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Hebrew as Literary Language[1]

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Scholars disagree on the status of the language of the Hebrew Bible. The questions come down to two: (1) whether Biblical Hebrew was a language and (2) when the language might have been spoken, if ever. Paul Tarazi and Gotthelf Bergsträsser agree on the answer to (1), that the Hebrew Bible was written in a single language.[2] For Edward Ullendorf, "Biblical Hebrew" could only be called "no more than a linguistic fragment," because of how much is missing for it to be used in everyday life.[3] It is unclear, however, whether he believed that the language was not spoken at all or that the biblical text represented a small portion of a language spoken by a historical people. Jehoshua Grintz made claims that relate to both (1) and (2) when he wrote that Hebrew "was the main vehicle of speech in Jerusalem and the surrounding country, as well as the language most used for literary purposes during [the late Second Temple] period," which continued from the time of the creation of the Hebrew Bible.[4] Ernst Knauf clearly stated that Biblical Hebrew (1) combined elements from so many different time periods and styles, and therefore, (2) could not have been spoken.[5] Similarly, Tarazi stated that Biblical Hebrew did not predate the composition of the Bible and was not spoken at all.[6] These scholars tend to agree that Hebrew, as written in the Bible, was not spoken, but the precise relationship between the written and spoken languages remains debatable.

Another question that arises from the Biblical Hebrew language is the original meaning of the designation עברי *'ivri* "Hebrew." This question is significant because the term "Hebrew" referred

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[1] This is a reprint of an article published in a 2019 Festschrift volume in honor of V. Rev. Dr. Paul Nadim Tarazi.

[2] Paul Nadim Tarazi, *The Rise of Scripture* (St. Paul: OCABS Press, 2017), 72; Gotthelf Bergsträsser, *Introduction to the Semitic Languages: Text Specimens and Grammatical Sketches*(trans. Peter T. Daniels; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 50. This claim, of course, excludes the Aramaic sections of the Hebrew Bible.

[3] Edward Ullendorff, "Is Biblical Hebrew a Language?" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 34 (1971): 254.

[4] Jehoshua M. Grintz, "Hebrew as the Spoken and Written Language in the Last Days of the Second Temple," *JBL* 79 (1960): 32. While it goes beyond the scope of this paper, much of the discussion about the "language of Jesus," that is, whether Jews were speaking Hebrew at the time of the writing of the New Testament, assumes that Hebrew was a vernacular language at some point in history.

[5] Ernst Axel Knauf, "War 'Biblisch-Hebräisch' eine Sprache?" *ZAH* 3 (1990): 21.

[6] Tarazi pointed out, "[T]he language that was spoken during the so-called 'Late Biblical Hebrew' period as well as at the height of the so-called 'Standard or Classical Biblical Hebrew' period, is qualified as 'Judean' or 'Judahite,'" so the language of the Bible at some point was seen as different from the language spoken at Jerusalem (Tarazi, *Rise*, 61-62).

only to people and not to a language in the text of the Hebrew Bible. Julius Lewy wrote that the adjective meant "alien" or "the one from beyond," and was derived from the noun עבר *'eber* meaning "an area outside one's own territory."[7] According to D. R. G. Beattie and Philip Davies, the term began more specifically as *'eber ha-nahar*, a calque of the Akkadian, *eber-nari*, which was a "clearly-defined territory" in the western part of the Assyrian Empire.[8] As far as to whom the term refers, Beattie and Davies wrote, "Hebrew is a term used either by foreigners to designate Israelites or Judaeans, or by Israelites and Judeans when speaking to foreigners about themselves."[9] Tarazi stated that the term meant "crosser," which comes from the verb of the same root "cross," and refers more specifically to the "itinerant shepherds 'crossing' back and forth through the Syrian Wilderness."[10] Scholars thus agree that the term derives from the root "cross," but disagree whether it is people from a territory "across" a river or people "crossing" a territory. The territory, however, seems to be the vicinity of the Syrian Desert "across" the Euphrates.

