

# What Was the Original Language of the Bible?

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What language was the Bible originally written in? Pastors and seminarians can probably answer that easily enough, but the rest of us might have only a vague idea that the Bible was written in one of those “dead” languages. Ancient Greek? Latin, perhaps?

The Bible was actually written in *three* different ancient languages: **Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek**. While (a modern version of) each of these languages is spoken today, most modern readers of those languages would have some difficulty with the ancient versions used in the Biblical texts. It’s strange to think that we might hardly recognize the most influential book in the world in its original form!

## Hebrew, Language of (Most of) the Old Testament

Ancient Hebrew was the tongue of the ancient Israelites and the language in which most of the Old Testament was penned. [Isaiah 19:18](#) calls it “the language of Canaan,” while other verses label it “Judean” and “language of the Jews” ([2 Kings 18:26](#); [Isaiah 36:11, 13](#); [2 Chronicles 32:18](#); [Nehemiah 13:24](#)).

Ancient Hebrew is a Semitic language that dates back past 1500 B.C. Its alphabet consists of 22 characters, all consonants (don’t worry; vowels were eventually added), and is written from right to left.

While Hebrew remained the sacred tongue of the Jews, its use as a common spoken language declined after the Jews’ return from exile (538 B.C.). Despite a revival of the language during the [Maccabean era](#), it was eventually all but replaced in everyday usage by Aramaic. Modern Hebrew can trace its ancestry to Biblical Hebrew, but has incorporated many other influences as well.

## What’s Aramaic?

Ancient Aramaic originated among the Arameans in northern Syria and became widely used under the Assyrians. A few passages in the Old Testament were written in Aramaic ([Genesis 31:47](#); [Ezra 4:8-6:18, 7:12-26](#); [Jeremiah 10:11](#)).

Some have compared the relationship between Hebrew and Aramaic to that between modern Spanish and Portuguese: they’re distinct languages, but sufficiently closely related that a reader of one can understand much of the other. Aramaic was very popular in the ancient world and was commonly spoken in Jesus’ time.

## The New Testament wasn’t written in Hebrew?

Many people assume that the New Testament was written in Hebrew as well, but by the time the gospels were being written, many Jews didn’t even speak Hebrew anymore. Rome had conquered Greece, and the influence of [Greek culture](#) had saturated the empire. What’s interesting about Biblical Greek is that it didn’t use a high-class or complicated style; it was written in *koiné* (common Greek), a language that could be understood by almost anyone, educated or not.

It’s amazing to see how the Word of God has traveled through languages and cultures. It began in the language of his chosen people, adopted the language of the Roman world, and now exists in over 2,000 different languages. Far from being a static, one-language text, the Bible actually embraces translation and cross-language accessibility by its very nature. Whether you read the Bible in its original languages or in one of thousands of modern tongues, it’s a blessing to be able to read God’s word today just as it was read thousands of years ago.