

*A Student's Introduction to Biblical Hebrew*

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This chapter introduces the essential features required to begin reading Hebrew. This textbook focuses on the development of reading skills, so the explanations center around the features necessary for reading Hebrew and not on historical or grammatical explanations. The student is encouraged to supplement the material found in this textbook with a more comprehensive grammar in order to understand better the historical development of the language. By the end of this chapter, the student should be able to recognize and pronounce all the Hebrew letters and vowel pointing. Once the goals of this chapter are met, the student will move quickly into reading Hebrew.

**What are the essential features that you need to memorize in Chapter 1?**

1. The **alphabet**: It is essential to learn how to say, to recognize, and to write the Hebrew **alphabet**.
2. **Vowel points**: It is essential to learn the **vowel points** that have been added to the consonants.
3. **Syllabification** and **stress**: It is essential to learn the basic rules for syllable division and stress so that the student may begin to read and pronounce Hebrew.
4. **Some orthographic (writing) and phonological (pronunciation) features**: It is essential to memorize the names and characteristics of a few rules for the writing and pronunciation of Hebrew. These features include the *dageš*, gutturals, and the *begadkephat* letters.

## **Section One: alphabet**

The Hebrew alphabet is similar to the English alphabet in terms of the sounds of the consonants. In fact, the name for the Hebrew alphabet (the *aleph bet*) is very similar to the term “alphabet.” The student will thus recognize most but not all of the sounds. There are some notable differences—the orthography (or writing) of the Hebrew alphabet is quite different from the English alphabet, and Hebrew is also written and read from right to left.

Some textbooks use transliteration of Hebrew in the initial chapters in order to ease the transition for students that find these features difficult. This textbook uses a different approach. While these features may take many students a little while to get used to, they will soon become very familiar and not pose a problem. It is essential that beginning students of Hebrew learn to recognize and replicate the Hebrew letters from the very beginning because everything else builds on this knowledge base. The use of the transliteration crutch only serves to create another step that will ultimately slow down the learning process. Thus, the following table should be memorized and mastered right away. Students should know how to recite, write, and read all of the Hebrew consonants (*see CD for audio file of alphabet as well as drill sheets*).

**Table 1.01**

| <u>Name</u>             | <u>Hebrew Letter</u> | <u>Modern Phonetic value</u> |
|-------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------|
| ʿālep                   | א                    | None                         |
| Bêt                     | ב                    | “b” as in “boy”              |
| Gîmel                   | ג                    | “g” as in “good”             |
| Dālet                   | ד                    | “d” as in “day”              |
| He (pronounced “hay”)   | ה                    | “h” as in “help”             |
| Waw (pronounced “vav”)  | ו                    | “v” as in “victory”          |
| Zayin                   | ז                    | “z” as in “zebra”            |
| Het (pronounced “chet”) | ח                    |                              |
| Tet                     | ט                    | “t” as in “top”              |
| Yod                     | י                    | “y” as in “young”            |
| Kaph                    | כ                    | “k” as in “kid”              |
| Lamed                   | ל                    | “l” as in “lamp”             |
| Mem                     | מ                    | “m” as in “mom”              |
| Nun                     | נ                    | “nun” as in “nun”            |
| Samek                   | ס                    | “s” as in “sick”             |
| ʿayin                   | ע                    | None                         |
| Peh                     | פ                    | “p” as in “part”             |
| Sade                    | צ                    | “ts” as in “ <b>hits</b> ”   |
| Qoph                    | ק                    | “k” as in “kill”             |
| Resh                    | ר                    | “r” as in “rip”              |
| Sin                     | ש                    | “s” as in “sick”             |
| Shin                    | שׁ                   | “sh” as in “sheet”           |
| Taw (pronounced “tav”)  | ת                    | “t” as in “top”              |

(See CD for audio file and drill sheets)

**Final forms of a few letters:** A few letters have two forms—one form for consonants in the initial or medial position of a word, and one “final” form when these letters are found at the end of a word. These letters (*kaph* [כ], *mem* [מ], *nun* [נ], *pe* [פ], and *sade* [צ], ) must be memorized. The writing of these letters is similar to the initial/medial form, but in the final position they have an elongated form that extends below an imaginary line of the other letters in the word. The following is a table with these letters and their final forms (the student will notice that the table is oriented from right to left so as to begin reinforcing the way that Hebrew is written):

