

40 Days To Understanding The Bible In 15 Minutes A Day

Day 22

In What Languages Was the Bible Written?

Almost all of the Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew, but a few parts were written in Aramaic, also known as Syriac. These include Ezra 4:8–6:18; 7:12–26; Daniel 2:4–7:28; and a few other isolated verses. Hebrew and Aramaic both belong to the Semitic language group (others in this group include Phoenician, Arabic, Akkadian, and Ugaritic). The term *Semitic* comes from Shem, the name of Noah’s oldest son (Genesis 6:10).

The word *Hebrew* comes from the name given the Israelites by non-Israelites. The term is seen in Genesis 14:13 and 1 Samuel 4:6, for example. The Hebrew language, then, was the Israelites’ native tongue for most of the Old Testament period. Hebrew is a vivid language, ideally suited to telling stories in a pictorial way. This expresses how Hebrews tended to think—more often in concrete pictures than in abstract concepts.

According to Bible scholars Norman Geisler and William Nix, “Hebrew is a language through which the message is felt rather than thought.” That is, it is a language of the heart rather than the head. The Hebrew language proved an ideal means through which God could reveal himself through acts in history as opposed to simply making theological statements.

During the time of the Assyrian Empire (tenth through seventh centuries BC), the Assyrians’ native language, Aramaic, became the trade language of much of the ancient Near East. The name itself comes from the Arameans who lived in Aram, later known as Syria (thus the term *Syriac*) located northeast of the Sea of Galilee.

Aramaic continued to be the primary language throughout the Near East through the fourth century BC, when Greek began to displace it after the conquests of Alexander the Great. During their time of exile in Assyria, and later in Babylon, the Israelites began speaking Aramaic rather than Hebrew. They continued its use even after the Persians, who had defeated the Babylonians, allowed them to return home in 538 BC.

This became a problem for the Jews who had returned, because they could no longer understand the Hebrew Scriptures; God’s Word had to be explained to them in Aramaic. This is what was happening in Nehemiah 8:8: “They [Ezra and other Levites] read from the Book

of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.”

What was initially done orally was eventually written down and called *Targums*, the Aramaic word meaning “translations.” These would be the very first translations of Scripture. The Israelites, or *Jews*, as they came to be known at this time in history, who lived in Palestine (formerly called *Canaan*), continued to speak Aramaic as their native language into the first century AD. Aramaic was the language Jesus himself learned and spoke (see Mark 15:34).

The New Testament was written in *koine*, or common Greek—that is, “street language” Greek. This is significant, in that God did not see fit to inspire the books of the New Testament to be written in academic Greek, making them accessible only to scholars. He inspired them in the common Greek, because His Word is for *all* people. Alexander the Great established the Greek Empire in the fourth century BC, and along with it, Greek as the universal language. This was so widespread that even after the Romans displaced the Greeks as the dominant power, they continued to promote Greek as the common language. As with Hebrew for the Old Testament, it is significant that God chose to use Greek to communicate the books of the New Testament.

Greek is a language of the mind (remember ancient Greek philosophy). It provides technical precision, which is important in stating ideas, concepts, or thoughts. Greek is therefore ideally suited to communicate propositional or theological truth. This would be hard to do in a more pictorial language like Hebrew. It seems that God also chose Greek for the books of the New Testament since so many people spoke it in the first century. This aided in the efficient, timely communication and spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the books of the New Testament. Remember that Jesus commanded that disciples be made from “all nations” (Matthew 28:19).

It might be helpful to discuss one more step regarding the original languages of the Bible: the process of copying the books of the Bible. The term *autograph* is applied to the original biblical documents written by the authors or their scribes. None of these originals are *extant* today, which means “still in existence or available in a library or museum.” However, there are *copies* available. There are fewer for the Old Testament, but *many* for the New Testament—nearly 6,000 partial or full manuscripts! In a technical sense, a copy is still in the original biblical language—Hebrew copied to Hebrew and Greek copied to Greek. Since these

copies were made before the invention of the printing press, this was very tedious work, done completely by hand.

What is also important to note here is how seriously the copyists or scribes took their responsibility. They understood that this was no ordinary literature being copied; it was the very Word of God. Consequently, they did their work with as much care as possible. Being imperfect human beings, they did not do a perfect job—there are minor differences between copies—but they were amazingly accurate. It seems that God providentially worked through them to faithfully preserve His Word as communicated initially in the autographs of Scripture.

A good example of this is the group of scribes called the Masoretes, who worked around AD 500–1000. They are well-known for their faithful and accurate copying of the Hebrew Scriptures. An example of their diligence is that they kept track of the number of lines and letters and even the very middle letter of the manuscripts they were copying. After completing a copy, which normally took months, they would compare the number of lines and letters and the middle letter of their copy to the source manuscript, and if there was any deviation, they would destroy the copy and start over. This should give us great confidence in the accuracy of the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts upon which our English Bible is based.

FUN FACT

The current Hebrew text used by biblical scholars is known as the Masoretic Text, the work of these Jewish scribes. The Dead Sea Scrolls, which were found in 1947, and predate the Masoretic Text by about 1,000 years, confirm the accuracy of the Masoretic Text and demonstrate that the Hebrew text was faithfully preserved through the centuries.