

## Topic Page: [Hebrew language](#)

Summary Article: **Hebrew language**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

member of the Canaanite group of the West Semitic subdivision of the Semitic subfamily of the Afroasiatic family of languages (see Afroasiatic languages). Hebrew was the language of the Jewish people in biblical times, and most of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew. The oldest extant example of Hebrew writing dates from the 11th or 10th cent. B.C. Hebrew began to die out as a spoken tongue among the Jews after they were defeated by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. Well before the time of Jesus it had been replaced by Aramaic as the Jewish vernacular, although it was preserved as the language of the Jewish religion. From A.D. 70, when the dispersion of the Jews from Palestine began, until modern times, Hebrew has remained the Jewish language of religion, learning, and literature. During this 2,000-year period, Hebrew has always been spoken to some extent. At the end of the 19th cent. the Zionist movement brought about the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language, which culminated in its designation as an official tongue of the state of Israel in 1948. There it is spoken by most of the 4.5 million Jews of that country.

Grammatically, Hebrew is typical of the Semitic tongues in that so many words have a triconsonantal root consisting of three consonants separated by vowels. Changes in, or omissions of, the vowels alter the meaning of a root. Prefixes and suffixes are also added to roots to modify the meaning. There are two genders, masculine and feminine, which are found in the inflection of the verb as well as in noun forms. Modern Hebrew has experienced some changes in phonology, syntax, and morphology. Pronunciation of various orthographical forms has changed, as well as the rules for prefixing and suffixing prepositions to nouns and pronouns. Ancient Hebrew seemed to favor a word order in which the verb precedes the subject of a sentence, but in modern Hebrew the subject typically precedes the verb. Hebrew vocabulary has been updated by the addition of many new words, especially words of a scientific nature.

The earliest alphabet used for Hebrew belongs to the Canaanite branch of the North Semitic writing and is known as Early Hebrew. Later the Jews adapted the Aramaic writing and evolved from it a script called Square Hebrew, which is the source of modern Hebrew printing. Most modern Hebrew handwritten text uses a cursive script developed more recently. Today the Hebrew alphabet has 22 letters, all consonants. Symbols for the vowels were apparently introduced about the 8th cent. A.D. and are usually placed below the consonants if employed. Their use is generally limited to the Bible, verse, and children's books. Hebrew is written from right to left.

See Chomsky, W. , *Hebrew: The Eternal Language* (1957);

Kamhi, D. J. , *Modern Hebrew* (1982);

Kutscher, E. , *A History of the Hebrew Language* (1984);

Glinert, L. , *The Grammar of Modern Hebrew* (1989).

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## **Chicago**

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## **Harvard**

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## **MLA**

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