jews.

Aquila's Version: Greek - for anti-Christian Jews, 128 AD

Theodotian's Version: for Christians, 180 AD

Symmachus Version: for Christians, 200 AD

Origen's Hexepla: for Christians, 250 AD

Versions with both Old and New Testament:

Syriac Version: for Christians in Syria, 150 AD

Latin: Old Latin: North Africa, 150 AD. Italic: Italy, fourth century AD. Vulgate: western churches, 383-405 AD.

Coptic: Egyptian, 250 AD

Ethiopic: Ethiopia, fourth century AD



Gothic: for the Goths, 350 AD

Georgian: Iberia, 570 AD

Armenian: Armenia, 400 AD

Arabic: Arabia, eighth century AD

Slavonic: Slavic believers in Europe, 870 AD

Persian: believers in Persia

For information on the Targums, Talmud, Midrash, Gemara, and other related Jewish writings, see category on [Literary Isagogics](#).