

The Original Languages of the Biblical Texts

The documents of the Old Testament were originally written in Hebrew and Aramaic (Ezra 4:7–6:18; 7:12–26; Jer. 10:11; Dan. 2:4–7:28) and the documents of the New Testament were originally written in Greek. These were not “inspired” or “holy” languages as some have thought, but were simply the languages of the people God revealed himself to.

I. The Hebrew of the Old Testament

The form of Hebrew found in the Bible was probably spoken from as early as 1500 BC to some time after 400 BC. The Hebrew of the OT is what is referred to today as “Classical” Hebrew to be distinguished from “Modern” Hebrew. Technically, the Hebrew we find in the OT is a dead language and is not spoken or understood in the way Modern Hebrew is spoken or understood. Linguists today are unsure of how it was pronounced when it was spoken. Ultimately, the OT documents are the only documents we know of that contain this Classical Hebrew. The Dead Sea Scrolls (cir. 2nd century BC) are the closest other documents with Classical Hebrew, but they were written centuries after of the final parts of the OT were written. Hebrew is a Semitic language, quite similar to Aramaic, and is read from right to left.

Isaiah 2:1 הַדְּבַר אֲשֶׁר תָּזַה יִשְׁעֶיהוּ בֶן-אָמוּץ עַל-יְהוּדָה וִירוּשָׁלַם:
Isaiah 2:2a וְהָיָה בְאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים נֶכֶן יִהְיֶה הַר בֵּית-יְהוָה בְּרֹאשׁ הַהָרִים וְנָשָׂא מִגְבְּעוֹת
Isaiah 2:2b וְנָהָרוּ אֱלֹהֵי כָל-הַגּוֹיִם:
Isaiah 2:3a וְהָלְכוּ עַמִּים רַבִּים וְאָמְרוּ לָכֵן וְנִעְלָה אֶל-הַר-יְהוָה אֶל-בַּיִת אֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב
Isaiah 2:3b וִירָנוּ מִדְּרָכָיו וְנִלְכָה בְּאַרְחֻתָיו כִּי מִצִּיּוֹן תֵּצֵא תוֹרָה וְדְבַר-יְהוָה מִירוּשָׁלַם:
Isaiah 2:4a וְשָׁפַט בֵּין הַגּוֹיִם וְהוֹכִיחַ לְעַמִּים רַבִּים
Isaiah 2:4b וְכָתַתּוּ חֲרֻבוֹתֵם לְאֵתִים וְחֲנִיתוֹתֵיהֶם לְמִזְמֹרוֹת
Isaiah 2:4c לְאִישׁ אֶל-גּוֹי חָרֵב וְלֹא-יִלְמְדוּ עוֹד מִלְחָמָה:
Isaiah 2:5 בַּיִת יַעֲקֹב לָכֵן וְנִלְכָה בְּאוֹר יְהוָה:

Hebrew, Aramaic, and some neighboring Semitic languages share an alphabet of 22 consonant letters only. The form of Hebrew script generally used until at least the Babylonian exile, and still found in some Dead Sea Scrolls, is known as the Paleo-Hebrew script. Some of its letters still resemble their equivalents in the Greek alphabet. During the rule of the Persians (539–332 BC) the square Aramaic (or Assyrian) script was adopted for writing Hebrew, with the result that the forms of letters originally used for Aramaic are now almost universally associated in people's minds with Hebrew.¹

¹ David W. Chapman, “The Original Languages of the Bible: Hebrew and Aramaic” in *ESV Study Bible* (Crossway Publishers, 2008)

Hebrew name	Square (Assyrian or Aramaic) script	Paleo-Hebrew form	Sound	Traditional transliteration
Aleph	א	𐤀	glottal stop	ʾ
Beth	ב	𐤁	b	b
Gimel	ג	𐤂	g	g
Daleth	ד	𐤃	d	d
He	ה	𐤄	h	h
Vav	ו	𐤅	v	v
Zayin	ז	𐤆	s	z
Heth	ח	𐤇	ch ("loch")	h
Teth	ט	𐤈	t	.t
Yod	י	𐤉	y	y
Kaph	כ, ך	𐤊	k	k
Lamedh	ל	𐤋	l	l
Mem	מ, ם	𐤌	m	m
Nun	נ, ן	𐤍	n	n
Samekh	ס		s	s
Ayin	ע	𐤎	–	‘
Pe	פ, ף	𐤏	p	p
Tsadhe	צ, ץ	𐤐	ts	.s
Qoph	ק	𐤑	q	q
Resh	ר	𐤒	r	r
Sin	שׁ	𐤓	s	ś
Shin	שׂ	𐤔	sh	š
Tav	ת	𐤕	t	t

The alphabet itself has had an effect on the form of certain texts in the OT. A number of the Psalms (Psalms 9; 10; 25; 34; 37; 111; 112; 119; 145) are arranged as types of acrostic poems composed around the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, as are the first four chapters of Lamentations.²

Mat 5:18 For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.

² David W. Chapman, "The Original Languages of the Bible: Hebrew and Aramaic"

II. The Greek of the New Testament

Although the native language of Jesus and his disciples was probably Aramaic, the New Testament was written in Koine (“common”) Greek. As with Hebrew, Koine Greek is considered a dead language in that it is not written or spoken today. Koine Greek is different from Attic Greek (in which Homer wrote cir. 8th century BC), Classical Greek (in which Plato wrote cir. 4th century BC), Byzantine Greek (in which the Greek Orthodox Church used cir. 6th century AD), and Modern Greek (which modern Greeks speak today). The age of Koine Greek lasted roughly from 4th century BC to the 4th century AD. It was the “people’s” language, used in every day speech and writing. More formal documents during that time were written in classical Greek, Latin, or Aramaic. Greek is an “Indo-European” language, and is read from left to right.

