

## LANGUAGES OF THE BIBLE

### Lesson on May 1, 2019

#### Introduction

Hebrew is a Semitic language along with Aramaic and other Canaanite languages. It was the language of the Israelites and became the language of the Hebrew Bible. A large portion of the Hebrew Bible comes from the pre-exile and exile time periods. Hebrew language at that time was written in what is called the Phoenician-Old Hebrew script. It was an early form of the first alphabetic script ever devised. It contained only consonants (and no vowels).

Centuries after the exile the everyday language in Palestine changed from Hebrew to Aramaic. Language of most biblical writings continued to be Hebrew. Written script was slowly changed from Old Hebrew to the *square script* of Aramaic.

#### Early Aramaic alphabet

The Early Aramaic alphabet was developed sometime during the late 10th or early 9th century BC and replaced Assyrian cuneiform as the main writing system of the Assyrian empire.

Ⲁ	ⲁ	Ⲃ	ⲃ	Ⲅ	ⲅ	Ⲇ	ⲇ	Ⲉ	ⲉ	Ⲋ
kāph	yudh	ṭēth	ḥēth	zain	waw	ḥē	dālath	gāmal	bēth	ālah
k	y	ṭ	ḥ	z	w	h	d	g	b	ʾ
ⲋ	Ⲍ	ⲍ	Ⲏ	ⲏ	Ⲑ	ⲑ	Ⲓ	ⲓ	Ⲕ	ⲕ
tau	shin	rēsh	qoph	ṣādhē	pē	ʿē	semkath	nun	mim	lāmadh
t	sh	r	q	ṣ	p	ʿ	s	n	m	l

#### Imperial Aramaic alphabet

This version of the Aramaic alphabet dates from the 5th century BC and was used to write Imperial Aramaic, the standardised and official language of the Archaemenid Empire. It was adapted to write Hebrew during the 5th century BC, and the modern version shown below is still used to write Neo-Aramaic dialects.

Ⲁ	ⲁ	Ⲃ	ⲃ	Ⲅ	ⲅ	Ⲇ	ⲇ	Ⲉ	ⲉ	Ⲋ
kāph	yudh	ṭēth	ḥēth	zain	waw	ḥē	dālath	gāmal	bēth	ālah
[k/x]	[j/i/e:]	[tʰ]	[h]	[z]	[w/o/u:]	[h]	[d/ð]	[g/ɣ]	[b/v]	[ʔ/a:/e:]
ⲋ	Ⲍ	ⲍ	Ⲏ	ⲏ	Ⲑ	ⲑ	Ⲓ	ⲓ	Ⲕ	ⲕ
tau	shin	rēsh	qoph	ṣādhē	pē	ʿē	semkath	nun	mim	lāmadh
[t/θ]	[ʃ]	[r]	[q]	[sʰ]	[p/f]	[ʕ]	[s]	[n]	[m]	[l]

#### Square script for Aramaic

Ⲁ/כ	ⲁ/י	Ⲃ/ט	ⲃ/ח	Ⲅ/ז	ⲅ/ו	Ⲇ/ה	ⲇ/ד	Ⲉ/ג	ⲉ/ב	Ⲋ/א
kaph	yudh	ṭet	ḥet	zayin	waw	he	dalat	gammal	beth	'alaph
[k]	[j]	[tʰ]	[h/x]	[z]	[w]	[h]	[d]	[g]	[b]	[ʔ]
ⲋ/ת	Ⲍ/ש	ⲍ/ר	Ⲏ/ק	ⲏ/צ	Ⲑ/פ	ⲑ/ע	Ⲓ/ס	ⲓ/נ	Ⲕ/מ	ⲕ/ל
taw	shin	resh	qoph	ṣadhe	pe	'ayin	semkath	nun	mim	lammadh
[t]	[ʃ]	[r]	[q]	[sʰ]	[p]	[ʕ]	[s]	[n]	[m]	[l]

By the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century BC the process of forming the Hebrew Bible was almost complete. But the Hebrew Bible was still composed of many manuscripts with various histories. It became the task of the scribes (called the Sopherim) to work towards a standard text. During the next several centuries the Sopherim developed the earliest Masorah. Masorah reflects the combined efforts of thousands of scribes known as Masoretes. Working over hundreds of years they created a uniform and fixed version of the Hebrew Bible. In order to ensure the text would be transmitted accurately they counted every word. During this time vowels were added to the text to preserve the traditional pronunciation.