**Table 1.02**

| <u>Final Form</u> | <u>Initial and Medial Form</u> | <u>Letter Name</u> |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------|
| ך                 | כ                              | <i>kaph</i>        |
| ם                 | מ                              | <i>mem</i>         |
| ן                 | נ                              | <i>nun</i>         |
| ף                 | פ                              | <i>pe</i>          |
| ץ                 | צ                              | <i>Sade</i>        |

### **Section Two: vowel points**

Ancient Hebrew manuscripts were not written with vowels, and correct pronunciation was pass down from generation to generation by oral tradition. Obviously, this feature allowed for a number of inconsistencies. Therefore, in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, a group of Jewish scholars in Tiberias undertook the task to add vowel points to the received consonantal text. These scholars are called the Masorettes (or “traditionalists”). Most printed texts of the Hebrew Bible today are a collection of the

Masoretic Text (MT), and the vowel system employed is called the Tiberian Masoretic vocalization. This textbook also employs this system.

The Masoretes maintained the consonantal text and inserted points above and below the consonants to indicate which vowels should be used. The following table presents a summary of the Tiberian Masoretic vocalization. These points are not found apart from consonants, so the table lists the points together with the consonant *bet* (ב).

**Table 1.03**

| Vowel class              | Long or short |       | Pronunciation            | Name of vowel point           |
|--------------------------|---------------|-------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| /a/<br>(pronounced “ah”) | Short         | בֿ    | a (short “ah”)           | Patah                         |
|                          | Long          | בֿֿ   | ā (long “ah”)            | qames                         |
| i<br>(pronounced “ee”)   | Long or short | בֿי   | i or ī (short/long “ee”) | hîreq                         |
|                          | Long          | בֿֿי  | ē (long “ee”)            | serê                          |
|                          | Short         | בֿיֿ  | e (short “eh”)           | segol                         |
|                          | Reduced       | בֿיֿֿ | ě (reduced “eh”)         | šĕwā <sup>2</sup> (see below) |
| u<br>(pronounced “uu”)   | Long          | בֿו   | ō (long “o”)             | holem                         |
|                          | Short         | בֿוֿ  | u (short “ew”)           | qibbus                        |
|                          | short         | בֿוֿֿ | o (short “o”)            | qamas-hatup                   |

The šĕwā<sup>2</sup>:

One vowel point, the šĕwā<sup>2</sup>, deserves special mention because it can either be a vocal or a silent. A vocal šĕwā<sup>2</sup> is a reduced vowel sound while a silent šĕwā<sup>2</sup> marks the end of a syllable and is not a vowel at all. The following “rules” help simplify this situation:

1. A *šěwā*<sup>◌</sup> is silent if it ends a syllable.
2. A *šěwā*<sup>◌</sup> is vocal if it starts a syllable. A *šěwā*<sup>◌</sup> can start a syllable in the following cases:
  - a. A *šěwā*<sup>◌</sup> starts a word (**Table 1.04**)
 

|             |           |           |          |
|-------------|-----------|-----------|----------|
| בְּרֵאשִׁית | וְהָאָרֶץ | מִרְחֹקֶת | לְמִינוּ |
|-------------|-----------|-----------|----------|
  - b. A *šěwā*<sup>◌</sup> follows a closed syllable and does not occur at the end of a word (**Table 1.05**):
 

|          |            |             |             |
|----------|------------|-------------|-------------|
| יְמֵלֹוּ | בְּקֶרֶבֶד | תִּשְׁמְרוּ | כְּנֹפֵשֶׁד |
|----------|------------|-------------|-------------|
  - c. A *šěwā*<sup>◌</sup> follows an open syllable with a long vowel (either accented or unaccented):
  - d. A *šěwā*<sup>◌</sup> follows an accented, open syllable with short vowel

