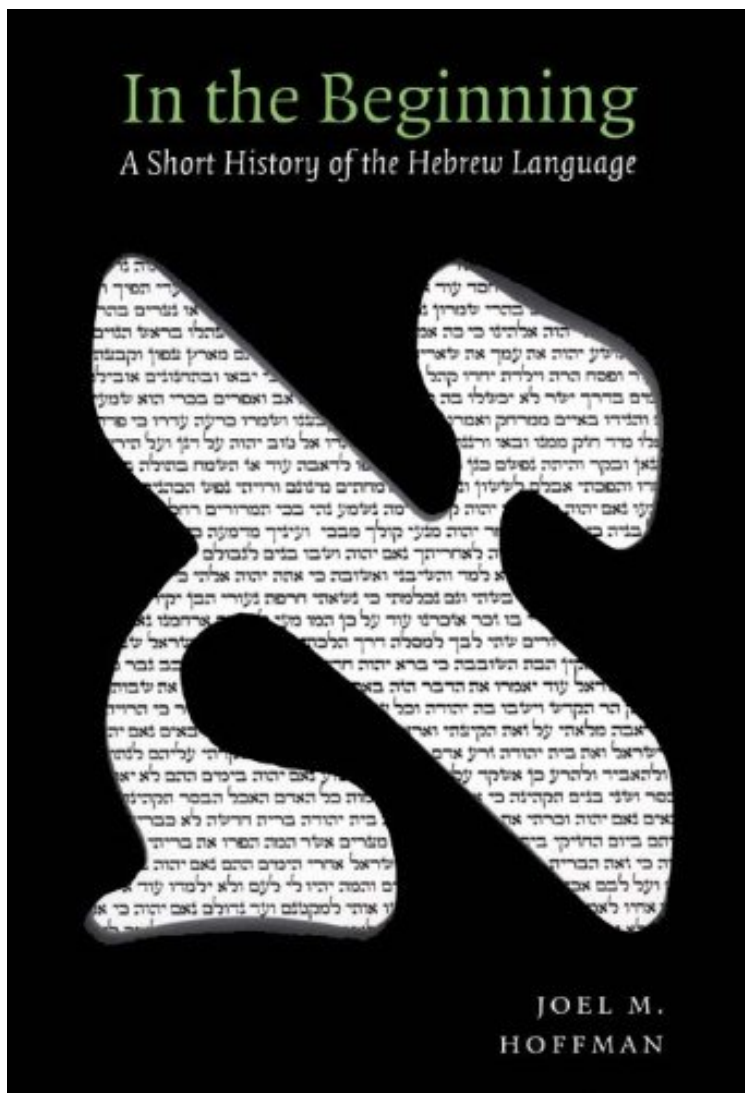


# In the Beginning: A Short History of the Hebrew Language

Joel Hoffman

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#345282 in Books NYU Press 2006-03-01 2006-03-01 Original language: English PDF # 1 9.02 x .63 x 5.981, .85 #File Name: 0814736904280 pages | File size: 69.Mb

**Joel Hoffman : In the Beginning: A Short History of the Hebrew Language** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised In the Beginning: A Short History of the Hebrew Language:

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. Interesting, but somewhat overstated in its conclusions regarding the primacy of Hebrew in the development of vowel systems By Ulfilas This book provides an interesting history of the evolution of Hebrew. Special attention is given to the idea that Hebrew deserves a special place in the evolution of writing because it was (supposedly) the language in which vowels were first incorporated into an alphabet or system of writing. The author even conjectures that the Hebrew name for God, Yahweh, was coined to exhibit this newly

developed vowel system. The central argument for the primacy of Hebrew as the cradle of vowels systems, as discussed in Chapter 3, seems to be that the spread and incorporation of vowels into other languages would have been more widespread if these vowels had been propagated by the more widespread language of Aramaic (noting that the Aramaic language and alphabet are similar to and closely related to that of Hebrew). That is, the slow spread of vowels into neighboring languages, such as Greek, suggests the obscure language of Hebrew as the source rather than the more widespread language of Aramaic. The author notes that Aramaic appears to have developed these vowels during the same 9th or 10th century B.C. time frame as Hebrew, and that evidence does not favor either language as the first developer of these vowels. The author, however, confuses the reader by such statements as the opening sentence in Chapter 3: "Approximately 3000 years ago, the ancient Hebrews discovered what would be the precursors to every modern system of writing." This book would be more to my liking if the author had more uniformly maintained the balance between evidence and conjecture.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Deep, revealing, fascinating  
By A. Fainshtein 5 stars because for me the whole subject of how language develops, and all the factors and forces that affect this process -- this subject fascinates me. And the book provides lots of food for my curiosity, deep and intricate details on a wide swath of ancient history - especially the first part. Later the book delves into quite technical details of the structure and development of Hebrew, which, probably, is difficult to follow. Fortunately, my familiarity with Hebrew allowed me to keep up. :-)

The experience was very satisfactory.  
1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Scholarly  
By Uncle Don Most of the discussion was quite technical and scholarly, not geared to a casual reader. On the other hand, the section on modern Israeli Hebrew language trends was interesting and entirely new to me.

Hebrew as a language is just over 3,000 years old, and the story of its alphabet is unique among the languages of the world. Hebrew set the stage for almost every modern alphabet, and was arguably the first written language simple enough for everyone, not just scribes, to learn, making it possible to make a written record available to the masses for the first time. Written language has existed for so many years since around 3500 BCE that most of us take it for granted. But as Hoffman reveals in this entertaining and informative work, even the idea that speech can be divided into units called words and that these words can be represented with marks on a page, had to be discovered. As Hoffman points out, almost every modern system of writing descends from Hebrew; by studying the history of this language, we can learn a good deal about how we express ourselves today. Hoffman follows and decodes the adventure that is the history of Hebrew, illuminating how the written record has survived, the significance of the Dead Sea Scrolls and ancient translations, and attempts to determine how the language actually sounded. He places these developments into a historical context, and shows their continuing impact on the modern world. This sweeping history traces Hebrew's development as one of the first languages to make use of vowels. Hoffman also covers the dramatic story of the rebirth of Hebrew as a modern, spoken language. Packed with lively information about language and linguistics and history, *In the Beginning* is essential reading for both newcomers and scholars interested in learning more about Hebrew and languages in general.

Those with a passion for Hebrew, linguistics and religious history will probably find much to captivate them. -Na'amat Woman Hoffman has a flair for explaining how languages work. -Times Literary Supplement A fascinating account of the evolution of Hebrew as a language. Those interested in language are in for a delightful surprise. -Record- of Scarsdale, NY [I]t is written in an energetic style with a commitment to exploring the evolution of Hebrew from ancient times to the present in ways that a broad audience can comprehend. It will be fortunate, indeed, if future efforts can achieve the commendable promise embodied in this volume's title with the clarity and enthusiasm that fill its pages. -Religious Studies Hoffman does a good job of pointing out the different traditions of biblical Hebrew that existed in antiquity. -The Jerusalem Post About the Author Joel Hoffman lectures and teaches classes on biblical and rabbinic Hebrew and translation at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion. He is the head translator for Jewish Lights multi-volume prayerbook and commentary series, *My Peoples Prayerbook*. He lives in the NYC area.