### **Some things to note about the Hebrew language:**

Hebrew uses the word *alephbet* from their first two letters – aleph and bet. It consists of 22 consonants with vowels (dots and dashes) placed above and below consonants. One advantage to Hebrew is that the sound of each letter remains consistent (unlike English). Hebrew is read from right to left.

Sometimes there is no way to convey the meaning of a Hebrew phrase in contemporary English. Hebrew conjunction *and* begins almost every verse. It usually means *and* but has a wider range of meanings like but, since, while, then. In general Hebrew words sometimes have a wider range of meaning than English counterpart. Example: In Hebrew *gadol* can mean big, great, high, or old.

Four-letter Biblical name for God is *YHWH* (also known as the Tetragrammaton). In Biblical times people would have read the name aloud. Following the completion of the Hebrew Bible, Jews stopped saying the name aloud. Practice for centuries was to say *the Lord* (adonay) rather than the four-letter equivalent.

Most people do not think about God as male or female. However, in the Torah God is in the masculine form (feminine word is THWH).

In Hebrew the infinitive before the verb is placed before the verb to convey emphasis. Example: In Hebrew *mot yumat* would mean: dying he shall be put to death. In English we would say: he shall surely be put to death.

### **Some principles of interpretation:**

Bible contains both literal and figurative expressions that call for special care in interpretation. Figurative words turn it from its primary usage to another meaning. Such figures of speech have been divided into two distinct groups: *Figures of words* are those in which the image is confined to a single word. Example: Jesus said – Go and say to that fox (meaning Herod). *Figures of thought* require many verses and are found in allegories or parables. Bible abounds in many different images based on experiences in Palestine.

Context may tell us that the words have a figurative meaning or should be considered literal. We need to examine parallel passages. Words should be understood in their literal sense unless it involves an obvious contradiction. We also discount the literal interpretation if the outcome is absurd (wolf lives with the lamb).

*Quote from Luther:* I have often said that he who desires to study the Holy Scriptures must see to it that he sticks to the common usage of the words, whenever and wherever he can, until an article of faith forces him to read the words otherwise.

It is through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit that we become faithful interpreters.

### **Aramaic**

There are 268 verses in the Old Testament written in Aramaic (not in Hebrew).

Most of the verses are found in Daniel and Ezra.

Ezra 4:8-6:18 and 7:12-26

Daniel 2:4b-7:28

Jeremiah 10:11

Plus there are various proper names and single words and phrases scattered throughout Bible.

It is important for New Testament studies as Jesus had several direct quotes in Aramaic.

In the Old Testament some verses make a direct reference to the Aramaic language.

Aramaic was called *Hebrew* in the New Testament since it was the language of the Hebrews.

Word *Aramaic* is derived from *Aram*, a son of Shem who was the ancestor of the Arameans.

Prominent in the Near East, it was established as an international language by 700 BC.

After conquest of Babylon by Persia, the Persians also established Aramaic as official language.

It is the reason portions of Ezra (which record official correspondence) are written in Aramaic.

When the books of Daniel and Ezra were written, most Jews understood Hebrew and Aramaic.

Hebrew was spoken in their homes and Aramaic was the language of the broader society.

Over time, Aramaic replaced Hebrew as the primary language spoken by the Jews.

Jews learned Aramaic while in exile.

Because of this, Aramaic was the native tongue of Jesus Christ.

One of the peculiarities of biblical Aramaic is that the divine name is never used.

YHWH is only used in Hebrew.

However, the term *the God of heaven* occurs frequently in Aramaic (more than in Hebrew).

There are no Old Testament books written entirely in Aramaic.

There is a great deal of Aramaic literature outside of the Bible.

From about 600 BC until 700 AD, Aramaic was the primary trade language of the Near East.

Aramaic was only displaced by Arabic when the Muslims conquered the Middle East.

It is still spoken in parts of Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Turkey.

Because of its broad use, there is rarely any doubt about the meaning of these words in Scripture.

