

The Hebrew Language and Way of Thinking

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As you all know, the Bible was not originally written in English. The Old Testament was written several thousand years ago to a people (the Hebrews) whose language and culture were very different from our own. The New Testament was written in Greek, but most of its authors were raised as Hebrews. The Hebrew way of thinking about the world around them was very different from the way we think. If we want to understand the Biblical text as the original hearers understood it, then we need a better understanding of the Hebrew language and way of thinking.

Development of the Hebrew Alphabet

Below are the 22 letters of the Modern Hebrew alphabet (written from right to left).

כ	י	ט	ח	ז	ו	ה	ד	ג	ב	א
kaph	yod	tet	chet	zayin	vav	hey	dalet	gimmel	bet	aleph
ת	ש	ר	ק	צ	פ	ע	ס	נ	מ	ל
tav	shin	resh	qof	tsade	pey	ayin	samech	nun	mem	lamed

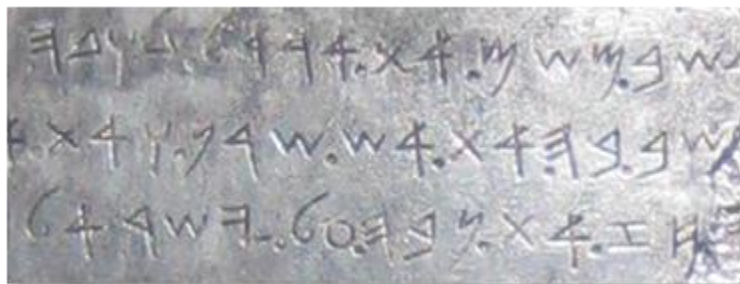
However, this was not the alphabet in use in ancient times. The present day Samaritans (there are about 756 in the world today) use Torah scrolls that are written in a very different script. Recall that the Samaritans were the descendants of the Northern Tribes of Israel that were not sent into Assyrian captivity. The alphabet employed by the Samaritans (called Paleo or Old Hebrew) is shown below.

ך	י	ט	ח	ז	ו	ה	ד	ג	ב	א
kaph	yod	tet	chet	zayin	vav	hey	dalet	gimmel	bet	aleph
ת	ש	ר	ק	צ	פ	ע	ס	נ	מ	ל
tav	shin	resh	qof	tsade	pey	ayin	samech	nun	mem	lamed

Archeologists have found coins dating from before the Babylonian captivity that use this same script.



Archeologists have also found artifacts from Phoenicia and Moab that use almost identical characters. Below is shown the Moabite stone discovered in 1868. This stone is dated at around 840 BC.



It is believed that this old Hebrew script was used up to the time of the Babylonian captivity (597–538 BC) at which time Ezra transcribed it into the square Chaldean script in use today.

Below you can see how other alphabets developed out of the Old Hebrew alphabet. The first five letters of the Old Hebrew alphabet are Aleph, Bet, Gimmel, Dalet, and Hey (written from right to left).



The Greeks borrowed these letters and called them Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, and Epsilon. The Greeks wrote from left to right, and the letters are mirror images of the Hebrew letters. The name “alphabet” is a combination of the first two letters Alpha and Beta.



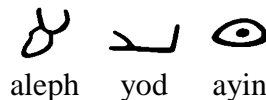
The Greek letters evolved into the modern form shown below.



The English alphabet came from the Romans whose alphabet was based on the Greek alphabet.