In this paper I will show that the language in which the Bible was written was called "Hebrew" to identify it with the pastoral "foreigners" of the Syrian Desert, as Tarazi claimed, and those with whom Yhwh identified. I will begin with the basic datum that Biblical Hebrew was the main language of the Tanakh; although we have no data that it was spoken in the area. It was originally called "Hebrew" because of its association with nomadism and disconnect from urban life—the home of Yhwh, the main character of the Hebrew Bible. Scripture came from the wilderness, where Yhwh made his home, and the language arose from the same place. In order to grasp what the Bible means by "Hebrew," and so why the translator of Ben Sira would call the language by this name, I will examine the term עברי *'ivri* "Hebrew" in the Hebrew Bible, which appears 34 times, by asking who is using the term, about whom they are using it, and to whom they are speaking. We will see that the term עברי *'ivri* "Hebrew" refers to a super-ethnic group, comprised of the Sons of Israel and multiple pastoral tribes in the Syrian and Arabian Deserts, to whom the Hebrew Bible ascribes Yhwh as the patronal deity. Once we establish these points, we will see that the use of this term to name the written language of the Bible makes explicit that scripture was rooted in the pastoral homeland of the wilderness and intended to cross tribes and did not belong to a single one of them.

Written vs. spoken languages

Based on the paradigm of other languages, we cannot assume that Biblical Hebrew was a spoken language in addition to a literary language. Written languages never reflect spoken vernacular languages perfectly because each serves its own purpose. Marlon Brando's famous line in "On the Waterfront," "I *coulda* been a contender," does not follow the rules of correct written grammar. Should he have said, however, "I *could have* been a contender," it would have sounded strange and out-of-place because of his character and the social situation he occupied. This distinction between spoken and written varieties exists in every language with a written variety. As a result of this linguistic dichotomy, biblical and Semitic scholars have debated the relationship between Biblical Hebrew and a spoken analogue.

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[7] Julius Lewy, "Origin and Signification of the Biblical Term 'Hebrew,'" *HUCA* 28 (1957): 13.

[8] D. R. G. Beattie and Philip R. Davies, "What does Hebrew Mean?" *JSS* 56 (2011): 78.

[9] Beattie and Davies, "What does Hebrew Mean?" 76.

[10] Tarazi, *Rise*, 69.

Societies often include multiple languages and dialects that fill distinct niches. For example, "Arabic," which we often consider a single language, in the modern world occupies a complex space between written and spoken forms. Arabic has terms for each of these varieties of the language: *fuṣḥa* for the literary form (as is used in books and newspapers) and elevated speech (e.g., speeches and sermons), and *'ammiyya* for the panoply of everyday spoken varieties.

The difference between the two creates different social groups. A Moroccan and an Iraqi cannot understand each other when each speaks in his or her distinct, native *'ammiyya*. They are two linguistic groups. An educated Moroccan and an educated Iraqi would both have learned *fuṣḥa*, so they would have no problem understanding the same newscast or magazine article, which their uneducated compatriots could not comprehend. The literary language, therefore, forges the educated of both groups into a single group with its own identity. While varieties of spoken Arabic, *'ammiyya*, belong to distinct social groups, *fuṣḥa* spans multiple tribes and nations.

This linguistic situation is not unique to Arabic. The term "Chinese" refers to both a standard language, Mandarin, taught universally in Chinese schools, as well as to many speakers of mutually incomprehensible but related dialects or languages.[11] All would write with the same language, however,[12] and they may or may not speak Mandarin to each other.[13] Even among German speakers, a rural Bavarian speaking in a local dialect cannot be understood by someone from Saxony without some experience or special training.[14] Yet both could read the same website in common written German or *Hochdeutsch* ("High German"). Written languages unify speakers of various languages into a single social group.

