

The History of Hebrew

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..... Overview

We'll trace the more than 3,000 years of Hebrew's development, discovering how pre-Biblical Hebrew became the Hebrew used in the Bible, then Samaritan Hebrew, Rabbinic Hebrew, Medieval Hebrew, and finally Modern Hebrew. How do Modern and Biblical Hebrew differ? How are they the same? What about the Hebrew of the Rabbis? Why were the "vowels" added after nearly 2,000 years of unpointed text, only to fall into disuse again in modern times? Why does Modern Hebrew spelling tend to adopt the same changes the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls instigated? What clues can the Trope marks give us about ancient Hebrew structure? Why do the same words mean vastly different things in different periods of Hebrew?

Taking linguistic evidence seriously, we'll look at the various periods of Hebrew, concluding with a better understanding of how the Hebrew of different eras both varied and remained the same.

From start to finish, the story of Hebrew reflects the vehicle used to record our people's history. By the end of the semester, you'll appreciate the intricacies of that record, and have a much better understanding of Hebrew throughout the ages.

..... Requirements

Requirements for the course are two-fold.

First, because most of the information for the course is not available in printed form, you should plan on attending every class. If you must miss a class, you will want to make sure to obtain class notes from someone else. I will not take attendance formally, but you will find it very difficult to understand the lectures if you do not keep up.

Secondly, your grade in the class will depend upon either a final exam or a final project (you can choose), in addition to one or two small written assignments during the semester. Most students opt for a final project, and students may work on these projects in small groups. The project demonstrates an understanding of the material discussed in class and applies that material to a realm of your choosing.

.....Topics.....

The course begins with an overview of how languages can differ, and then of different periods of Hebrew and examples of how they differ. Then we look at seven distinct periods of Hebrew. Finally, time permitting, we'll revisit some periods in more detail, and take a look at special topics, such as the Trope system.

Overview. How, in principle, can languages or dialects differ? Comparing Hebrew from different eras demonstrates that over the past three thousand years, Hebrew has seen changes in its phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, style and spelling, yet has retained certain key and fringe elements.

Biblical Hebrew. Most of what is commonly thought about Biblical Hebrew comes from the work of Ben Asher dating from roughly the 10th century, well over a thousand years after the canonization of the Bible. What we really know about Biblical Hebrew, as it was used when the Bible was composed, is very different.

For example, what is the real story behind the letters *be ged kefet*? Do we know how Biblical Hebrew was pronounced? Why does *vav ha-hipuch* seem to change past into future, and future into past? What are the ramifications of not having any punctuation in the Bible? Why is the word for “she” (“*hi*”) regularly “mis-spelled,” and how is this related to Hebrew’s system of grammatical gender? In a similar vein, why do the numbers and pronouns seem “backward,” in that the versions ending in *-a* are masculine? What does *that* tell us?

Masoretic Traditions. In addition to Ben Asher’s (Tiberian) system of vowels — the one in use today in Israel — two other major systems of preserving the Bible surfaced at roughly the same time. Comparing and contrasting these systems offers further insight into Biblical Hebrew and into how it was understood by later readers of the Bible.

What can we learn from the “Eretz Yisrael” system, in which Sh’va and Tsere are not differentiated, or from the Babylonian system in which Segol and Patach are not differentiated?

Dead Sea Scrolls. The Dead Sea Scrolls are the oldest extant manuscripts of the Bible, predating the Masoretic versions by nearly 1,000 years. But they do not conform to any Masoretic system. They thus offer additional, but sometimes contradictory, evidence about the nature of Biblical Hebrew.

Why are the Dead Sea Scrolls written in the “full” (“*maleh*”) spelling system, in contrast to the Bible? What might this tell us about the pronunciation of Biblical and Late Biblical Hebrew? Was Hebrew still a spoken language when the Dead Sea Scrolls were written?

Late Biblical Hebrew. In many ways, Late Biblical Hebrew (some Psalms, etc.) seems closer to the Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls than to other periods of Hebrew. Why? Why isn't it the same as Biblical Hebrew?

Rabbinic Hebrew. After the canonization of the Bible, Hebrew continued to be used certainly as a language of written thought, and probably as a spoken language, but the vocabulary, syntax and style of Rabbinic Hebrew differs greatly from any prior dialects of Hebrew. What caused these changes, and what do they tell us about the nature of Hebrew?

Early Modern Hebrew. After many hundreds of years of disuse Hebrew once again became a major spoken language around the beginning of the century. But for several reasons, some natural, some artificial, it differed greatly from previous versions of Hebrew. What prompted these changes? And what can they tell us about the overall nature of the Hebrew language?

Late Modern Hebrew. Only fifty years after the birth of the Modern State of Israel, Modern Hebrew has already seen tremendous changes, among them major syntactic and pronunciation changes, a new system of *binyanim* and a new understanding of *beqed kefet*, the last of which has major ramifications for the language as a whole. What caused these changes?

Trope. The Trope system in the Bible provides a nearly perfect (error rates of $\frac{1}{10}\%$) grammatical analysis of the text. What does this analysis tell us about how the Bible was understood? Why might there be musical traditions associated with this seemingly grammatical analysis?

.....Selected Bibliography.....

Most of the course consists of class lectures and handouts, because most of the material is not available in printed form. However, the following are used to greater or lesser degrees during the course, either to supplant or to reinforce material presented in class.

Of these, the books most worth having on your bookshelf are mine and Sáenz-Badillos'.

Allen, W.S. 1987. *Vox Graeca: a guide to the pronunciation of classical Greek*. Cambridge.

Hoffman, Joel M. 2004. *In the Beginning: A Short History of the Hebrew Language*. New York.

Kutscher, E.Y. 1982. *A History of the Hebrew Language*. Jerusalem.

Sáenz-Badillos, Angel. 1993. *A History of the Hebrew Language*. J. Elwolde, trans. Great Britain.

Sanders, J.A. 1967. *The Dead Sea Psalms Scroll*. Ithica, NY.

Polzin, R. 1976. *Late Biblical Hebrew: toward an historical typology of Biblical Hebrew Prose*. Missoula, Montana.

Saggs, H.W.F. 1989. *Civilization Before Greece and Rome*. New Haven.

Yeivin, I. 1985. מסורת הלשון העברית המשתקפת בניקוד הבבלי. [The Tradition of the Hebrew Language as reflected in the Babylonean Pointing System.] Jerusalem.