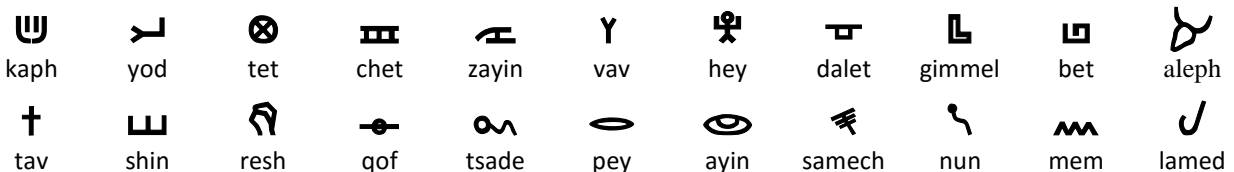


In 1905 Flinders Petrie, a renowned Egyptologist discovered an inscription written using previously unknown pictograph symbols. Due to the limited number of pictographs employed, it was determined that the language was alphabetic. Another renowned Egyptologist Dr. Alan H. Gardiner studied this inscription in detail. He was able to determine that the pictograph symbols were related to the Hebrew alphabet since the names of the Hebrew characters had ancient meanings related to the pictographs, i.e., For example, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet is named aleph meaning “ox;” the tenth letter is named yod meaning “hand,” and the sixteenth letter is named ayin meaning “eye.” Below are the pictograph characters from the inscription matching these Hebrew characters:



aleph yod ayin

The ox head pictured on the left corresponded to the letter aleph, the arm and hand pictured in the center corresponded to the letter yod, and the eye pictured on the right corresponded to the letter ayin. This pictograph script is called Proto-Semitic or Ancient Hebrew. It appears to have been the forerunner of all languages in that region (Hebrew, Phoenician, Chaldean, etc.). The entire 22-letter Ancient Hebrew alphabet is shown below.



The pictographic symbols are an aid in determining the original meaning of many Hebrew words. For example, the Hebrew word אל (El) for God would be written in the Ancient Hebrew script. The first letter is an ox head that signifies strength and the second letter is a shepherd’s staff that signifies authority. Thus, the two letters together signify “strong authority.” It is interesting that ancient kings often wore horns on their head and carried a staff. The crown

and scepter are thought to be an outgrowth of this practice. Another example is the Hebrew word אב (Av) for father. This would be written אב in the Ancient Hebrew script. The second character is the floor plan for a nomadic tent with an opening and a partition dividing the men and women. This character signifies “home.” Thus, the father is the strength of the home. Below is a chart giving possible meanings of the Ancient Hebrew characters

Ancient Hebrew	Modern Hebrew	Name	Description	Possible Meaning
	א	Aleph	Ox head	Strength, leader
	ב	Bet	Nomadic tent	House, family, in
	ג	Gimmel	Foot	Walk, gather, carry, camel
	ד	Dalet	Tent door	Move, hang, pathway, entry
	ה	Hey	Man with arms raised	Look, behold, “the”, reveal, breath, man
	ו	Vav	Tent peg	Secure, add, “and”, connect, Messiah
	ז	Zayin	Sickle or plow	Cut, plow, weapon, harvest
	ח	Chet	Tent wall	Separate, divide, half, inside or outside
	ט	Tet	Clay basket or bowl	Surround, store, contain, clay, womb
	י	Yod	Arm and hand	Work, throw, make, deed
	כ	Kaph	Palm of hand	Open, tame, subdue, bless, bend
	ל	Lamed	Staff	Authority, protect, bind, yoke, lead, control
	מ	Mem	Water	Chaos, mighty, massive, sea
	נ	Nun	Seed sprout	Offspring, heir, continue
	ס	Samech	Thorn or palm branch	Protect, sharp, pierce, hate
	ע	Ayin	Eye	See, experience, watch, know, heed, color
	פ	Pey	Mouth	Word, speak, blow, edge
	צ	Tsade	Man on his side or a trail to a destination	Correct path, desire, need, hunt, wait
	ק	Qof	Sun on horizon	Gather, condense, behind, circle
	ר	Resh	Man's head	Man, top, beginning, rule, possession
	ש	Shin	Teeth or woman's breasts	Feed, eat, consume, bite, press, two, repeat
	ת	Tav	Mark or sign	Covenant, sign, signature

The word “manna” (not a Hebrew word) came from the Hebrew word “man.” This would have been written in the Ancient Hebrew script as מנ. The first symbol represents water and the second symbol pictures a seed sprout. A possible meaning for these pictographs is “seed left by the dew.” Another interesting example is the Hebrew word פלל (palal) for “pray.” In the ancient script, this would be written פל. A possible meaning is “speak to the shepherd for guidance.” Obviously, the interpretation of the pictographs is not always straightforward, but they can sometimes give added meaning to Hebrew words.

