

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## What Is Biblical Hebrew?

CLINTON J. MOYER, PHD



BIBLICAL HEBREW: A modern scribe writing a Torah scroll. Note the square Hebrew script. [Liran1977](#), [CC BY-SA 3.0](#), via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

### *Exploring the Language of Ancient Israel and Judah*

Biblical Hebrew is the dialect of the Canaanite language used by the people of ancient Israel, and the primary language of the Hebrew Bible. It and the other regional dialects that make up this group—Ammonite, Moabite, Edomite, Phoenician, and so on—were mutually intelligible, meaning that a speaker of one of them could generally understand the others without difficulty.

### THE LANGUAGE OF THE HEBREWS

The Canaanite language, of which Hebrew is a dialect, represents the western or southwestern branch of the Northwest Semitic subfamily. Its geographic domain was the area known as the Levant, which extends inland from the easternmost coastline of the Mediterranean Sea towards the Dead Sea and the Great Rift Valley. There is some debate, however, about how far north the Canaanite sphere extended: to wit, Ugaritic, the language of the northern Levantine city of Ugarit, is held by some to be an early form of Canaanite, while others prefer to view it as a separate sister language.

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In addition to the Ugaritic evidence from the end of the Late Bronze Age (13th century BCE), other early evidence for Canaanite comes from the [Amarna letters](#), documents sent from local Levantine rulers to the Egyptian pharaohs during the 14th century BCE. In these documents, which are written in [Akkadian](#), we encounter distinctively Canaanite personal names and other features that provide vestigial glimpses of the language of the authors.

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It is not until the Iron Age II (c. 1000–550 BCE) and beyond that direct written evidence for Hebrew and the other Canaanite dialects becomes available. In the case of Hebrew, the oldest known inscription is the [Khirbet Qeiyafa ostrakon](#), which dates to the very beginning of this period, around 1000 BCE. The subsequent centuries have yielded a wealth of epigraphic material in Hebrew and its sister dialects, ranging from monumental inscriptions to casual communications written on potsherds or other media. In terms of volume, the available materials are extremely limited; even so, however, it is possible to detect distinctive hallmarks in these texts that enable us to distinguish one dialect from another.

The biblical texts bear special mention here. While the historical texts in the Bible deal with events taking place beginning in the Iron Age I (1200–1000 BCE) and move forward through the Iron Age II and the periods beyond, our earliest physical witnesses to these materials date to the second century BCE; what's more, they are Greek translations (forerunners of the Septuagint). The [Dead Sea Scrolls](#) provide the earliest Hebrew manuscripts of these texts, which date from the first century BCE to the first century CE. This has led to endless debate in scholarship about whether the earliest of these texts were *composed* in the early part of the biblical period, specifically Iron Age II, or whether they came several centuries later during the Persian and Hellenistic periods (sixth–second centuries BCE).



A fragment of a Dead Sea Scroll during the conservation process. *Courtesy Leon Levy Dead Sea Scrolls Digital Library, IAA.*  
*Photographer: Shai Halevi.*

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For a variety of reasons, too complex and numerous to detail here, there is good reason, at least, to see the core biblical texts as representative of the Hebrew language of the Iron Age. The development of the canon over many centuries enables us to identify different temporal strata in the language itself. Standard Biblical Hebrew, then, is the (sub)dialect of Hebrew specific to Judah during the monarchic period (corresponding roughly to the entirety of the Iron Age II). Meanwhile, Archaic Biblical Hebrew is to be found in the oldest segments of text preserved in the canon, such as the poems in Exodus 15, Deuteronomy 32, and Judges 5; and Late Biblical Hebrew is represented in the texts that fall after the Babylonian Exile (586 BCE), such as Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther, and is notable primarily for the evidence it bears of Aramaic influence.

Following the biblical period, of course, the Hebrew language continued to develop, though its use began to dwindle. By the time of Mishnaic Hebrew (second–fifth centuries CE) and Medieval Hebrew, native Hebrew speakers were a thing of the past, and the language was preserved for scholarly and liturgical purposes. Only in modernity, in the early 20th century, was the language revived, such that now Modern Hebrew is the native tongue of millions.

Returning to the biblical period, it is important to note that in addition to different temporal (diachronic) strata in the biblical Hebrew canon, there also are distinctive dialectal (synchronic) elements. Most prominent among these is Israelian Hebrew, a (sub)dialect unique to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, which contrasts in specific ways with the standard Judahite dialect in the Bible. Using certain distinctive words, grammatical forms, and pronunciations, Israelian texts reflect the language of Judah's northern neighbors. This can occur for a variety of reasons: 1) a particular passage may evince northern authorship, as opposed to the Judahite authorship of the bulk of the canon (e.g., Nehemiah 9); 2) a (presumably Judahite) author, in telling a story involving figures from the north, may “spice up” the telling by putting hints of Israelian dialect into the mouths of the characters (e.g., 1 Kings 22); or 3) an author may engage in a kind of code-switching, where, in speaking to or about the Northern Kingdom or its people, the corresponding dialectal forms are used (e.g., Amos 6).

It is important to distinguish between the first of these processes, which is an incidental/accidental penetration of Israelian Hebrew into the biblical corpus, and the latter two, which are deliberate, literarily motivated authorial practices. These latter practices, moreover, extend beyond Israelian Hebrew: for instance, in Numbers 22–24 the foreign prophet Balaam speaks in language that is tinged throughout with Aramaic-like features, thus reflecting that he hails from the land of Aram.

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Seal impression from the seventh century BCE, using the paleo-Hebrew script. The inscription reads “For Nathan-melech, servant of the king.” It is thought that this is the same individual mentioned in 2 Kings 23:11. [Eliyahu Yannai / City of David Archives](#), Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

During the Iron Age, biblical Hebrew and the other Canaanite dialects were written using what is commonly known as the paleo-Hebrew script. During the Persian period (c. 538–332 BCE), however, this script was supplanted by the “square” script used for Aramaic, a sister language of Hebrew that served as the *lingua franca* for the Persian Empire. This square script has served as the standard form of written Hebrew up to the present day.

The interested reader will have no trouble locating a wealth of resources online and in print for the study of Biblical Hebrew. It is worth noting, however, that it should not be confused with Modern Hebrew; the two forms of the language, while plainly related, are very different, as one might expect given the gap of more than two thousand years between them.

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