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History of the Ancient and Modern Hebrew Language

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The Semitic Family of Languages

Freely adapted from p1 of א תולדות הלשון העברית חוברת by Sh Sharbit based on the lectures of E. Y. Kutscher, Bar-Orin, 1969 (the Hamito-Semitic languages are now generally called the AfroAsiatic Language group)

- **Proto- Hamito-Semitic**
  - **Proto-Hamitic**
    - **Egyptian**
    - **Berber**
    - **Cushitic**
  - **Proto-Semitic**
    - **West-Semitic**
      - **South Semitic**
        - **Arabic**
        - **South Arabian**
        - **Ethiopian Semitic Languages**
      - **North-West Semitic**
        - **Aramaic**
        - **Ugaritic**
        - **Canaanite**
          - **Phoenician**
            - **Punic**
          - **Moabite**
          - **Ammonite**
          - **Edomite**
          - **Hebrew**
    - **Akkadian**
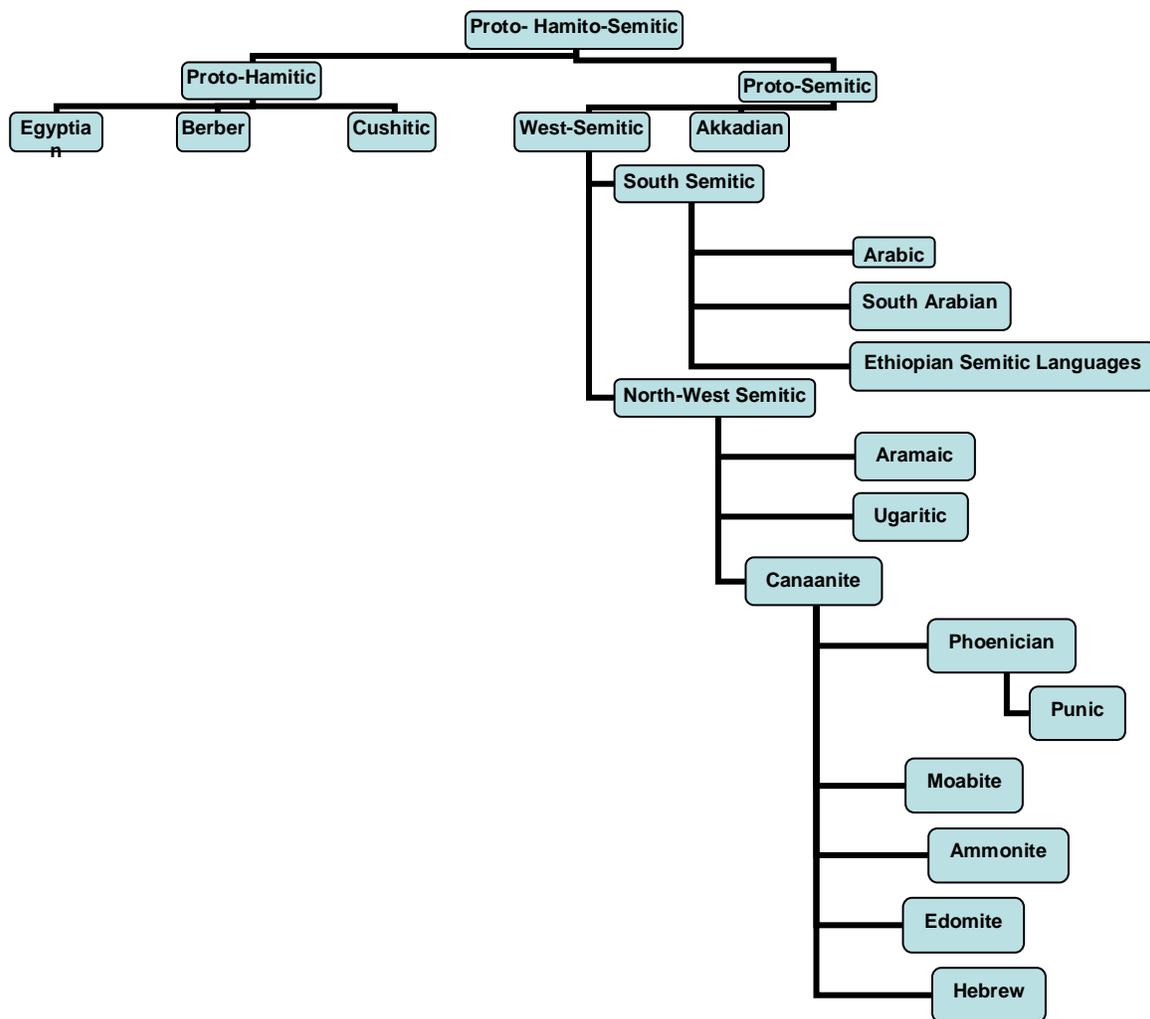
Nb. article - "[Semitic Languages (with Special Reference to the Levant),](#)" by Gary Rendsburg

Box 8 - Scripts and Scripture

All texts, later incorporated in the Hebrew Bible, which were brought into exile in Babylonia in the early 6th century BCE, would have been written in Paleo-Hebrew scripts resembling those of the Mesha, Siloam and/or Lachish and with the orthography of Epigraphic Hebrew (see Gogel).

A significant part of the authoring, and most of the redacting of the Pentateuch, the Deuteronomistic History, the major prophetic books etc. took place in Babylonia from c. 590 BCE to c. 450 BCE. The language of that area was Aramaic. Presumably during that exile span of time the redaction of scriptures probably went hand with:

1. Aramaic displacing Hebrew as the spoken language of the exiles;

2. The rapid acceptance of the Imperial Aramaic script for writing both Hebrew and Aramaic; and,

3. An increased and more uniform use of vowel letters in Hebrew writing, partly under the influence of Aramaic spelling conventions and partly to distinguish Hebrew from Aramaic pronunciation of cognate words and forms. It is of course possible that this orthographic change took place without the acceptance of Aramaic script.