The oldest inscriptions found involving the Ancient Hebrew script date to almost 2000 BC. Many experts believe that this is the oldest alphabet based language. It appears that the Ancient Hebrew script was in use up into the 12th century BC. The Old Hebrew script was used from the 12th century BC into the 4th century BC. The Modern Hebrew has been used from the 4th century BC up to the present time.

After an unsuccessful revolt in 135 AD, the Romans dispersed the Jews to prevent further revolts. As a result, Hebrew ceased being an everyday language for most Jews and was used only for religious purposes. This was the case up to the latter part of the 19th century. Thus, Hebrew was virtually a dead language for close to 2000 years. Its revival was due in large part to the dedication of one man. In 1881, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda emigrated from Russia to Israel and initiated a revival of the Hebrew language. Of course, he needed to add many new words to bring the language up-to-date. There were no words in the existing Hebrew for such things as automobiles, telephones, electric lights, etc. The expanded Hebrew language spread slowly, first to his family and neighbors and then into communities. It eventually became incorporated into schools and by 1922 it was widely spoken in Israel. When Israel became a state in 1948 it was designated as the official language. It is extremely rare for a language to die out and then reappear.

The Ancient Hebrew Language

The ancient Hebrew language had a small vocabulary compared to modern languages. It was about 1% the size of today's English. This means that Hebrew words often had many meanings, and it was not possible to express many of the nuances that we can in English. Thus, Hebrew words tend to be less specific than English words. It also means that English words used to translate the Hebrew often carry additional meanings not present in the original. For example, when we see the word "earth" we usually think of a spherical planet orbiting the sun as part of a vast galaxy. An ancient Hebrew, however, would likely have thought of the earth as the ground he saw around him that appeared relatively flat. Similarly, an ancient Hebrew would have thought of the sky as a bowl-shaped dome. We can also see from this that the meaning of words is heavily influenced by the culture of the author and of the audience. As was the case in most ancient languages, Hebrew words were originally written using only consonants. Although the ancient Hebrews used vowel sounds in their speech, vowel marks were not introduced until after the dispersion (about 200 AD). Below is a Bible verse from an English translation written with only consonants. See if you can read it.

N TH BGNNNG WS TH WRD ND TH WRD WS WTH GD ND TH WRD WS GD

If you are familiar with the Bible, you probably recognized this as John 1:1. If you were not familiar with the Bible, then translating this verse would have been much harder. We need to remember that in ancient times the primary means of scripture transmission was oral. The written version was more of a reminder, somewhat like our shorthand. Even in modern Israel, vowel pointings are seldom used except in Bibles, dictionaries, poetry, and books for children. Newspapers, magazines, etc. have no vowel markings.

Vowel markings are placed under, over, or on the side of consonants. The letter aleph is used below to show some of the more common vowel marks:

א or א indicate an ah sound like the "a" in father

א indicates an ee sound as in bee

א indicates an ey sound as in grey

⌘ indicates an eh sound as in red

⌘ indicates an oh sound as in open

⌘ indicates an uw sound as in tune

A single Hebrew word can have several meanings depending on how it is pronounced. For example, the Hebrew word בקר can have the following meanings depending on how it is pronounced

- baw-kar means to “seek” or “inquire”
- baw-**kawr** means “ox”
- **bo**-ker means “morning”

Thus, context is crucial to determining a word’s meaning.

