

# 119

## MINISTRIES

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### LEARN BIBLICAL HEBREW LESSON 1

Welcome to Learn Biblical Hebrew with 119 Ministries! This is lesson 1.

In this lesson, I will introduce you to the Hebrew language, and explain what you can expect to learn from this course.

First of all, what is *Biblical* Hebrew? Biblical Hebrew is the primary language that the first 39 books of the Bible were written in. These books are sometimes collectively referred to as the Old Testament; in Hebrew, they are called the Tanach. In this course, you will be learning aspects of the Hebrew language that are necessary to read the Tanach. My goal is to take you from knowing nothing at all about Hebrew, to being able to read a Hebrew Bible verse as quickly as possible.

This course does *not* teach modern vocabulary or grammar—so, for example, we’re not going to learn how to ask where the bathroom is, or how much a taxi costs. This course is specifically tailored for people whose end goal is to read the Bible in its original language.

There are several resources that are available in this course. The first resource is this series of video lectures. Each of these lectures is roughly twenty to thirty minutes long, and covers one or two basic principles of Hebrew, with explanations and examples. I try to be clear and thorough in my explanations, but of course you can feel free to pause or rewind the video if the material moves along too quickly.

The second resource is a written summary and exercise sheet that accompanies each lesson. The summary is just a paragraph or two that briefly sums up what the lesson is about, and the exercise sheet is a set of homework problems that you can solve in order to practice your new Hebrew skills. The answers to the exercises are included so you can check your own work. You can find the link to the summary and exercises for each lesson in the description below each video. I encourage you all to do the exercises, because they will help you understand and remember the information much better than just watching the videos.

So, now that you know what you're getting into, I'm going to show you some of the basic features of the Hebrew language.

Biblical Hebrew is written and read from right to left. Of course, English words and sentences are written from left to right, so you will have to get used to reading and writing backwards. Don't worry, though, it's not quite as difficult as you might think, though it does take a little getting used to.

Hebrew has its own alphabet. In English, of course, we use the letters A through Z, and these letters comprise what is called the Latin alphabet. There are many languages, that use this Latin alphabet, including Spanish, German, and French. So if you've learned any of those languages, then you've had the luxury of being able to use all of the letters that you're already used to. The Hebrew language, however, is much older than the Latin language, and Hebrew has a different alphabet with different letters. We'll be spending the first few lectures in this course learning all about the Hebrew letters and the sounds that they make.

Speaking of letters, Hebrew letters do *not* have an uppercase and lowercase form. So, Hebrew names are not capitalized, and you don't capitalize the first word in a sentence, because there aren't any capital letters. That's good for us, because you only have to learn one form of each letter, instead of having to learn an uppercase and lowercase form.

Also, the Hebrew of the Bible does not have punctuation markings. There are no periods, no commas, and no quotation marks.

Hebrew letters can be written with different scripts. A script is the way that the letters appear. In English we can write in print, or we can write in cursive, and you can think of those two forms as different scripts. The letters being written are the same letters, they make the same sounds, but they look different. Hebrew also has a number of different scripts.

The oldest Hebrew writings that have been found were written in a script called Paleo-Hebrew. Here, you can see what that Paleo-Hebrew looks like. I won't be going into detail on Paleo Hebrew in this course, but one very interesting thing to note about it is that the Greek alphabet is actually derived from the Paleo Hebrew alphabet, and the Latin alphabet is derived from the Greek alphabet. So, many of the letters that we use today in English could be considered the "grandchildren" of ancient Hebrew letters.

Again, we're not going to be talking in detail about those things in this course, but I do think that it is worth mentioning that when you learn Hebrew, you're not just learning a foreign language, but you're learning a language that is one of the ancient ancestors of the English language.

Returning now to our discussion of scripts, the script that we are going to be learning to read and write is called the Babylonian script, or sometimes it is called the Aramaic script or the square script. Here you can see what that script looks like. This script was developed by Hebrew scribes after the Babylonian captivity, which started around 600 B.C. The reason that we're going to be learning this particular script is that most copies of the Tanach that are available today are written in this script. So, if you want to be able to read a Hebrew Bible, this is the most useful script to know.

Another feature of Hebrew is that Hebrew has small symbols that are called vowel points. In English, we have five letters that are vowels—A, E, I, O, and U, and the rest of the letters are called consonants. Most Hebrew letters make the sounds of consonants, and the vowel sounds are indicated by vowel

points. To see what this looks like, here is a Hebrew word written here. Right now, this Hebrew word has only letters, and no vowel points.

Here, we've added some vowel points beneath the letters. Whenever you read Hebrew, the little dots and lines that are underneath the letters are called vowel points.

