

Hebrew and Aramaic:

Origins, Differences, and Historical Relationship

Hebrew and Aramaic are closely related Semitic languages that played central roles in the religious, cultural, and political life of the ancient Near East. While they share common roots and structural similarities, they developed distinct functions and histories.

Language Family and Origins

Both Hebrew and Aramaic belong to the Northwest Semitic branch of the Afro-Asiatic language family. They likely evolved from earlier Semitic dialects spoken in the Levant during the second millennium BCE.

Which Came First

Hebrew is generally considered the older language as a distinct, identifiable form. It emerged by approximately 1200–1000 BCE as the language of ancient Israel and Judah. Aramaic developed slightly later, around 1000–900 BCE, but rapidly spread due to its adoption by major empires.

Historical Roles

Hebrew functioned primarily as a sacred, literary, and national language. It was used for religious texts, law, and poetry and became central to Jewish identity. Most of the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh) is written in Hebrew.

Aramaic, by contrast, became the everyday spoken and administrative language across much of the Near East. Empires such as the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian empires adopted Aramaic as a common language for governance and trade.

Use in Religious Texts

Although Hebrew dominates biblical literature, portions of the Bible—most notably sections of Daniel and Ezra—are written in Aramaic. Later Jewish texts, including much of the Talmud, are also primarily in Aramaic.

Later History and Modern Use

Hebrew experienced a revival in the late 19th and 20th centuries and is now spoken as Modern Hebrew in Israel. Aramaic, while no longer widely spoken, survives in liturgical contexts and among small communities.

Conclusion

In summary, Hebrew came first as a distinct language tied to a specific people and identity, while Aramaic became broader in use as the international language of the ancient Near East. Their interaction reflects a dynamic history of language, power, and cultural continuity.