Beliefs about the "Hebrew" language often assume that the authors of the Tanakh spoke the very Hebrew in which they wrote, as if they had no choice, and so we do not reflect on the language itself used in this literature. We cannot assume that the scriptural writers spoke the language they wrote in. If we assume that the language of the Torah was only one of multiple possible languages to compose this work in, we must examine the written language as not only the medium but also as part of the message.

The Bible presents a complex linguistic, and thus social, context. First, languages such as Aramaic, Judahite, and Ashdodite are explicitly mentioned in the Bible as being spoken, and among these, only Aramaic is mentioned as written.[15] In other words, while the Hebrew Bible assumes a multilingual environment, it never mentions Hebrew among them. Second, the first time we read of Hebrew as a language is in the Greek Septuagint, when the grandson of Jesus Ben Sira mentioned that the original text he was translating was uttered ἑβραϊστὶ hebraïsti "in Hebrew" or "Hebraically"

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[11] The language calls itself *Pǔtōnghuà*, which literally means "common language."

[12] Taiwan is one of a few exceptions that uses a different writing system than the mainland, though the language is spoken in mostly the same way.

[13] On more than one occasion, I have witnessed native Mandarin and Cantonese speakers speaking English to each other to communicate.

[14] I saw a German-language documentary in Germany that featured an elderly Austrian farmer, whose speech was subtitled for other Germans, even though it was technically "German."

[15] Evidence of spoken language variation appears in the famous scene in Judg 12:6, where the Gileadites and Ephraimites pronounce the word for "grain" as *shibboleth* and *sibboleth*, respectively. According to the biblical author, the latter showed that "he could not speak it so," that is, he was incorrect. Spoken dialects differed, at least on this subtle level.

(Sir *Prologue*). His statement raises the question of the nature of this written language and its sociological niche.

Evidence thus points to a unique connection between the term "Hebrew" and the language of scripture, and its distinction from other languages reported as spoken. Since Hebrew in the Tanakh only refers to people, we must ask what this term meant before it was mentioned as a language and so what prompted the translator of Ben Sira to call this language by this gentilic adjective.

Identity of the Hebrews

Eberites and the Syrian Desert (Gen 10-11)

Eber (עבר), the eponymous progenitor of all the Hebrews (עברים *'ivrim*), begat the desert-dwelling peoples of the Syrian and Arabian Deserts, to the exclusion of the founders of the great cities of the region. It is only an accident of history that English translates עברים *'ivrim* as "Hebrews" and not "Eberites." The first mention of Eber simply ascribes his children to Shem, son of Noah (Gen 10:21). Over the course of the next three verses, we read that Eber is, in fact, the great-grandson of Shem (Gen 10:22-24). The text singles out Eber as the single, archetypal descendent whose children bear the name of this son of Noah; Eberites are the S(h)emites.

One would expect that this naming would carry special prestige, but the present chapter offers less-than-impressive details about Eber's children, Peleg and Joktan. First, the text only presents the meaning of Peleg's name, "Division," which represents the division of the land (Gen 10:25). Second, the other brother's name is Joktan, which the text does not interpret, but which means inauspiciously, "He/it will be made small." While Joktan bears 13 sons, the Bible only mentions three of them again.[16] We learn little about the totality of Joktan's sons, other than that they dwelt from Mesha to the eastern mountain, Sephar (Gen 10:30). "Division" and "Made Small" dwelling in the wilderness do not inspire awe in the reader.

Furthermore, the sons dwell in obscure places, not the great cities. We only possess general evidence about these locations. Mesha possibly lies somewhere between the Red Sea, Arabian Desert, and Persian Gulf.[17] Sephar may be situated on the coast of modern Yemen, or may mean "border country" in a more general sense.[18] The biblical text only locates Sephar to "the east." In spite of the number of Joktan's children, the text located these Eberites obscurely somewhere in the desert between the Fertile Crescent and the bottom of the Arabian Peninsula.