Verbs in Hebrew did not have time related tenses such as Past, Present, and Future. Verb tenses were action related rather than time related. Verbs represented either a completed action (Perfect tense) or an incomplete action (Imperfect tense). You can see from this that their conception of time was much different from ours. We tend to think of time geometrically as a continuous line with the present being a point on the line, the past as the line segment to the left or before the point, and the future as the line segment to the right or after the point. The Hebrews tended to think of time as cyclical rather than linear. They also marked time periods by important events that happened during the period. As we will see later on, the Hebrews were very action oriented.

Hebrew does not use the various forms of “to be” in the same way as English. Where we might say “I am a father” or “you are clever,” the Hebrews would say the equivalent of “I father” and “you clever,” i.e., they would not use any verb at all. Hebrew does have, however, a verb הָיָה (hayah) that means “to be” or “to exist.” Forms of this verb are used in the following scriptures:

*And God said, **Let there be** light* Genesis 1:3

*God said to Moses, “**I AM WHO I AM**” (or “**I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE**”)* Exodus 3:14

However, this verb is not used in many of the situations where a form of “to be” would be used in English.

The Hebrew language does not have an indefinite article “a,” but it does have the equivalent of the definite article “the” that is obtained by prefixing a noun with the letter h (hey).

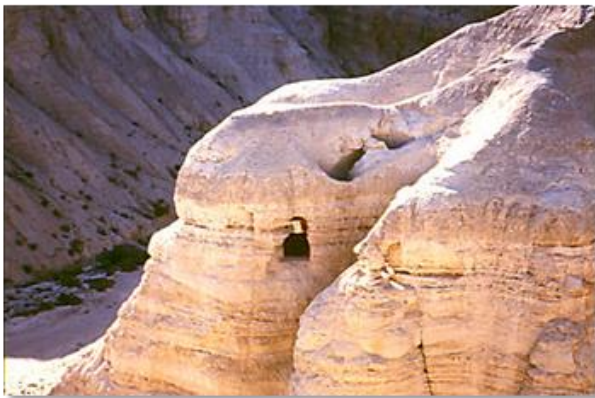
Some additional characteristics of the Hebrew language are that it is written from right to left and its letters are all of one case (there are no upper and lower case letters). There are no punctuation marks, although sometimes there are words that serve the same purpose. The word order is usually opposite to that of English with the verb preceding the subject. The distinction between verbs and nouns is not as great as it is in English, with related verbs and nouns often having the same root. Nouns in Hebrew are usually action related.

The Hebrew Bible

Since the writing materials of the ancient Hebrews deteriorated very rapidly with time, the original Hebrew manuscripts have not survived. Up until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the oldest manuscript containing the complete Hebrew Bible (Tenach) was the Aleppo codex, also called the Masoretic text. It was written in about 930 AD.

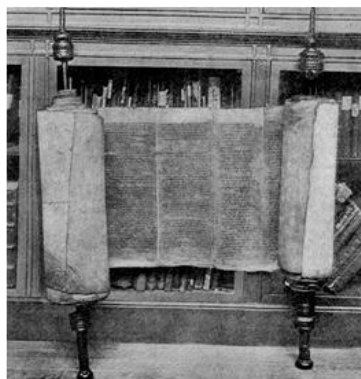


The Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered during the period 1946–1956 in the caves of Qumran located about a mile from the northwest shore of the Dead Sea. It is believed that most of the manuscripts date from 200–70 BC.



Caves where Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered

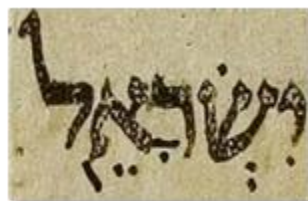
The scrolls contain parts of every book in the Tenach except Esther. The only complete scroll is the Isaiah scroll shown below



The Dead Sea Scrolls agree very well with the Aleppo codex. The major difference being that the Aleppo codex contains vowel pointings that were not introduced until after the dispersion. The older manuscripts include only consonants.



