

The Meaning of the Word “Hebrew” in Genesis

In the Old Testament “Hebrew” Never Refers to the Hebrew Language

Nowadays in English and most other languages the word “Hebrew” refers to the language of the ancient Israelites, which was a variety of the ancient Canaanite language. However, in the Old Testament, the word “Hebrew” [never has this meaning](#). Prior to the book of 2 Kings the language is never named, and after that point it is usually called “the language of Judah”. What it was called before the division of the kingdom at the death of Solomon is unknown. It may have been called “the language of Israel”, though we have no evidence of this. However, it is called “the language of Canaan” once in the Old Testament, in Isaiah 19:18, and this may have been what it was called all along.

Hebrew form	יְהוּדִית	שְׂפַת כְּנָעַן	יְהוּדִית
Pronunciation	yəhūdîṭ	śəp̄aṭ kənaʿan	yəhūdîṭ
Literal meaning	(language) of Judah	language of Canaan	(language) of Judah
References	2 Kings 18:26, 28, 2 Chr. 32:18, Isa. 36:11, 13	Isa. 19:18	Neh. 13:24
Probable meaning	Hebrew language	Hebrew language	Hebrew language*
ESV	the language of Judah	the language of Canaan	the language of Judah
NIV	Hebrew	the language of Canaan	the language of Judah
Context	701 B.C. or slightly after. These are 3 retellings of the same event, in which “the language of Judah” is contrasted with אֲרָמִית ’ārāmîṭ “Aramaic (language)”.	701 B.C. or shortly after.	425 B.C. Here “the language of Judah” (almost certainly Hebrew) is contrasted with אֲשַׁדּוּדִית ’ašdōwḏîṭ “the language of Ashdod” (probably their own dialect of Canaanite, which would have had time to diverge significantly from Hebrew, and which in any case was closer to Phoenician than Hebrew) and other neighboring languages.*

* Some have suggested that the opposite is true, that Hebrew was lost as the native language of the Jews during the Babylonian captivity, and that “the language of Judah” was now Aramaic, but that the people of Ashdod, who were not exiled by the Babylonians, still retained Hebrew/Canaanite. I myself had thought this for a while, since Hebrew was largely replaced by Aramaic at least in Galilee by Jesus’ time, and Aramaic was his native language. However, both of these assumptions are in error: Hebrew had not totally died out as a native language among the Jews, and in fact in Judea it was apparently alive and well in the first century, at least according to the [Jewish diaspora](#) section of the Wikipedia article on Hebrew. (See also the paragraph preceding that section.)

By the time of the New Testament “Hebrew” Did Often Refer to the Hebrew or Aramaic Languages

However, by the time the New Testament was written, the word Hebrew (actually, the three Greek words Ἑβραϊστί [hēbrais'ti] or Ἑβραῖς [hēbra'is] or Ἑβραϊκός [hēbrai'kōs]) does refer to the language

In Revelation 9:11 and Revelation 16:16 the term used is Ἑβραϊστί, and in these passages the words “Abaddon” and “Armageddon” are mentioned, clearly Hebrew words.

However, these terms for “Hebrew” are fuzzy in the New Testament, and can refer freely to either the Hebrew or Aramaic languages. The actual words quoted in all of the gospel passages (“Bethesda” in John 5:2, “Gabbatha” in John 19:13, “Golgotha” in John 19:17, and “Rabboni” in John 20:16) are Aramaic words, not Hebrew words, so the Greek term “Hebrew” is translated as “Aramaic” in these passages in modern versions like the NIV or the ESV, showing that Aramaic was viewed as the “Hebrew language” about as much as Hebrew was! (“Hebrew” is also translated as “Aramaic” in the NIV and ESV in the only other gospel reference, John 19:20, though it is an interesting assumption that Pilate would have used Aramaic rather than Hebrew for the inscription on the cross.) All of these examples are also Ἑβραϊστί.

In some manuscripts in one passage, Luke 23:38, the term Ἑβραϊκός is used, with the same reference as John 19:20. Surprisingly, in contrast to John 19:20, the ESV has “Hebrew” in the footnote. The NIV has no footnote.

In Acts 21:40, Acts 22:2, and Acts 26:14 a different Greek word Ἑβραῖς is used (actually the dative phrase τῇ Ἑβραϊδὶ διαλέκτῳ [‘te hēbra’idi dia’lekto] “in the Hebrew language”). In the first two Paul is speaking to the crowd in Jerusalem, and in the last Jesus is speaking to Paul on the road to Damascus, and it is not clear whether Hebrew or Aramaic was being spoken, since no sample words are given. In these cases the NIV has “Aramaic”, whereas the ESV has “Hebrew” but puts in the footnote “Or *the Hebrew dialect* (probably Aramaic)”, so it is assumed that Aramaic was being spoken in these cases.

A different Greek word Ἑβραῖος is used a few times to refer to the Hebrew people: Acts 6:1, 2 Corinthians 11:22, Philippians 3:5, Philippians 3:5.