The next mention of Eber came after the fall of the Tower of Babel in Gen 11:10, and the text made a genealogical beeline through five generations to bring the focus onto Terah, the father of Abram. This followed the line of Peleg, "Division," whose name acquired additional significance with the story of the Tower and the resulting division of nations. The text did not name the "sons and daughters" who are not the direct ancestors of Abram, but once we arrived at Terah, we learned details about his sons. This clan lived in the land of the Chaldeans, as opposed to their cousins, the sons of Joktan, to the south and west.

If we locate the "Eberites" or "Hebrews" according to Genesis 10-11, they populated the area

[16] Those mentioned again are Ophir, Havilah, and Sheba, who all bear a relationship to gold.

[17] Gary H. Oller, "Mesha," *ABD* 3:708.

[18] Oller, "Sephar," *ABD* 5:1098.

between Ur and the Syrian and Arabian Deserts. The text contrasts their habitation with that of Eber's city-dwelling great-uncles, who included the eponymous founders of Elam, Ashur, and Aram (10:22). Significantly, the archetypal descendants of Shem who are ascribed to his line were not these founders of great cities, but obscure dwellers of the desert. The text thus presents a special relationship between Shem, son of Noah, and the denizens of the wilderness, including Abram, son of Terah, to the exclusion of the major cities.

Abram, the Hebrew (Gen 14)

Once the narrative sped through the genealogy to land on Terah, it slowed to settle on his most famous son, Abram, in Gen 11. A few chapters later, in Gen 14, we read the first occurrence of the adjective "Hebrew," ascribed to Abram as "*the* Hebrew." Logically, the area would have been filled with Hebrews/Eberites, that is, descendants of Eber, for many generations up to and including Abram's time. Abram, however, is singled out as *the* Hebrew.

The reader must pay attention to the context in which Abram is identified as "Hebrew." He is identified among Amorites when they needed someone with knowledge of the desert when the Amorites were in trouble. Chedorlaomer plundered them and fled northeastward. They called on Abram *the Hebrew* for help. Unless this description contrasts him from the others around him, the addition of this eponym is superfluous; we already knew since chapter 11 that his father descended from the children of Eber. We need to understand, therefore, why the author would have emphasized Abram as *the Hebrew* to be called upon when help in the desert was needed. The Bible introduced the Amorites as Canaanites, that is, descendants of Ham.[19] Hamites dwelt in the area from Sidon in the North to Gaza in the South, and East to the Jordan (Gen 10:15-16). More specifically, Amorites come from the eastern Mediterranean coast (Gen 10:15-20). Thus, they perhaps lacked the knowledge to pursue Chedorlaomer and his allies to Dan and the area of Damascus (Gen 14:14-15).

Significantly, Abram spent significant time in the Syrian Desert as a typical "Hebrew." The story presented the character of Abram as personally experienced in the desert. First, he emigrated with his father from Ur to Haran, from Chaldean civilization to the provinces (Gen 11:31). He grew up outside the big city. Second, "Haran" literally means in Hebrew "hot (place)," and modern archaeologists locate this city in modern-day southern Turkey, or the northern part of the Fertile Crescent on the border of the Syrian Desert.[20] Third, after living in Haran, Abram turned to the South—the Syrian Desert—to shepherd his sheep, (Gen 13:1-2) before settling down in Hebron, at the Plain of Mamre, with his tent (Gen 13:18). Fourth, Abram lived as a nomad. Over the course of chapters 11 to 14, he moved from Ur to Haran (11:31), from Haran to Canaan (12:5), and to Sichem (12:6), Egypt (12:10), the area of Bethel (13:3), and Mamre (13:18). He thus did not follow the lifestyle of Ham or of Eber's uncles, founders of cities, but as a typical Eberite: a wandering

[19] This biblical depiction of the Amorites contrasts with the much older one from Sumerian and Akkadian literature, where the MAR.TU / *Amurru* are depicted—probably satirically—as uncivilized shepherds from the Euphrates Valley, down to W Mesopotamia and the Arabian Desert. From archaeological and linguistic evidence, one can find their influence from Ugarit on the Mediterranean coast to the old cities of Mesopotamia during the first centuries of the second millennium BCE, though they seem to have assimilated into the surrounding cultures by the Late Bronze Age (George E. Mendenhall, "Amorites," *ABD* 1:200-201). The present work, however, focuses on the biblical presentation of the Amorites and their distinction from Hebrews.