Dead Sea Scroll



Aleppo codex

Eastern Versus Western Thought

Our understanding of a language is strongly influenced by our “worldview” or philosophy. This underlying worldview determines how we see and describe the world around us. There are two major divisions of philosophy and thought processes — Eastern and Western. All ancient cultures would be classified as Eastern. Western philosophy was introduced by the Greeks in the sixth century BC by such philosophers as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Western or Greek philosophy spread rapidly, and now is now dominant in our world. Although Hebrew is spoken in Israel today, Modern Hebrew thought is more Western than Eastern. To understand the Old Testament as the original hearers would have understood it, we need to be aware of how they thought about their world. In the following, we will present some comparisons of Eastern and Western ways of thinking.

- **Dynamic vs. Static**

The Greeks tended to view change as bad. Things tend to deteriorate with time. Thus, they tended to view life in terms of static pictures much like a photograph taken with a camera. The Hebrews on the other hand tended to view life dynamically. They saw the future positively as an opportunity for new beginnings. In English, we make a sharp distinction between nouns and verbs. Nouns refer to persons, places, or things. Verbs refer to actions. Hebrew does not make this sharp distinction. People and things are thought of in terms of what they do. For example, the Hebrews would not think of God in terms of characteristics such as omnipotent or omnipresent. Instead, they would think of God in terms of what he is doing for them or what he has done for them, e.g. “The God who brought us out of Egypt.”

- **Concrete vs. Abstract**

The language of the Hebrews is a concrete language, meaning that it uses words that express something that can be seen, touched, smelled, tasted or heard and all five of the senses are used when speaking, hearing, writing and reading the Hebrew language. An example of this can be found in Psalms 1:3

He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, and whose leaf does not wither.

Greek thought deals more with abstractions and generalizations. Examples of abstract thought can be found in Psalms 103:8

The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.

The terms “compassionate”, “gracious”, “anger”, and “love” represent abstract concepts that cannot be seen, touched, smelled, tasted, or heard. These terms were used by the translator to make this verse easier to understand by an English speaking reader. The

Hebrew words used in this verse were more concrete. For example, the word translated as anger actually refers to the nose in Hebrew. Hebrews thought of anger in terms of heavy breathing and a flaring of the nostrils. The Hebrews were certainly capable of abstract thought, but it was always tied to something concrete.

- **Appearance vs. Function**

In Greek thought, things are described by their appearance, whereas in Hebrew thought things are described in terms of their function. For example, a Greek thinker might describe a pencil as yellow, approximately seven inches long, and having a tip at one end. A Hebrew thinker would more likely describe it by “I write with it.” Greek descriptions make heavy use of adjectives such as yellow and long. Hebrew descriptions usually involve verbs more than adjectives. If you look at the description of Noah’s ark in Genesis 6 or the description of the tabernacle in Exodus 25–26, you will find that the appearance is not really described, only building instructions.

- **Personal vs. Impersonal**

Greek thinkers usually think of objects as they might appear to a detached observer viewing them from the outside. Hebrew thinkers view objects in terms of how they would affect them personally. Thus, instead of seeing grass as green, they would more likely see it as something they feed to their animals.

- **Speculation vs. Acceptance**

The Hebrews didn’t tend to speculate about things they didn’t understand. For example, the term “Sheol” is used for the place where people go when they die. It was never described and was generally treated as something unknown. They were willing to leave it at that.

- **Block Logic vs. Step Logic**

Greek logic breaks things down into a succession of steps where each step logically follows from the previous step. The Hebrews tended to think in terms of independent blocks of experiences. The blocks didn’t necessarily have any relation to one another either logically or chronologically. This type of thinking can frequently lead to contradictions. The Hebrews didn’t seem to worry much about contradictions. They believed that what they perceived as contradictions only reflected their lack of understanding of God and his ways.