In the Old Testament “Hebrew” Is Almost Always Used in Interaction with Foreigners

But in the Old Testament עִבְרִי *‘ibri* “Hebrew”, early pronunciation [ʕibri:], never refers to the language, but to the people, and is not used very frequently. (The term Israelites בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל *bənê yiśrā’el*, literally “sons of Israel” is far more common.) It occurs 34 times (in 33 verses) in all of the Old Testament, compared to several thousand times for “Israelites”. It occurs 6 times in Genesis, 15 times in Exodus, 8 times in 1 Samuel, 2 times in Jeremiah, and 1 time in Jonah. In most of these cases it is used when relating to foreigners, and very frequently it is the foreigners who are using it, not the Israelites.

Specifically, it is used 11 times by foreigners: Genesis 39:14, 39:17, 41:12, Exodus 1:16, 1:22, 2:6, 1 Samuel 4:6, 4:9, 13:19, 14:11, 29:3.

It is used 18 times in interaction with foreigners: Genesis 14:13, 40:15, 43:32, Exodus 1:15, 1:19, 2:7, 2:11, 2:13, 3:18, 5:3, 7:16, 9:1, 9:13, 10:3, 1 Samuel 13:3, 13:7, 14:21, Jonah 1:9.

It is only used 4 other times, in internal laws of Israel, but all referring to Hebrew slaves as distinguished from foreign slaves: Exodus 21:2, Deuteronomy 15:12, Jeremiah 34:9, 34:14.

The last general use of the term is in 1 Samuel during battles with the Philistines before David became king around the year 1010 B.C. There is one more use of the term in Jonah, of unknown date but perhaps after 800 B.C.

This distribution is somewhat surprising, suggesting that the term “Hebrew” is not really the Israelites’ own term, but one primarily applied to them by outsiders, at least in its early usage. And if we look carefully at the examples from Genesis we see something even more surprising.

In Genesis “Hebrew” is Not Limited to the Israelites, But Refers to Some Larger Group that Includes Them!

What do we see in the 6 uses of the term “Hebrew” in Genesis?

Genesis 14:13: Then one who had escaped came and told Abram the **Hebrew**, who was living by the oaks of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol and of Aner. These were allies of Abram.

Genesis 39:13-18: ¹³ And as soon as she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled out of the house, ¹⁴ she called to the men of her household and said to them, “See, he has brought among us a **Hebrew** to laugh at us. He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice. ¹⁵ And as soon as he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me and fled and got out of the house.” ¹⁶ Then she laid up his garment by her until his master came home, ¹⁷ and she told him the same story, saying, “The **Hebrew** servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to laugh at me. ¹⁸ But as soon as I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment beside me and fled out of the house.”

Genesis 40:15: For I was indeed stolen out of the land of the **Hebrews**, and here also I have done nothing that they should put me into the pit.

Genesis 41:12: A young **Hebrew** was there with us, a servant of the captain of the guard. When we told him, he interpreted our dreams to us, giving an interpretation to each man according to his dream.

Genesis 43:32: They served him by himself, and them by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because the Egyptians could not eat with the **Hebrews**, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians.

Genesis 14:13 mentions Abram the Hebrew, so obviously he wasn’t the original Hebrew!

And in the remaining references, we see that Jacob's family is not well known at all, but that everyone knows what a Hebrew is, and knows that they are Hebrews! So obviously the term refers to some larger group. So what is a Hebrew?

Well, first of all, Joseph says that he was stolen "out of the land of the Hebrews" in Genesis 40:15, so does Hebrew refer to anyone from Canaan? Genesis 14:13 suggests not, since Abram is called a Hebrew, but Mamre and his brothers are not, but are called Amorites. In fact, the term is never used anywhere in the Bible for Canaanites other than Abram's descendants, the Israelites.

In Jewish tradition עִבְרִי 'ibrî "Hebrew" is any descendant of עֶבֶר 'ēber "Eber", one of Abraham's ancestors. Both have the same first three consonants in Hebrew, in spite of the English spelling.¹ Thus, in Jewish tradition [all of Eber's descendants](#) are Hebrews. Many Bible dictionaries also suggest this as being a possible meaning. (If this were true, then most of them ended up quite a ways south, in the Arabian Peninsula or Ethiopia, at least the descendants of Joktan, in desert regions, and would have been Bedouins, as were Abraham's family. However, there is no suggestion from the Hebrew that עִבְרִי 'ibrî means Bedouin.)

However, the Bible never says anywhere that Hebrew means descendant of Eber, and the only time Eber's descendants are explicitly referred to it is with the term עֶבְרֵי־כָל kāl-banê-'ēber "all the children of Eber" in Genesis 10:21. And it seems unlikely that such an ancestral connection would explain how the Egyptians were familiar with the term "Hebrew" but not with Abraham's descendants.