[20] Yoshitaka Kobayashi locates it about 80 km east of Charchemish ("Haran (PLACE)," *ABD* 3:59).

herder, familiar with and at home in the Syrian Desert. Likely his dwelling as a shepherd in the desert earned him the respect of the Amorites when they needed the help of a desert-dwelling "Hebrew."

Sons of Israel among the Hebrews (Gen 39, 43, and 46)

The narrative of Joseph and his brothers' descent into Egypt reveals that "Hebrews" and "Sons of Israel" are not synonyms because the Egyptians were already familiar with Hebrew language and culture before they ever met Joseph's brothers.

The term "Hebrew" had a negative, foreign connotation in this section.[21] Joseph began to live among the Egyptians starting in Gen 39. Soon, however, he rebuffed the advances of Potiphar's wife, and she disparaged him among her house and to her husband by saying that this "Hebrew" was brought in to "mock" them (Gen 39:14, 17). "Hebrew" was the word that identified Joseph and did so in a clearly negative sense.

When the other sons of Israel came down to Egypt for food (Gen 42), they had to identify themselves to the Egyptians, and the Egyptians understood that they were Hebrews without them identifying themselves as such. The brothers introduced themselves as brothers of one father from the Land of Canaan (Gen 42:7, 13). When Joseph concealed himself, he was able to use an interpreter to speak to them (Gen 42:23). This scene takes for granted that the Egyptian court employed someone knowledgeable in whatever language they were speaking, so it was clearly familiar to the officials.

The Egyptians functioned toward Joseph's brothers according to preexisting cultural norms towards Hebrews. On the brothers' second visit, in chapter 43, Joseph offered them food. He did not eat with them, however, because it was an "abomination" for Egyptians to eat with "Hebrews" (Gen 43:32). Again, we note that the word that designated the sons of this one father was "Hebrews," not "Canaanites" or "Sons of Israel."[22]

We must deduce that this geographic and linguistic information sufficed for the Egyptians to identify their guests as Hebrews. From what they told the Egyptians, Joseph's brothers were Canaanites who spoke a particular language common enough for their hosts that they had a translator on hand. It is not clear if it is *a* Hebrew language or *the* Hebrew language, however. The sons of Israel were Hebrew, so the language must have been connected to that identity in some way, maybe to Canaan. We do not know if the Egyptians considered all Canaanites "Hebrews."[23] Either the Egyptians believed that Canaanites were Hebrews, or the brothers' speech distinguished them from non-Hebrew Canaanites. Whatever the cause, the Egyptians decided that the men were Hebrews and that they could not eat together.

It is likely not a coincidence that the Egyptians held shepherds and Hebrew in contempt, and that the sons of Israel lived as shepherds among them. When Joseph's relatives addressed Pharaoh later in the story, they were to tell him that they were shepherds and that they had settled

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[21] Only once do the Egyptians use "Hebrew" in a neutral sense, when Joseph's prison cellmates described him to Pharaoh as a "Hebrew" and a slave (Gen 41:12).

[22] Evidently, "Hebrew" is not a genetic designation but a cultural one, since Joseph was surely able to eat with his Egyptian wife (Gen 41:45).