It is probable that the Torah, as a whole, the Deuteronomistic History, the major prophetic books etc. were "published" initially in the Aramaic script in Babylonia. Of course the redactors would have drawn on documents written in the Paleo-Hebrew scripts and the orthography of Epigraphic Hebrew. Thus it may be that all Paleo-Hebrew biblical texts (e.g. the Qumran Paleo-Hebrew Leviticus scroll, the Samaritan Torah) at one stage passed through a form in Aramaic letters. It is likely that some of the later books of the Bible, such as Esther, Proverbs, Qohelet, Jonah, Daniel etc. were composed in Aramaic script.

In examining likely errors, it is necessary to consider –

1. Word Division - Paleo-Hebrew texts usually used clear dots to separate words thus minimizing the likelihood of an error in word division. Biblical texts in the Aramaic-Square Hebrew script seem to have used blank spaces between words.

2. Confusion of Letters (see tables of scripts in *The Book of Hebrew Script: History, Palaeography, Script Styles, Calligraphy & Design* by Ada Yardeni)

a) *Paleo-Hebrew Script* – In Mesha and Siloam scripts confusion of letters is unlikely. Lachish script, being squat and somewhat cursive, errors are more possible if the document were written in a very small hand it might perhaps be possible to confuse 𐤍 (n) and 𐤐 (p).

b) Aramaic-Square Hebrew Script[1] – In Babylonia, the Jewish exiles would have adopted one or more

Box 8 - Scripts and Scripture

versions of the Imperial Aramaic Script. The later Judean Jewish developments of the script are known as Square Hebrew or Jewish Script. The rapid evolution of this script as the script changed, so changed the letters that could be easily confused. Eg. in the Herodian script of the first century BCE, *waw, yod* and *zayin* could be confused as could *he* and *het*.

The problem is that a single line of texts copied might go from Mesha script to Lachish script to Imperial Aramaic script, to 3rd century BCE Jewish script to Herodian script potentially exposed to changing sets of possible letter confusions at each stage. A less likely line of development might be from Mesha script to Lachish script to early Second Temple Paleo-Hebrew script[2], to 3rd century BCE Jewish script to Herodian script.

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[1] 'The term "Early Jewish" is used here … to designate the scripts developed in Judaea and used by Jews beginning in the Maccabaean period and continuing to the time of the First Jewish Revolt. It stands in contrast to Palaeo-Hebrew … and to the Aramaic cursive of the late Persian and early Greek periods from which Jewish. Nabataean, and Palmyrene, among others. were derived. The traditional designations, "Assyrian," "Aramaic," "Square" do not apply accurately to the several Early Jewish script types and cannot be used in scientific palaeographical discussion. The last-mentioned term, "Square," applies at best to the formal hand of the First Jewish Revolt (and later), or less happily to the Herodian book hands, and should be abandoned. We have chosen the designation "Early Jewish"; it could be argued plausibly that "Judaean" would be even more precise. However, the broader term seems a happier alternative since the Early Jewish script was in use by Jews outside Judaea (cf. the Nash Papyrus), and it permits us to speak of the scripts of the late Roman and Byzantine eras from Palestine, Egypt, and Mesopotamia (e.g., from Dura), which are continuous with the early series, as "Late Jewish."'. Quoted from footnote 5 of The Development of Jewish Scripts by Frank Moore Cross (1961) reprinted in Leaves from an Epigrapher's Notebook: Collected Papers in Hebrew and West Semitic Palaeography and Epigraphy (Harvard Semitic Studies, No. 51) by Frank Moore Cross.

[2] 'The Palaeo-Hebrew script of Qumran is properly described as an archaistic survival from the book hand of Israelite times. It shows little development in the interval between the epigraphs of the seventh–fifth centuries BCE and manuscripts of Maccabaean or Hasmonaean date. Evidently

the script was taken up anew in the era of nationalistic revival of the second century BCE, to judge from its use as a monumental script by the Hasmonaeans on their coinage, as well as its resurgence as a biblical hand. It is in the late Hasmonaean era also that the Samaritan Pentateuchal text separates from the main stream of Jewish tradition, preserving in its special hand the Palaeo-Hebrew tradition …. Moreover, in the second century BCE, Palaeo-Hebrew forms, dormant for some four centuries, begin afresh to evolve at a fairly steady pace. This new development is reflected in the series of MSS at Qumran, as well as in the coinage of the First and Second Jewish Revolts, and in the earliest Samaritan epigraphs. On the other hand, the earliest exemplars of the Palaeo-Hebrew hand at Qumran exhibit a remarkable fidelity of form and stance, when compared with archaic scripts, and were penned with fluid grace and speed. One can best explain these characteristics of the Qumran Palaeo-Hebrew hand by assuming that though relatively static, the old script was preserved alive in some narrow circle, presumably by a coterie of erudite scribes, as a biblical book hand. When the first of the Palaeo-Hebrew fragments were found in Cave I, an alternative explanation was proposed, that the fragments were in fact archaic, from the fourth or fifth century BCE. But later finds, including manuscripts in which there is extensive mixture of Palaeo-Hebrew and Jewish scripts (and in one instance a mixture of Palaeo-Hebrew, Jewish, and Greek scripts), have rendered this proposal inadmissible.'. Quoted from footnote 4 of The Development of Jewish Scripts by Frank Moore Cross (1961) reprinted in Leaves from an Epigrapher's Notebook: Collected Papers in Hebrew and West Semitic Palaeography and Epigraphy (Harvard Semitic Studies, No. 51) by Frank Moore Cross.