

A BRIEF HISTORY OF HEBREW

Hebrew is one of a large group of languages, called 'Semitic', spoken throughout the Middle East and North Africa. The name was first used as late as 1781 by a German scholar, A.L. Schlözer. He aimed to subdivide languages into related groups according to their similarities, and he named them after the three people who survived the Flood: the sons of Noah. One of them, Shem, whose name is the origin of 'Semitic', was the father of Eber (Genesis 10:21). Eber's name is given in the Bible as the origin of 'Hebrew' (Ivrit).

Semitic languages are spoken in three main geographic regions, as can be seen in the attached map. Northwest Semitic covers Israel and its neighbours, including Hebrew from Israel, Canaanite spoken by its earlier inhabitants, Phoenician from the coastal region to the north of Haifa, Ugaritic to the north of that, and a group of languages to the east including Edomite, Ammonite and Moabite. Further inland is Aramaic, the international language of the region at the time of Jesus. The East Semitic group includes Old Akkadian, Babylonian and Assyrian, all of which later gave way to Aramaic. Lastly, the South Semitic group covers Arabic and its many dialects, including the Ethiopian languages of East Africa.

Some 70 different languages and dialects make up the Semitic family. Many are known only from written documents, some of which contain information identical to that in the Hebrew Bible. Hebrew, and several other languages, survived in scholarly or literary use long after they ceased to be spoken for everyday purposes.

HOW SEMITIC LANGUAGES WORK

1. They have a basic vocabulary in common.
2. They include many guttural sounds (made in the back of the throat).
3. Most nouns and verbs are based on three-letter roots, and fine shades of meaning can be conveyed by slightly varying their use.
4. The simple word-structure, with its clearly recognizable roots, is a great aid to learning.

HEBREW IN THE BIBLE

The Bible describes how Abraham left his home in Mesopotamia to travel to Canaan, far to the west. He and his family presumably continued to speak a Mesopotamian language among themselves when they came to their new country, but at the same time must also have adopted aspects of local Canaanite. The product of this encounter is Hebrew, which continued to be spoken by Israelites at least until their Babylonian exile in 586 BCE.

From that time on, the Aramaic of Mesopotamia was also used by Israelites. Some parts of the Bible are written in it, including Daniel 2:4 - 7:28 and parts of Ezra. Since many Jews could no longer easily follow Hebrew, translators now used to translate and explain the text in Aramaic. Aramaic had become so familiar to Jews that the greatest source of books for Jewish law to this day - the Talmuds of Jerusalem and of Babylon - were written in it.

THE FIRST 'HEBREW COURSES'

Aramaic speakers had comparatively little difficulty understanding Hebrew, since the languages are not dissimilar. But for those whose first language was Greek, a special effort was necessary to learn

the language. Aramaic was displaced by Arabic after the Arab conquests of the 7th century, and Jews found themselves speaking many different languages in the countries in which they were now scattered. Thus, Hebrew became one of the main tools for maintaining their common identity.

Jews saw this exile from their homeland as a temporary episode which would end with the coming of the Messiah. Learning Hebrew would encourage the Messiah to come sooner. However, Hebrew was preserved not only in the form of a sacred language of prayer and study. Jews from different continents could communicate and write contracts in it. The Hebrew language bound Jews from remote lands into a community in which trilingualism was the rule. Governments and rulers found it desirable to employ Jews to travel and develop trade between different parts of the world. That explains perhaps why so many of them were involved in international trade during the Middle Ages.

In the Ancient World Jews spoke Greek and Aramaic as well as Hebrew; in the Middle East until quite recently they would use Arabic and Ladino for everyday purposes, and Hebrew for their worship; while in Eastern Europe until the Holocaust Jews spoke either Russian or Polish, as well as Yiddish and Hebrew.

THE MAGIC OF HEBREW

Having outlined the scholarly approach to the history of Hebrew, we may turn to Jewish tradition for a more colourful version. Jews see Hebrew as the first and greatest of all languages. The medieval poet, Yehudah Halevi, claimed that in creating the world, God spoke Hebrew. As the language of Adam and Eve, it was humankind's only tongue until the Tower of Babel 'confounded men's words'. Jews still think of Hebrew as a spiritually superior language, bearing the imprint of the creator. Ancient sources describe Hebrew as the language used by angels who throng around the divine throne. To this day, most prayers are written and recited in it.

THE REBIRTH OF HEBREW

As early as in the 4th century BCE, when the Jews returned to their homeland, many chose to readopt Hebrew for everyday use. But this proved difficult in practical terms. By the 10th century the great Jewish poet and philosopher, Sa'adia Gaon, had to plead for Hebrew to be studied. He and others argued that the Bible could only be fully understood in the original.

For centuries the Hebrew language remained the legacy of the Jewish religion and culture. It was preserved from change and carefully guarded until it was reinstated in our own time as a truly living language - Modern Hebrew. Few contemporary languages have an uninterrupted history as long as Hebrew. A modern reader can understand 3000-year-old texts with ease. There is also probably no language that has been revived for everyday use after so many centuries of confinement to scholarly or religious life.

Learning modern Hebrew is, therefore, a key to a fascinating ancient culture, with an unrivalled wealth of written material to offer, including the Book of Books itself in its original version. But it is also a pleasurable and fulfilling way to discover the vital spirit of modern Israel, in which Hebrew, once seen as God's own language, has achieved a rebirth little short of miraculous.