Hebrew always had vowel sounds, but these vowel points did not always exist. Written vowel points were invented about 1,200 years ago by a group of scribes called the Masoretes. Before these vowel points, when you read Hebrew, you just had to be familiar enough with the language to know which vowel sounds to use, and where to use them. But, thanks to the Masoretes and their vowel points, it's much easier to learn Hebrew today.

In this course, we are going to learn these vowel points, not only because it makes the language easier to learn, but also because any Tanach you find today is going to have vowel points in it.

So, we've explained how we're going to write the letters and vowels, but how are we going to pronounce them? As you might have guessed, there are a number of different ways to actually pronounce the Hebrew letters and vowels. These different ways of pronouncing Hebrew are called *dialects*.

Every language has different dialects. For example, I speak English, but the way I pronounce English words is different from the way someone in Scotland would pronounce those same words. In fact, they wouldn't call their country Scotland, they would say something more like [Scottish accent] "Scotland." In the same way, people pronounce English differently in Alabama than they do in Minnesota. So English has a number of different dialects, and Hebrew has different dialects also.

In this course, the dialect we're going to be learning is called Modern Hebrew, or Israeli Hebrew. This dialect is considered "proper" speech in modern Israel, and it is actually a blend of two older dialects. One other dialect worth mentioning is called the Ashkenazic dialect. This dialect comes from Jews who lived in Germany, and it is still a very popular dialect today, especially among orthodox Jews. It is very likely that you will hear Hebrew spoken in the Ashkenazic dialect at some point. So, in this course, we are going to officially teach the modern dialect, but I will also tell you some things about the Ashkenazic dialect so that you can recognize it when you hear it.

There is one more thing I need to explain about Hebrew dialects, and that is, why am I teaching a modern dialect in a Biblical Hebrew course? Why don't I teach a dialect that was spoken at the time that the Hebrew Bible was written?

There are two reasons for this. First, we don't know exactly how Hebrew was pronounced in ancient times. Scholars have come up with some educated guesses, but since we don't have any 3,000 year-old audio recordings, we just can't know for certain how the Hebrew of ancient times really sounded.

Second, Hebrew had different dialects even in Biblical times, and the Bible itself tells us this. In the book of Judges, chapter 12, we find a story of a civil war that took place during the reign of the judge Jephthah. During this conflict, Jephthah's armies could tell the difference between Ephraimites and other Israelites by the way the Ephraimites pronounced the word "shibboleth." In other words, the Ephraimites' dialect was different from the dialect of the other Israelites. So this means there were dialectic differences in the Hebrew language long before even king David's time. So even if I knew exactly how to pronounce every Hebrew dialect that existed from the time of Moses to the time of

Ezra, it's not clear which one of those dialects you could consider the most "Biblical." So, instead of taking a wild guess at how the language was spoken at some particular past time and place, I'm just going to teach the pronunciation of Hebrew that you will most likely hear today.

Again, just to clarify, even though we're learning a modern pronunciation of Hebrew, we are not learning modern Hebrew vocabulary. We won't be learning words for things like airplane or television, because we don't need to know those words in order to read the Tanach.

Finally, this is an introductory level course. My goal is to take you from a place of knowing nothing at all about Hebrew to actually reading a Bible verse in as short a time as possible. Consequently, I am not going to cover every single detail of the language, nor am I going to mention every exception to every rule. My goal in this course is to give you enough information to get started using Hebrew without getting bogged down in all the technical details right away.

As we get further into the course, I will supply more and more details, so you can get a more complete and correct understanding of the language, but at first, I'm going to simplify everything as much as I can, again, so that you can get to reading and writing the language on a basic level as quickly as possible.

This course is designed to give you a good base of knowledge and understanding that you can build on later if you decide that you really want to dig in to the language. If you do decide to continue learning the language when you have completed this course, my recommendation would be to either take a university Hebrew course, or to find a Hebrew language tutor.

So, let's quickly review everything I've talked about today. Hebrew is written and read from right to left.

We are going to learn the Hebrew alphabet.

We are going to learn Biblical Hebrew vocabulary and grammar.

We are going to write using the Babylonian script and the Masoretic vowel points.

Finally, we are going to pronounce the words in the modern Israeli dialect, while also making a note of the Ashkenazic dialect.

We're going to end every lesson with this Hebrew word. This word is Shalom. In modern Hebrew, Shalom is both a greeting and a farewell, so it's the equivalent of saying hello or goodbye. In ancient Hebrew, Shalom is a word that means "peace." So, at the end of each lesson, I will bid you Shalom, which means both farewell and peace.

You can find a written summary of this lesson at the link in the description below. I look forward to seeing you in the next lesson, where we will begin to learn the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

Shalom!

*For more on learning Biblical Hebrew and other teachings, please visit us at [www.testeverything.net](http://www.testeverything.net)*

**Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.**

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