[23] The genealogies in Genesis 10 make it clear that Canaanites were sons of Ham, as opposed to the Hebrews, sons of Shem.

in the region of Goshen, as they had lived as such in Canaan. Joseph wanted them to tell Pharaoh this because "every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians" (Gen 46:31-34). Thus it was either coincidence that the Egyptians held both Hebrews and shepherds in contempt, or they assumed a relationship between Hebrews and shepherds. Based on the origin of the Hebrews, the combination seemed inseparable so Egyptian culture likely linked Hebrew and shepherds.

This story clearly distinguishes between "Hebrew" and "son of Israel," because for the Egyptians being Hebrew was a salient characteristic, completely separate from their being sons of Israel. Having identified these visitors as Hebrews, the Egyptians followed existing mores to deal with them. Hence the text identifies the sons of Israel as Hebrews, but Hebrews must have included more than just this clan. The text leaves us no choice here but to see Hebrews as a broader category of shepherds to which the sons of Israel belong.

God of the Hebrews (Exod 3, 5)

As we move into the book of Exodus, Yhwh himself distinguished between Hebrews and the Sons of Israel. In Exodus 3, when Moses met Yhwh for the first time, Yhwh introduced himself to him as "the god of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Exod 3:6). When Moses introduced Yhwh to the Sons of Israel, he was to call him "I am" (אהיה *'ahiyeh*) as well as "Yhwh, the god of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Exod 3:14-16).

Yhwh was to be introduced differently to Pharaoh. Moses used two appellations for Yhwh in his first actual confrontation with Pharaoh, but he only captured his attention by mentioning the Hebrews. When Moses was to introduce Yhwh to Pharaoh, Yhwh commanded him to call him "Yhwh, god of the Hebrews" (Exod 3:18). Moses and Aaron, in fact, first introduced him to Pharaoh as "Yhwh, god of Israel," which Yhwh never actually called himself up to this point (Exod 5:1). Pharaoh rejected them, stating that he did not know this god and would not let "Israel" go (Exod 5:2). Then, the two added that the "god of the Hebrews" had met with them (Exod 5:3). From that point, Moses and Aaron only called him "God of the Hebrews" when speaking to Pharaoh (Exod 7:16; 9:1, 13; 10:3). Yhwh was therefore the god of Israel *and the rest of the Hebrews.*

To Pharaoh's face, Yhwh reemphasized his identity with the Hebrews, and not exclusively with the Sons of Israel. Significantly, we learned from the previous book that Egyptians reviled Hebrews. The god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob identified himself precisely with the shepherds Pharaoh abhorred, and ironically, he forced Pharaoh to allow them to separate and feast separately from the Egyptians.

This claim by Yhwh in front of Pharaoh to be the god of the abominable ones built on the identity of the Hebrews with nomadic desert life outside of major cities. As Yhwh led Israel out of Egypt, he not only was bringing them into the desert where he would speak to them, but where Hebrews belonged.

Do Philistines know who Israel is? (1 Samuel)

A problem arises in the text of 1 Sam 13-14 because "Hebrew" and "Sons of Israel" are both used, but the distinction the author is intending is not immediately clear. Nada Na'aman understood that in 1 Samuel "Hebrew" was an ethnic designation, with more of a negative

connotation than "Israel."[24] Ralph Klein similarly believed that "Hebrew" had two definitions: (1) a negative term for Sons of Israel and (2) mercenaries who could change allegiances.[25]

These claims that equate the term "Hebrew" with "Sons of Israel" assume a change occurred from the usage in Genesis and Exodus, where it encompassed more than the Sons of Israel. No evidence in the 1 Samuel context suggests that such a change occurred, as we can interpret "Hebrew" to continue to designate a larger group than simply the Sons of Israel. Furthermore, the clear negative connotation in Genesis and Exodus does not show up as clearly in 1 Samuel. Just as Egyptians understood the Hebrews to be an ethnic group of which the pastoral Sons of Israel made up a subset, the Philistines likely followed this same paradigm in this book. "Hebrews" was a broad group that the Philistines knew, while "Sons of Israel" was a specific designation for David's subjects familiar to the reader.

