

Hebrew Streams

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Hebrew & Aramaic Transliteration

(Academic & Non-Academic)

The Hebrew Bible (“Tanakh” or “Miqra” in Jewish tradition; “Old Testament” in Christian tradition) was composed and transmitted in Hebrew, though portions of it are in Aramaic.

Hebrew

In use from the 2nd millennium BC/E, Hebrew is one of many S(h)emitic languages, a name derived after Shem the son of Noah from whom the majority of peoples speaking these languages were descended (Gen 10:21-31). In the 8th cent., it is called the “language of Judah” (*Yehudit*, 2 Kgs 18:26) or “the language of Canaan” (Isa 19:18). It is called “Hebrew” (Greek, *Hebraisti*) first in the prologue to Sirach (ca. 130 BC/E).

Aramaic

Aramaic is related to Hebrew as French is to Italian. It dates back to at least 1,000 BC/E. Its name is taken from the place name “Aram,” a region known now as Syria and western Iraq. From the 9th or 8th cent. on, Aramaic became the international medium of commerce and diplomacy in the ancient Near East, much as Koiné Greek did later in the 4th cent. following Alexander's conquests. In older reference books Aramaic is often called “Chaldee” or “Chaldean,” after the ancient Greek name *Chaldaios* for an area of ancient Babylonia.

- Biblical Aramaic occurs in four places: (1) two words in Genesis 31:47 (*Yegar-sabadutha*); (2) one whole verse in Jeremiah 10:11; (3) two sections in Ezra (4:8—6:18; 7:12—26); and (4) the central portion of Daniel (2:4b—7:28). In 2 Kgs 18:26 servants of the Judean king Hezekiah (715-687 BC/E) plead with an Assyrian official not to speak in “Hebrew” (lit., “Judean”; *Yehudit*), but in “Aramaic” (*Aramit*), so the common people will not understand.

- Aramaic words, expressions, and names occur in the Greek New Testament: *Ephphatha* (Mark 7:34), *Gabbatha* (John 19:13), *Golgotha* (Mark 15:22; John 19:17), *Marana tha* (1 Corinthians 16:22), *Rabbouni* (Mark 10:51; John 20:16), *Siloam* (John 9:7); *Eloi Eloi lama sabachtani* (Matthew 27:46), *Talitha cumi* (Mark 5:41); Barnabas (Acts 4:36), Kefa or Kephias (=Peter; John 1:42), Tabitha (Acts 9:36, 40).

- The Pentateuch and portions of the Prophets were translated into Aramaic for Jews who had lost their knowledge of Hebrew. This began perhaps in the second century BC/E, and these paraphrases are called The Targums (“translations”).

- The Talmud is bilingual. Its first portion, the Mishnah, exists primarily in Hebrew; the Gemara, or commentary portion on the Mishnah, is mostly Aramaic. This is true for both editions: Babylonian (Bavli; 500 CE/AD) and Palestinian or Jerusalem (Yerushalmi; 400 CE/AD).

Scripts & Samples

Over two thousand years ago, the so-called Aramaic Square Script was adopted for Hebrew, so both languages use the same consonant alphabet. Examples of the script from 2,100-year-old fragments from Qumran can be seen at [Isaiah 53 at Qumran](#) and [The Name at Qumran](#) (PDF).

See the transliterated and translated Hebrew texts: [Numbers 6:22–27](#); [Isaiah 55:8–11](#); [Psalm 103:8–14](#) (PDF).

The Tables

The following Tables contain two systems of transliteration. “Academic Symbols” is used by most scholars of Biblical and Ancient Hebrew. The second is called “General” or “Non-Academic.” This style is used in non-technical publications and on this website.

Consonants

Hebrew & Aramaic	Letter Name	Sound	Academic Symbols	Non-Academic Symbols
א ¹	alef	silent	ʾ	vowel only is voiced
ב	beit	b	b	b
בּ	veit	v	b	v
ג ג	gimel	g as in "God"	g	g
ד	dalet	d	d	d
דּ	daleth	dh	d	dh
ה	he	h	h	h
ו	vav	v	w	v
ז	zayin	z	z	z
ח	het	h or ch ²	ḥ	h or ch
ט	tet	t	ṭ	t
י	yod	y	y	y
כּ כַּ	kaf, final kaf	k, kh ³	k	k, kh
כַּ	khaf	k	k	kh
ל	lamed	l	l	l
מּ מַ	mem, final mem	m	m	m
נּ נַ	nun, final nun	n	n	n
ס	samekh	s	s	s
ע ⁴	ayin	silent	ʿ	vowel only is voiced
פּ פַּ	peh, final peh	p, f	p	p, f
פַּ	feh	f	p	f
צ צ	tzaddei, final tzaddei	tz or ts as in "cats"	ṣ	tz or ts
ק	qof	k or q (not qu-)	q	k or q
ר	resh	r	r	r
שׁ	shin	sh	š	sh
שׂ	sin	s	ś	s
תּ	tav	t	t	t
תַּ	tav or thav	th	t	t or th

¹ א/Alef has lost its sound over time. Now only its accompanying vowel is sounded.

² "Ch" as in Lechem, Pesach or Menachem—not as in cherish, choose, church.

³ "Kh" as in Melekh, Malkhut or Mikhtav (also spelled Melech, Malchut and Michtav).

⁴ ע/Ayin has lost its sound over time. Now only its accompanying vowel is sounded.

Vowels

Hebrew & Aramaic	Vowel Name	Sound (American English)	Academic Symbols	Non-Academic Symbols
-	patach	a as in "cat"	a	a
ַ	qametz	ah "far"	ā	ah
ָ	final qametz he	ah	ā	ah
ֿ	segol	eh "met"	e	e
ֶ	tzerei	ei "day"	ē	ei
ֵ	tzerei yod	ei	ê	ei
ִ	short hiriq	ih "bid"	i	i
ִּ	long hiriq	ee "bee"	î	i
ִי	hiriq yod	ee	î	i
ֹ	qametz hatuf	oh (in short unaccented syllable)	o	o
ֻ	holem	oh	ō	o
ֹּ	full holem	oh	ô	o
ֺ	qibbutz	uh "full"	u	u
ֻּ	shureq	oo "fool"	û	u
ׁ	hatef qametz	short "ah"	ǎ	a
ׂ	hatef patach	short "a"	ǣ	a
׃	hatef segol	short "eh"	ě	e
ׄ	sheva	eh or silent	ě	e or '

Sources

- *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972), vol. 1, page 90; vol. 8, column 79
- Leslie McFall, "Hebrew Language," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (rev. ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 2:657–63
- Franz Rosenthal, *A Grammar of Biblical Aramaic* (6th rev. ed., Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1995)
- SBL [Society of Biblical Literature] *Handbook of Style* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999)