### Three: Syllabification and Stress

Hebrew words, like English words, can be divided into groups of nouns, verbs, particles, prepositions, adjectives, etc. The subsequent chapters will introduce all these types of words, but for now it is sufficient to note that all of these words or particles contain syllables—some words have only one syllable and some have multiple syllables. As the student will need to read and memorize Hebrew from the first day, it is important to begin to learn the basics of syllable division in the first chapter of this textbook. The approach presented here is to outline a number of general “rules” that are helpful for an understanding of the basics syllable division in Hebrew. The emphasis is on the common features rather than the exceptions. These “rules” should be taken as general guidelines rather than hard-and-fast rules that can never be broken. In most cases they are “95% rules” that explain Hebrew in more than 95% of all possible instances. The exceptions to these rules should be taken just as that—exceptions rather than the norm.

The following is a list of “rules” that should be learned:

1. Hebrew syllables are either stressed (accented) or unstressed (unaccented).
  - a. The stressed (accented) syllable normally is found on the last syllable (the *ultima*). It is common not to mark the accent on the *ultima* since this is the common placement of the accent.
  - b. In certain words and in certain situations caused by the adding of suffixes, the stressed (accented) can be found on the second-to-last syllable (the *penultima*). It is common to mark the accent on the *penultima*.
2. Hebrew syllables start with a consonant.<sup>1</sup>
3. Hebrew syllables can be either open syllables (end in a voiced vowel), or they can be closed syllables (end in a consonant).
4. Unstressed or unaccented syllables.
  - a. If the vowel is short, then the syllable is a closed syllable (CvC)
  - b. If the vowel is long, then the syllable is an open syllable (Cv̄)
  - c. If the vowel is reduced, then the syllable is an open syllable (Cv̆)
5. Stressed or unaccented syllables: can be either open or closed syllable with either a long or short vowel

The following chart summarizes the above rules and should be memorized:

|                          | Open Syllables | Closed Syllables |
|--------------------------|----------------|------------------|
| Accented or stressed     | CV, Cv         | Cv̄C, CvC        |
| Unaccented or unstressed | CV, Cv̆        | CvC              |

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<sup>1</sup> The conjunction ׀ is an exception to this rule.

#### **Four: special orthographic (writing) features**

By this point in the chapter, the student has learned most of the essential features necessary to read and pronounce Hebrew. However, there are a few additional features that must be introduced before we can move further. The present section includes these additional features.

#### **The *begad kepat* letters:**

The term *begad kepat* is a mnemonic device that is used to identify a group of six consonants that can be either stops or spirants: *bet* (ב), *gimel* (ג), *dalet* (ד), *kaph* (כ), *pe* (פ), and *taw* (ט). In classical Hebrew pronunciation, the spirants were probably pronounced with as hard sounds and spirants. For example, the letter *taw* was probably pronounced as a /t/ for the stop and as a /th/ for the spirant. This type of distinction has dropped out of usage in Modern, Israeli Hebrew for all of these letters except *bet*, *kaph*, and *pe*. However, these letters must be memorized because the existence of stops and spirants is important for understanding the usage of the *dagesh* to signify doubling (see below). For now, the student should simply memorize which letters are the *begad kepat* letters and know that these letters can be either stops or spirants.

#### **The *dagesh*:**

The *dagesh* is a point in a consonant. This point can indicate one of two things:

1. The consonant is doubled
2. The consonant is a stop (it is pronounced with a hard sound and not a spirant)

The following “rules” are helpful in determining whether the *dageš* signifies doubling or a stop:

1. If a *dageš* is found in any letter other than a *begad kephat* letter, the *dageš* signifies doubling.
2. If the *dageš* is found in a *begad kephat* letter, the letter is pronounced as a hard sound, but it remains an open question as to whether the letter is doubled or simply a stop.
  - a. If the *dageš* is in a *begad kephat* letter and follows a voiced vowel, then the *dageš* signifies doubling.
  - b. If the *dageš* is in a *begad kephat* letter but does not follow a voiced vowel, then the *dageš* signifies a stop that is not doubled. This happens in the following cases:
    - i. It follows a closed syllable
    - ii. It starts a word and the preceding word does not end in a vowel
    - iii. It starts a word and follows a major punctuation mark (if there is a major punctuation mark, then it does not matter if the previous word ends in a vowel or not.