Where the narrator used the designation "Sons of Israel," the word in the Philistines' mouths was "Hebrews" in 1 Sam 13-14. For example, the narrator informed the reader that the "men of Israel" hid out wherever they could in 1 Sam 13:6. When they came out from hiding, the Philistines remarked that the "Hebrews" were emerging (1 Sam 14:11). Elsewhere, the narrator told us that there was no smith in the "land of Israel" because the Philistines said they did not want the "Hebrews" to make weapons (1 Sam 13:19). If we assume a continuity in the meaning of this term from the Pentateuch, then this distinction may be one of prestige, that is, the Philistines used a negative term and the narrator a neutral one, or one of specificity, that is, the Philistines used a general term and the narrator a specific one.

We see this confusion in other scenes, as well. When the Philistines heard the "great shout" from Israel, the former noted that it came from "the camp of the Hebrews" (1 Sam 4:5-6). On another occasion, Israel camped in Jezreel. The Philistine leaders asked about the "Hebrews" there, and one of their own leaders explained that it was "David, servant of Saul, King of Israel" (1 Sam 29:1-3). This exchange indicates honest confusion arising from the fact that that to the Philistines, Israel represented one of an indecipherable array of Hebrew tribes or kingdoms. Any negative connotation is less evident.

The biggest challenge to the idea that the terms designated the same group of people is found in 1 Sam 14:21. We read there that some of the Hebrews with the Philistines went to stand with Israel. The word came from the voice of the narrator, not that of the Philistines, so it would not have the same negative sense. Klein claimed that this is a distinct use of the term, but this

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[24] Na'aman wrote, "It refers mainly to Israelites in the pre-monarchical period and is used to distinguish them from other ethnic groups; it usually appears in unfavorable contexts, thus lacking the halo generally associated with the term 'Israelite'" (Nadav Na'aman, "Ḫabiru and Hebrews: The Transfer of a Social Term to the Literary Sphere," *JNES* 45 [1986]:279). Na'aman further believes that this meaning derives from a development that started long before in the Amarna correspondence, "The Amarna correspondence shows a marked development in the history of the appellation 'Ḫabiru.' On many occasions, the term went beyond its original meaning (i.e., a designation for uprooted people) and became a derogatory appellation for rebels against Egyptian authority" (Na'aman, "Ḫabiru," 275).

[25] Klein claimed, "Note that 'Hebrews' is used in two senses in this chapter [1 Sam 14], a) as a pejorative designation for Israelites when Philistines are speaking (14:11; cf. 13:19) and b) as a designation for mercenary outlaws who could choose to fight for hire with either Israel or the Philistines (14:21; cf. 13:3, 7). Victory had a bandwagon effect. Other Israelites, who had earlier hidden on Mount Ephraim (13:6), joined in pursuit of the fleeing Philistines" (Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel,* Word Biblical Commentary 10 [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008], 137).

distinction is not necessary. They are not necessarily treacherous Sons of Israel. We can understand them as Hebrews who were not Sons of Israel and who decided to align with the Sons of Israel against the Philistines.

The Philistines' perception paralleled closely the Egyptians', even though the latter took place several centuries earlier in the story. The Egyptians created their rules about *Hebrews* not *Israel*. Philistines knew they were in pursuit of *Hebrews*, but were less clued into the fact that it was *Israel* until someone from their own group identified the leader as belonging to the latter sub-group. Moreover, the narrator took this distinction as natural when we read about the changing allegiance of a group of Hebrews towards Israel.

The Hebrews in 1 Samuel differed in their cultural attributes from those in the Pentateuch. In Genesis, they were pastoralists from Canaan who spoke a particular language, and in Exodus, the former characteristic played a more important role. In 1 Samuel the Hebrews were not explicitly pastoralists. Therefore, the combination of their language and location likely indicated to the Philistines that they were Hebrews. Whether or not they were still pastoral, they spoke a dialect or language related to those traditional shepherds.