- **Agency vs. Natural**

Science primarily deals with the law-like behavior of events rather than causation. However, our culture often thinks of nature as the cause of events. This way of thinking would have been completely foreign to the ancient Hebrews. Ancient cultures such as the Hebrews tended to view everything in terms of the supernatural. To the Hebrew, if something could not be viewed as due to the action of another human, then it must be due to God.

- **Whole vs. the particular**

The picture below was shown to a large number of viewers from around the world. They were asked what they saw in this picture.



Those from Western, Greek thinking cultures usually said they saw a deer. Those from Eastern countries usually saw a grove. The Hebrews, like those from Eastern countries, tended to see the whole rather than the particular. The survey also showed the respondents the following pictures and were asked how they thought the boy in the center felt.



Those from Western, Greek thinking cultures saw the boy as happy in both pictures. Those from Eastern countries saw the boy as happy in the left picture, but sad in the right picture. They figured he was sad in the right picture since everyone else in the picture looked sad.

Some Important Hebrew Words

In the beginning (bereshit) בְּרֵאשִׁית

These are the first words of Genesis and the title of the book in Hebrew. “reshit” is the word for “beginning” and “be” is translated as “in.” We tend to think of the beginning as a point in time. Due to the wide acceptance of the “Big Bang” theory in science, we tend to associate this event with the opening words of Genesis. While this theory tends to support the Genesis account, it is unlikely that the author of Genesis had anything like this in mind. To the Hebrews “reshit” virtually always referred to a period of time. For example, “reshit” was used for the period of Job’s life prior to the great calamities he experienced as an old man. It was also used for the initial period of a king’s reign prior to the official reckoning of the start of his reign. It was common to have the official start of a king’s reign at the beginning of the year following the actual start. In some cases, the official start of the reign was delayed for years.

God




There were several Hebrew words used for God. The word אֱלֹהִים (Elohim) means one with power and authority. It has the plural form to add emphasis. It is also consistent with the concept of the trinity.

The word אֲדֹנָי (adonai) is usually translated “Lord”. Literally, it means “my lords” (plural). However, it is used like a name.

The word יְהוָה (Yaweh) is the name usually used for the God of Israel. It was considered so sacred that it was never spoken. Thus, we have no idea how it should be pronounced. The Masoretic text added vowel marks that indicated a pronunciation (Yehowah or Yehovah). It is from this that we get the word Jehovah. Since there is no such word Yehovah in Hebrew, this was a clue that this word should not be spoken. The Hebrews generally spoke the word “adonai” instead. The origin and meaning of the title Yaweh is not clear. It is thought by some to be an ancient form of the verb “to be.”

The word אֲהִיָּה (ehyeh) is the first person form of the verb הָיָה (hayah) meaning “to exist or to have breath.” This is the title that God told Moses to use if he was asked the name of the one who sent him (Exodus 3:14). The word “ehyeh” is usually translated “I am”. It is the imperfect form of the verb. I looked at a blog on the internet that was written by a Jewish girl. She said that there is no “I AM” in Hebrew and they would translate this as “I WILL BE.” Since Hebrew verbs do not have time related tenses, it is possible that God is saying something here that could not be said with one word in English, i.e., “I WAS”, “I AM”, and “I WILL BE.”

Heart, Mind, and Soul

The Hebrew word for “heart” is לֵבָב (levav). This word is used for the heart organ, but the heart is also seen as the seat of thought (the mind) and the will. The word “levav” comes from the root word לֵב (lev) that was written in the ancient script as . The letter  pictured a tent or house, but could also mean “in” or “within.” The letter  pictures a shepherd’s staff and is often used to represent “authority.” Therefore, the ancient pictographs of “lev” could represent “the authority within.”

We tend to think of the heart as the seat of emotions, but that was not true for the Hebrews. For the Hebrews, the seat of emotions was the kidneys. The Hebrew word for kidneys is כְּלִיָּה (kilyah). This word is often translated as “heart” in English Bibles.

