

BIBLICAL HEBREW

*An Introductory Grammar*

## LESSON I

### 1. The Alphabet

| Name   | Form | Final Form | Transliteration | Pronunciation         | Modern Script | Block |
|--------|------|------------|-----------------|-----------------------|---------------|-------|
| ʾālěf  | א    |            | ʾ               | Silent letter         | /c            | א     |
| bêt    | ב    |            | b               | B as in <i>Boy</i>    | ב             | ב     |
|        | ב    |            | v               | V as in <i>Vine</i>   | ב             | ב     |
| gíměl  | ג    |            | g               | G as in <i>Go</i>     | ג             | ג     |
|        | ג    |            | g               | G as in <i>Go</i>     | ג             | ג     |
| dálět  | ד    |            | d               | D as in <i>Dare</i>   | ד             | ד     |
|        | ד    |            | d               | D as in <i>Dare</i>   | ד             | ד     |
| hēʾ    | ה    |            | h               | H as in <i>His</i>    | ה             | ה     |
| vāv    | ו    |            | v               | V as in <i>Vine</i>   | ו             | ו     |
| záyīn  | ז    |            | z               | Z as in <i>Zeal</i>   | ז             | ז     |
| hêt    | ח    |            | ḥ               | CH as in <i>BaCH</i>  | ח             | ח     |
| ṭêt    | ט    |            | ṭ               | T as in <i>Tall</i>   | ט             | ט     |
| yôd    | י    |            | y               | Y as in <i>Yes</i>    | י             | י     |
| kāf    | כ    | ך          | k               | K as in <i>Keep</i>   | כ             | כ     |
|        | כ    | ך          | kh              | CH as in <i>BaCH</i>  | כך            | ך     |
| lāmēd  | ל    |            | l               | L as in <i>Let</i>    | ל             | ל     |
| mēm    | מ    | ם          | m               | M as in <i>Met</i>    | מ             | מ     |
| nûn    | נ    | ן          | n               | N as in <i>Net</i>    | נ             | נ     |
| sāmēkh | ס    |            | s               | S as in <i>Set</i>    | ס             | ס     |
| ʾāyīn  | ע    |            | ʾ               | Silent letter         | ע             | ע     |
| pēʾ    | פ    | ף          | p               | P as in <i>Pet</i>    | פ             | פ     |
|        | פ    | ף          | f               | F as in <i>Fat</i>    | פ             | ף     |
| ṣādē   | צ    | ץ          | ṣ               | TS as in <i>NeTS</i>  | צ             | צ     |
| qōf    | ק    |            | q               | K as in <i>Keep</i>   | ק             | ק     |
| rēš    | ר    |            | r               | R as in <i>Rule</i>   | ר             | ר     |
| śīn    | ש    |            | ś               | S as in <i>Set</i>    | ש             | ש     |
| šīn    | ש    |            | š               | SH as in <i>SHine</i> | ש             | ש     |
| tāv    | ת    |            | t               | T as in <i>Tall</i>   | ת             | ת     |
|        | ת    |            | t               | T as in <i>Tall</i>   | ת             | ת     |

## I.1 THE ALPHABET

### Notes:

**1.1** The pronunciation recommended here is based upon that used in modern Hebrew. It is known as the Sephardic pronunciation.

**1.2** A point is placed under *h* when it transliterates *ח*, under *t* when it transliterates *ט*, and under *s* when it transliterates *צ*. This is to distinguish these letters from others that have similar sounds.

**1.3** There are twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet. This number is arrived at by counting *שׁ* and *שׂ* as variant forms of the same letter.

**1.4** The Hebrew alphabet contains no vowels, but only consonants. This is because ancient Hebrew was written without vowels. Its correct pronunciation was based upon an oral tradition handed down from generation to generation. A written vowel system was devised in the period between A.D. 500 and 1000 for the primary purpose of preserving the oral tradition. A text without vowels is called "an unpointed text." Synagogue scrolls even today are written with an unpointed text, as are most books, magazines, and newspapers printed in Modern Hebrew. The written vowels are of great benefit to the beginning student and will be studied in Lesson 2.

**1.5** The first letter in the alphabet is *א* (ʾālēf), but it must not be confused with English "a" or Greek "alpha" (α). The latter two are vowels, while *א* is always a consonant.

**1.6** Hebrew is written and read from right to left. Thus the letters of the alphabet should be written as follows:

א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ ק ר ש ת

But they should be read as follows: ʾālēf, bêt, gîmēl, etc.

**1.7** There are no capital letters in Hebrew.

**1.8** Each letter in the alphabet represents the initial consonant of the Hebrew name for that letter. The Hebrew names (minus vowels) are as follows:

|          |          |          |          |
|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| (1) אלף  | (7) זין  | (13) מם  | (19) קוף |
| (2) בית  | (8) חית  | (14) נון | (20) ריש |
| (3) גימל | (9) טית  | (15) סמך | (21) שין |
| (4) דלת  | (10) יוד | (16) עין | (22) שין |
| (5) הא   | (11) כף  | (17) פא  | (22) תו  |
| (6) וו   | (12) למד | (18) צדי |          |



**1.9** Six Hebrew consonants, ב, ג, ד, כ, פ, ת, may appear either with or without a dot placed within them. The dot is called a dagesh lene. The dot will normally be required when one of these six consonants begins a new word. It may even be required when one of them begins a new syllable within a word. Rules governing the use of the dagesh lene will be studied later.