Yhwh and the Hebrews (Jonah 1:9)

In the book of Jonah, the reluctant prophet introduces himself as a Hebrew and one who fears Yhwh, god of the heavens (Jonah 1:9). Significantly, he introduced himself neither as a Judahite nor as an Israelite/Son of Israel. He used the name of a specific deity, Yhwh, in his introduction, as well. The question then arises of why he would use such an unexpected designation for himself.

The data in the above passages depict a world where the Hebrews were known by peoples like the Egyptians and Philistines, but the Sons of Israel were less familiar. The Egyptians knew of Hebrews long before the Sons of Israel entered into their land, and the Philistines knew that they were at war with Hebrews but needed someone to identify the specific kingdom to them. These sailors, who lived far from the Syrian Desert, understood the reference to these people. The specific tribe of Hebrews Jonah came from likely would not have been meaningful.

The sailors also seemed to know of Yhwh, though Jonah had already explained that he had been fleeing this god of his. Like in Yhwh's first revelation to Pharaoh in Exodus 5, Jonah tied together Yhwh to his people, the Hebrews.

The language of the Bible

Since the Bible presented the Hebrews as a super-ethnic group that included the Sons of Israel, this situation must have influenced Ben Sira's grandson's use of the adjective to refer to the language of scripture. More precisely he said that difficulty arose from translating those things "uttered" in "Hebrew fashion" ἑβραϊστὶ *Hebraïsti* (Sir *Prologue*). One could say that as a Greek, perhaps he was over-simplifying the ethnic situation, just like the Egyptians and Philistines and Jonah's sailors, and meant, in fact, the language of Israel or Judah. This grandson, however, was a son of Israel and had access to the Hebrew scriptures, so we cannot believe that he would be capable of this confusion. Hence, if the translator of Ben Sira understood clearly what a Hebrew *person* was, then his appellation of the language points to Hebrew as a language that coincides with this super-ethnic group that included the Sons of Israel.

We know from the Bible itself that people were speaking local, ethnic languages, like Judahite and Aramaic; Hebrew belonged to none of these people-groups and to all of them. Hebrew functioned as a lingua franca, likely never spoken in everyday discourse, but certainly written. Hebrew was the desert *fuṣḥa* to the Judahite, Aramaic, etc. *'ammiyya*. This written language united the disparate groups around not just a common literary language that represented the various desert-dwelling, nomadic, Hebrew peoples, but the language of scripture. For the Egyptians and Philistines, therefore, the Sons of Israel were speaking one of the languages belonging to the "Hebrews." Those modes of speech were closely enough related that Egyptians and Philistines could identify one as "Hebrew."

This evidence leads to the conclusion that literary Hebrew was a broadly inclusive language and was not exclusive to the children of Israel. It thus paralleled Yhwh's self-introduction to Pharaoh as God of the Hebrews. Neither Yhwh nor the language of his speech belonged to Israel alone, but both deity and tongue included this tribe within a larger group. Furthermore, scripture belonged to this larger group, as well.

The Tanakh supposes that some neighboring nations, most clearly the Egyptians, looked down upon the Hebrews, yet Yhwh chose to identify specifically with them. This identification elevated opposition against the foreign powers of the time. That Ben Sira's grandson called the language of the story "Hebrew" continued the tradition of relating the revelation to these rejected peoples.

While Yhwh chose to reveal himself exclusively to the Sons of Israel at Sinai, the story of the revelation was recorded in a language accessible to all the pastoral Eberite peoples of the Syrian Desert—not of the big cities but of the nomads who inhabited the region and whom the great powers shunned. Those who called Abram, the first one named "the Hebrew," as their father, received this story of revelation in a language that was not "theirs" but extended an invitation to them to be included as Yhwh's people.