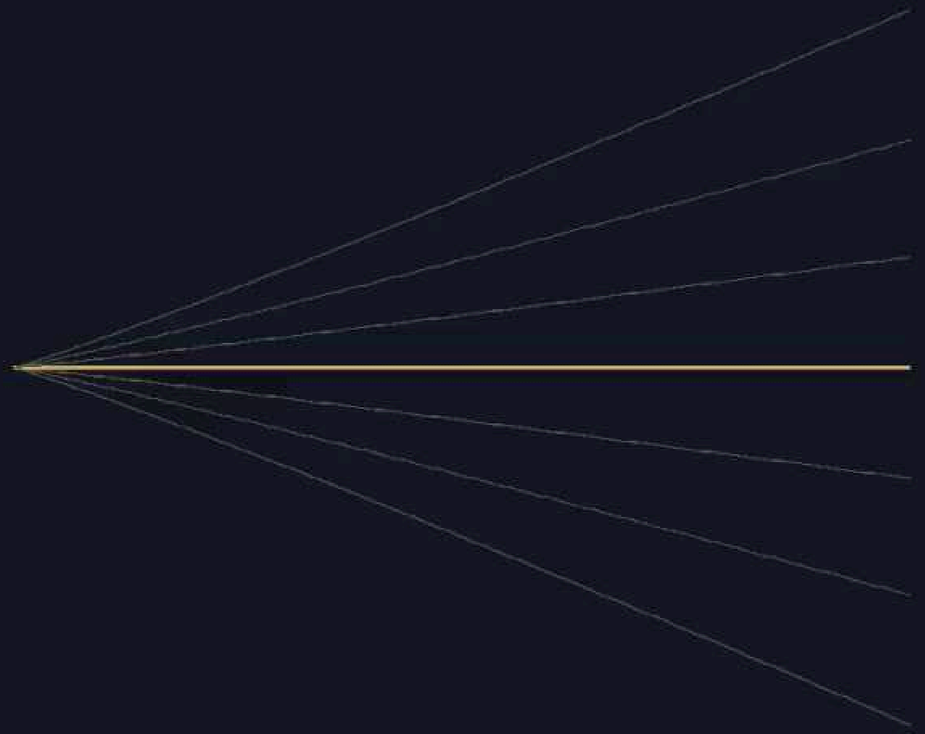
ANDERSON ACADEMY

HEBR 101 B · Introduction to Biblical Hebrew (Brief course)

Lecture 1 · about 7 min

History and the Alphabet



A library of university-level courses

The Semitic family

- Hebrew and Aramaic
- Arabic
- Akkadian and Ugaritic
- Ethiopian languages

¶ 1.1

with vowels and extra letters changing the meaning.

Origins

- Canaanite languages
- Close to Phoenician
- Earliest inscriptions, tenth century BC
- The Gezer Calendar

¶ 1.2

The earliest Hebrew inscriptions date from around the tenth century BC, such as the Gezer Calendar,

Periods of Hebrew

About 1000 BC	early inscriptions
First millennium BC	Biblical Hebrew
586 BC	exile, rise of Aramaic
Later	Rabbinic and Medieval Hebrew

¶ 1.3

After the Babylonian exile, which began in 586 BC, Aramaic became the everyday language of the region,

Hebrew lives on

- **About AD 200** — the Mishnah
- **Middle Ages** — poetry and philosophy
- **Late 1800s** — Ben-Yehuda and the revival
- **Today** — Modern Hebrew in Israel

¶ 1.4

In the late nineteenth century Eliezer Ben-Yehuda and others revived it as a spoken language.

The Dead Sea Scrolls

- Found in 1947 at Qumran
- Third century BC to first century AD
- Oldest biblical manuscripts
- Evidence of careful copying

¶ 1.5

include the oldest known manuscripts of almost every book of the Hebrew Bible.

Two scripts

Old

- Paleo-Hebrew
- From Phoenician
- The time of the kings

Later

- The square script
- From Aramaic
- Used today

¶ 1.6

which developed into the square script used in Hebrew Bibles and in Israel today.

The alphabet

- Twenty-two letters
- All consonants
- Right to left
- Aleph and bet behind alpha and beta

¶ 1.7

The name alphabet itself comes from the first two letters in Greek, alpha and beta,

Letter names

Letter	Meaning
Aleph, ox	Gimel, camel
Bet, house	Dalet, door

¶ 1.8

The order of the letters is very old:

Letters one to eleven

- Aleph, silent
- Bet, gimel, dalet
- He, vav, zayin
- Chet, tet, yod
- Kaf, k or kh

¶ 1.9

k or kh.

Letters twelve to twenty-two

- Lamed, mem, nun
- Samekh, ayin, pe
- Tsade, qof, resh
- Shin or sin
- Tav

¶ 1.10

Again as a chant: lamed, mem, nun, samekh, ayin, pe, tsade, qof, resh, shin, tav.

Final forms

- Kaf, mem, nun
- Pe, tsade
- Mark the end of a word
- Help in old manuscripts

¶ 1.11

especially in old manuscripts where words were written close together.

Letters that look alike

- Bet and kaf
- Dalet and resh
- He and chet
- Vav and zayin

¶ 1.12

Vav and zayin differ by a little head.

Letters with two sounds

Still distinct

- Bet, b or v
- Kaf, k or kh
- Pe, p or f

Merged today

- Gimel, dalet, tav
- Once two sounds each
- Now usually one

¶ 1.13

Without it, after a vowel, they were once soft: v, gh, dh, kh, f, th.

Letters as numbers

- Aleph one, bet two
- Yod ten, kaf twenty
- Qof one hundred
- Gematria

¶ 1.14

Later Jewish tradition found meanings in the number values of words, a practice called gematria.

Acrostic poems

- Lines follow the alphabet
- Psalm 119, twenty-two sections
- Lamentations 1 to 4
- Completeness, aleph to tav

¶ 1.15

and the first four chapters of Lamentations follow the same plan.

The gutturals

- Aleph and he
- Chet and ayin
- Often resh
- Prefer the vowel a

¶ 1.16

but knowing that gutturals behave differently will explain many small irregularities you meet later.

First words

- Shalom, peace
- Melekh, king
- Davar, word
- Bayit, house
- Torah, teaching
- Shabbat, rest

¶ 1.17

Shalom, for example, is shin, lamed, vav, mem, with the vav standing for the vowel o.