The Hebrew word מֵעָה (meyah) means “abdomen” or “gut.” This is the word used for the “unconscious mind” or our “instincts.” Maybe this is the origin of the expression “gut feeling.” The word “meyah” is sometimes translated as “heart” as in the following verse

I delight to do thy will, O my God; Yea, thy law is within my heart (meyah).
Psalm 40:8

The Hebrew word נֶפֶשׁ (nephesh) is often translated as soul. It is used in connection with both humans and animals. In Genesis 2:7 it is said that man became a “living soul.” In Genesis 1:24 an animal is referred to as a “living creature.” In Hebrew the two descriptions are the same — נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה (nephesh hayah) a living soul. In English, the word “soul” has sort of a mystical, non-physical connotation. In Hebrew, the word “nephesh” seems to refer to the whole being (body, mind, emotions, feelings, etc.).

The Law and Commandments

The Hebrew word תּוֹרָה (Torah) is often translated as “law”, but has the broader meaning of “teachings.” It is much like the guidance a parent gives to a child. It involves instructions, correction, praise, and punishment (when appropriate).

*Blessed is the man you discipline, O Lord,
the man you teach from your law (torah);* Psalm 94:12

The Hebrew word מִצְוָה (mitsvah) is usually translated as “command” or “commandment.” The English word “command” has sort of a harsh connotation. It is like something a general might give to his troops. The Hebrews, who had a nomadic background, thought of life like a journey. The word “mitsvah” originally denoted a directive to show the right path to take on the journey.

*Direct me in the path of your commands (mitsvah),
for there I find delight.* Psalm 119:35

The word רָשָׁע (rasha) is often translated as “wicked.” It comes from the verb “rasha” which concretely means “to walk away from the path.” In other words the “wicked” are those who have departed from the path, i.e., they are lost. The Hebrew word עֲדִיֵּק (tsadiyq) is usually translated as righteous, and the related word עֲדִיקָה (tsepeqah) is usually translated as righteousness. The concrete meaning of “tsadiyq” is “one who pays attention to and remains on the trail.”

The Hebrew word שָׁמַר (shamar) is sometimes translated as “keep” as in the verse

*And showing mercy unto thousands of them that love and keep (shamar) my
commandments.* Exodus 20:6

The original picture painted by the word “shamar” is a sheepfold of thorns that protects a flock. Thus, the original meaning of “shamar” was probably “guard” or “protect.” Just as “keep” likely didn’t mean “obey”, “break” likely didn’t mean “disobey”. The Hebrew word translated as “break” is פָּרַר (parar). A more concrete meaning of “parar” is “to trample”, as the grain is crushed on a threshing floor. Thus, the words “shamar” and “parar” referred more to attitude than strict obedience. Do we

cherish and guard God's commands or directions, or do we toss them away and trample on them?

Time

The Hebrew word for tomorrow is **מחר** (mahar) that comes from the root **אחר** (ahhar) meaning "to be behind." The Hebrew word for yesterday is **תמול** (temol) that is from the root **מול** (mul) meaning "in front." Thus, the Hebrews perceived the past as in front and the future as behind. They saw the past as in front where it could be seen (known) while the future was seen as behind (hidden or unknown).

The Hebrew word **עולם** (olam) is often translated as "eternity", but literally means "beyond the horizon." It can be used for both distance and time.

In Hebrew, the words for "east" and for "past" come from the same root meaning "in front." East (not north) was considered to be the primary direction from which others were measured. The Hebrew word **קדם** for east literally means "the direction of the rising sun."

Peace

The Hebrew noun **שלום** (shalom) is usually translated as "peace." The verb having the same root is **שָׁלַם** (shalam). It is usually used in the context of making restitution. When a person has caused another to be deficient in some way, such as a loss of livestock, it is the responsibility of the person who created the deficiency to restore what had been taken, lost, or stolen. The verb "shalam" literally means to make whole. The noun "shalom" means being in a state of wholeness, or being without deficiency. This certainly implies a lack of conflict, but includes much more.