The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew Lexicon observes, just as I have above, that the term is normally "a. put into the mouth of foreigners (Egyptian and Philistine), or b. used to distinguish Israel from foreigners," and says that the original meaning of the word may be "one from beyond, from the other side, i.e. probably (in Hebrew tradition) from beyond the Euphrates (compare Joshua 24:2,3E), but possibly in fact (if name given in Canaan) from beyond the Jordan." This analysis is apparently from עֶבֶר 'ēber "beyond", which is pronounced the same as the name Eber. However, this does not really explain Joseph's comment that he was stolen "out of the land of the Hebrews" in Genesis 40:15. He was born and raised in Canaan, which was *not* beyond either the Jordan or the Euphrates!

Could Hebrew be the same as *Habiru*?

A fascinating possibility is that "Hebrew" might have started out as the equivalent of a term *Habiru* or *Apiru* used in various middle-eastern sources from this time period. In Egyptian sources they are called the ḥpr.w, probably vocalized as ḥapiru, which starts with [ḥ] just like עִבְרִי [ʕibri:] "Hebrew" does. The [Wikipedia article](#) says:

Habiru or *Apiru* or ḥpr.w (Egyptian) was the name given by various Sumerian, Egyptian, Akkadian, Hittite, Mitanni, and Ugaritic sources (dated, roughly, between 1800 BC and 1100 BC) to a group of people living as nomadic

¹ In New Testament Greek they also both start with an [h] sound, Ἑβραῖος and Ἑβραῖ. Why Hebrew ע, usually transliterated as ḥ, which was used to write the two phonemes /ḥ/ or /ʕ/ in Hebrew, became [h] in Greek in these two words is unclear, since it usually comes out as either nothing or as γ [g] in Greek. It is intriguing that the term *Habiru* or *Apiru* or ḥapiru, which may be related and is discussed below, had this same alternation between [h] and [ḥ] in different regional languages, which makes one wonder if Greek could have gotten the [h] from another source.

invaders in areas of the Fertile Crescent from Northeastern Mesopotamia and Iran to the borders of Egypt in Canaan. Depending on the source and epoch, these *Habiru* are variously described as nomadic or semi-nomadic, rebels, outlaws, raiders, mercenaries, and bowmen, servants, slaves, migrant laborers, etc.

Thomas Briscoe in *The Holman Bible Atlas* says:

The term *Habiru* first appears shortly after 1900 B.C. ...

The name *Habiru* designated a social status, not an ethnic identity. *Habiru* were people who, for whatever reason, had left their homeland to make their way as foreigners in another land. As outsiders, *Habiru* had limited rights and opportunities. They were used as state servants in royal administrations and as unskilled laborers. Other *Habiru* were mercenaries who sold their services to the highest bidder or lived as outlaws on the margin of society. According to the [Amarna letters](#), the king of Shechem and his son employed *Habiru* to harass their Canaanite neighbors.

Given the description of the *Habiru*, and the attitudes of the Egyptians towards those they call Hebrews in Genesis, it really seems quite likely that the terms might have started out as equivalents. However, around 1100 BC the term seems to have died out in its broader meaning as a reference to anyone but the Israelites, but continued to be used by nearby peoples like the philistines and by Jonah to his shipmates to refer to the latter.

The *Habiru* are mentioned in some of the [Amarna letters](#), which were written perhaps between 1661 and 1332 B.C. according to some estimates, which would be half a century after the start of the Israelite conquest in 1406 B.C. and the death of Joshua in 1390. The Amarna letters were sent from various kings throughout Syria and Canaan, but the only ones which mention the *Habiru* are from around Jerusalem. Much has been written on both sides of the debate about whether some or all of these references could be to the Israelites. Many (including the [Wikipedia article](#)), reject such a connection, but many do not. Either way, given the broader application that the term certainly had, Bible-believing Christians should be careful about using such references as “proof” that the Hebrews are documented in Canaan at this time, since it cannot provide such proof. Even so, I personally believe it likely that some of these references are to the Israelites.

[This page](#) summarizes the argument well:

The debate over the possible connection between the *habiru* of the Amarna Letters and the biblical Israelites is well known. The term *habiru* is a social designation meaning fugitive or refugee, which was in use throughout the ancient Near East for most of the second millennium (Lemche 1992). While every reference to *habiru* in the Amarna Letters does not necessarily refer to the Israelites, if the Israelites came into the land at the end of the 15th century, as the Bible indicates, and if the Israelites were involved in an armed struggle to gain control of the central hill country, as the Bible also indicates, then at least some of the references to *habiru* in the areas where the Israelites were active must refer to the Israelites (Merrill 1987: 102-108). Such an assumption correlates quite well with the biblical data and the information gleaned from the Amarna Letters.

Other opinions from the Biblical point of view can be found [here](#).

But what implications might “Hebrew” being derived from *Habiru* have for the inerrancy and accuracy of the Bible? Only positive implications: We find a term whose meaning is a bit mysterious in its early uses, but which matches up with a well-attested term which has a similar meaning. The fact that the meaning was made more specific later is no surprise: words are always shifting meaning through the centuries, just as languages are always changing in other ways. The bottom line: the Bible is reliable!