Book Print	Name	Block	Cursive	Pronounced	Transliteration
א	Aleph	א	א	silent letter	' (or none)
ב	Bet	ב	ב	b as in boy	b
בּ	Vet	בּ	בּ	<i>no dot:</i> v as in vine	v
ג	Gimmel	ג	ג	g as in girl	g
ד	Dalet	ד	ד	d as in door	d
ה	Hey	ה	ה	h as in hay	h
ו	Vav	ו	ו	v as in vine; "consonantal vowel"	v
ז	Zayin	ז	ז	z as in zebra	z
ח	Chet	ח	ח	ch as in Bach	ch (or ħ)
ט	Tet	ט	ט	t as in time	t (or ṭ)
י	Yod	י	י	y as in yes; "consonantal vowel"	y
כ	Kaf	כ	כ	k as in kite	k
כּ	Khaf	כּ	כּ	<i>no dot:</i> ch as in bach	kh
כּ		ך	ך	<i>sofit form</i>	
ל	Lamed	ל	ל	l as in look	l
מ	Mem	מ	מ	m as in mom	m
מּ		ם	ם	<i>sofit form</i>	
נ	Nun	נ	נ	n as in now	n
נּ		ן	ן	<i>sofit form</i>	
ס	Samekh	ס	ס	s as in son	s
ע	'Ayin	ע	ע	silent letter	' (or none)
פ	Pey	פ	פ	p as in park	p
פּ	Fey	פּ	פּ	ph as in phone	ph / f
פּ		ף	ף	<i>sofit form</i>	
צ	Tsade	צ	צ	ts as in nuts	ts (or ṣ)
ץ		ץ	ץ	<i>sofit form</i>	
ק	Qof	ק	ק	q as in queen	q (or k)
ר	Resh	ר	ר	r as in rain	r
שׁ	Shin	שׁ	שׁ	sh as in shy	sh (or š)
שׂ	Sin	שׂ	שׂ	s as in sun	s (or ś)
ת	Tav	ת	ת	t as in tall	t

הוֹדוּ לַיהוָה כִּי־טוֹב כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ: א

יֹאמְרוּ־נָא יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ: ב

יֹאמְרוּ־נָא בֵּית־אֶהְרֹן כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ: ג

יֹאמְרוּ־נָא יִרְאֵי יְהוָה כִּי לְעוֹלָם חַסְדּוֹ: ד

מִן־הַמַּצָּר קָרָאתִי יְהוָה לְעֻנְיִי בַּמְּרֻחָב יְהוָה: ה

Aleph	Yahweh	le'ōwlām (forever)	hasdōw (loving kindness)
Beyt	Yisrāel	le'ōwlām (forever)	hasdōw (loving kindness)
Gimel	Ahārōn	le'ōwlām (forever)	hasdōw (loving kindness)
Dalet	Yahweh	le'ōwlām (forever)	hasdōw (loving kindness)
Hey	Yāh (God)		

#### Psalm 118:1-5

O give thanks to the Lord for He is good, forever His mercy endures  
Let say now Israel, "that forever His mercy endures"  
Let say now the house of Aaron, "that forever His mercy endures"  
Let say now those who fear the Lord, "that forever His mercy endures"  
In distress I called on God; answered me (and set me) in a broad place God.

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!  
Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever."  
Let the house of Aaron say, "His steadfast love endures forever."  
Out of my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered and set me in a broad place.

## **Hésed**

Hésed is one of the words difficult to render in English.

In one sense it applies to relationships in which one party is *superior* over the other.

However, one's status could be altered by shifting circumstances.

One example is the friendship between David and Jonathan.

David said to Jonathan: Deal faithfully with your servant (1 Samuel 20:8a).

As long as Jonathan had the superior position it was his obligation to help David.

Obligation arose out of their relationship.

Jonathan asked David to promise that when the roles were reversed David would show mercy.

David showed mercy to other members of Saul's family even after the death of Jonathan.

Hésed is not a virtue or personality trait but is something to be done.

At the same time, it is not people of high standing acting in a condescending manner.

Loyalty arises from the relationship itself and not from some legal obligation.

It is an act of inner faithfulness and of grace.

One is free to be loyal.