Starting in May of 334 BC, Alexander, the 21-year-old king of Macedon, led his victorious army through four pitched battles, two sieges, and innumerable smaller engagements that enabled him to conquer territory that now goes under the names of Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan. Reaching the banks of the Beas River in Pakistan, he reluctantly turned back as his exhausted troops threatened mutiny. Three years later, in 323 BC, he died (at age 32) in Babylon, just as he was planning an expedition all the way from Egypt along the North African coast to the Atlantic.³

When Alexander died, his empire broke up into separate kingdoms headed by his disgruntled generals. But he had changed the world. In the old, now liberated cities of Asia Minor—Ephesus and Pergamum—as well as in the newly founded cities of the Middle East—Antioch and Alexandria—the culture and language of the colonial aristocracy was Greek. Three centuries after Alexander's death, when the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth was written down, the language used was not Jesus' native Aramaic but Greek, which, thanks to Alexander's conquests, had become the common language of the Mediterranean world. The conclusion now universally accepted by philologists is that the Greek of the NT, in all essential respects, is the vernacular Koine of the first century a.d., the language of the Roman imperial period.⁴

In addition to the Greek NT, the Koine has left other literary monuments that are invaluable sources of light on the sacred text, including papyri, inscriptions, the writings of numerous Jewish and early Christian authors, and above all the Septuagint (LXX), the ancient version of the OT that became the Bible of the early church and was used extensively by the NT writers.⁵

Mark 10:35-37 Καὶ προσπορεύονται αὐτῷ Ἰάκωβος καὶ Ἰωάννης οἱ υἱοὶ Ζεβεδαίου λέγοντες αὐτῷ· διδάσκαλε, θέλομεν ἵνα ὃ ἐὰν αἰτήσωμέν σε ποιήσης ἡμῖν. ³⁶ ὁ δὲ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· τί θέλετέ [με] ποιήσω ὑμῖν; ³⁷ οἱ δὲ εἶπαν αὐτῷ· δὸς ἡμῖν ἵνα εἰς σου ἐκ δεξιῶν καὶ εἰς ἐξ ἀριστερῶν καθίσωμεν ἐν τῇ δόξῃ σου.

³ Peter J. Williams, “The Original Languages of the Bible: Greek”

⁴ Peter J. Williams, “The Original Languages of the Bible: Greek”

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Letter	Name of Letter	Transliteration
α	alpha	a
β	bēta	b
γ	gamma	g
δ	delta	d
ε	epsilon	e
ζ	zēta	z
η	ēta	ē
θ	thēta	th
ι	iōta	i
κ	kappa	k
λ	lambda	l
μ	mu	m
ν	nu	n
ξ	xi	x
ο	omicron	o
π	pi	p
ρ	rho	r
σ, ς	sigma, final sigma	s
τ	tau	t
υ	upsilon	y
φ	phi	ph
χ	chi	ch
ψ	psi	ps
ω	ōmega	ō

Rev 1:8 "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

Keep in mind that since Jesus spoke mostly in Aramaic, that almost all of the quotations of Jesus are translations into Greek. It is thought by many scholars that the Gospel of Matthew was originally written in Aramaic or Hebrew.

Gary Pratico & Miles Van Pelt, *Basics of Biblical Hebrew* (Zondervan, 2007)

William Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar* (Zondervan, 2003)

William Mounce, *Greek for the Rest of Us: Using Greek Tools without Mastering Biblical Greek* (Zondervan, 2007)

III. What To Learn With an Understanding of the Original Languages

1. **Words are Circles of Meaning, not Points.** What I mean by that is that words have meaning ranges and the exact meaning is determined by the context in which the word is used. Consider the examples of *phileo* and *agapao* in John 21:15-17. **We should seek to be driven by biblical concepts not by biblical words.** Why? You can say the words of the Bible and mean error by them.
2. **Follow the Flow of Thought When Reading Biblical Passages.** When reading your English translations, seek to follow the flow of thought of the passage rather than trying to hang your hat on isolated words.
3. **Use Many Translations.** No one translation is perfect (we'll talk about that in the coming weeks), so own and read as many translations as you can and be sure to compare them. By comparing translations, you will be able to see what was difficult for the translators to translate.
4. **Promote the Study of Hebrew and Greek.** Consider the words of saints from Church History:

Martin Luther (cir. 1530's) "The apostles themselves considered it necessary to put the New Testament into Greek and to bind it fast to that language, doubtless in order to preserve it for us safe and sound as in a sacred ark. For they foresaw all that was to come and now has come to pass, and knew that if it were contained only in one's heads, wild and fearful disorder and confusion, and many various interpretations, fancies and doctrines would arise in the Church, which could be prevented and from which the plain man could be protected only by committing the New Testament to writing the language."

Without languages we could not have received the gospel. Languages are the scabbard that contains the sword of the Spirit; they are the casket which contains the priceless jewels of antique thought; they are the vessel that holds the wine; and as the gospel says, they are the baskets in which the loaves and fishes are kept to feed the multitude.

If we neglect the literature we shall eventually lose the gospel ... No sooner did men cease to cultivate the languages than Christendom declined, even until it fell under the undisputed dominion of the pope. But no sooner was this torch relighted, than this papal owl fled with a shriek into congenial gloom ... In former times the fathers were frequently mistaken, because they were ignorant of the languages and in our days there are some who, like the Waldenses, do not think the languages of any use; but although their doctrine is good, they have often erred from the real meaning of the sacred text; they are without arms against error, and I fear much that their faith will not remain pure.