A convenient device for remembering the consonants that sometimes accept a dagesh lene is to memorize the artificial words BeGaD KeFaT, where B = ב, G = ג, D = ד, K = כ, F = פ, and T = ת.

In Modern Hebrew pronunciation, the presence or absence of the dagesh lene affects the pronunciation of three of the BeGaD KeFaT letters, namely ב, כ, and פ. With the dagesh lene their pronunciation is hard. Without it their pronunciation is soft. The other three consonants, ג, ד, and ת, are always given a hard sound, regardless of whether or not they have a dagesh lene.

|   |          |   |      |   |          |   |     |
|---|----------|---|------|---|----------|---|-----|
| ב | = b, but | ב | = v  | ג | = g, and | ג | = g |
| כ | = k, but | כ | = kh | ד | = d, and | ד | = d |
| פ | = p, but | פ | = f  | ת | = t, and | ת | = t |

**1.10** Vāv is pronounced like v in “vine.” The same is true of the letter bêt without the dagesh lene. Note also that an alternate name for the letter vāv is wāv, pronounced like the letter w in “we.”

**1.11** Five letters take special forms when they stand at the end of a word. Note that four of the final forms extend below the line, which is not the case with regular consonants, except in the case of ק.

|               |           |
|---------------|-----------|
| Regular forms | ב נ פ צ   |
| Final forms   | ב ם ן ף ץ |

**1.12** Five of the consonants, א, ה, ח, ע, and sometimes ר, are classified as gutturals, because of their having originally been pronounced in the throat. Their distinctive characteristics will be studied later.

**1.13** Certain letters are classified as sibilants because of their “s” sounds. They are ז, ס, צ, ש, and שׁ. Their presence in certain verb forms influences the writing of these forms (cf. XIV.36.4, p. 110).

**1.14** Individual Hebrew letters stand alone and are not joined to each other, except in modern script.

## EXERCISES

The exercises included in each lesson are designed to help the student apply the principles studied in that lesson. Examples used in the lessons and exercises will for the most part be taken verbatim from the Hebrew Bible. This will account for the different ways in which the same word may sometimes be written. The style of the author and the demands of the context may alter the form in which a particular word appears.

1. Write a full line of each of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.
2. Learn to pronounce the letters in proper order from א to ת.
3. Transliterate the following verse (Ezek. 38:12, one of twenty-six verses containing all the letters of the alphabet).

לשלל שלל ולבו בז להשיב ירך על חרבות נושבת ואל עם  
מאסף מגוים עשה מקנה וקנין ישובי על טבור הארץ

4. Practice pronouncing the letters in the verse above in the order in which they occur, reading from right to left.
5. Locate and identify all the final forms of letters that occur in the verse above.
6. Transliterate the Hebrew names for all consonants as they appear in paragraph I.1.8, pp. 2f.

Example:

אלף = 'lf

בית = byt; etc.

7. Certain letters are similar in form and thus easily confused. Examine the following letters and learn to identify each by name.

- |             |              |
|-------------|--------------|
| (1) ב, פ, כ | (6) ו, ז, י  |
| (2) ק, ר, ך | (7) ס, ם     |
| (3) נ, ג    | (8) מ, ט     |
| (4) ן, ך    | (9) ת, ח, ה  |
| (5) ר, ד    | (10) ן, צ, ע |

8. Certain letters sound alike. Learn to identify these letters by name.

- |                          |                           |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| (1) ש, ס - S, as in Set  | (4) ו, ב - V, as in Vine  |
| (2) ק, פ - K, as in Keep | (5) ח, כ - CH, as in BaCH |
| (3) ת, ט - T, as in Tall | (6) ע, א - Silent letters |



9. What do the letters in each of the following groups have in common?

- |                 |                |
|-----------------|----------------|
| (1) ב ג ד כ פ ת | (3) ך ס ז ף ין |
| (2) ב כ פ       | (4) א ה ח ע ר  |

10. Transliterate the following proper names and try to identify them from their consonantal forms. A reference is given to indicate where each may be found in the Hebrew Bible.

- |                                  |                           |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| (1) בית לחם (Mic. 5:1; Eng. 5:2) | (17) נתן (2 Sam. 7:3)     |
| (2) בלק (Num. 22:2)              | (18) סדם (Gen. 13:13)     |
| (3) בנימין (Gen. 42:4)           | (19) עשו (Gen. 25:25)     |
| (4) גר (Gen. 30:11)              | (20) פארן (Deut. 1:1)     |
| (5) גלגל (Josh. 5:9)             | (21) קדש (Gen. 14:7)      |
| (6) גשן (Gen. 46:28)             | (22) רבקה (Gen. 22:23)    |
| (7) דוד (1 Sam. 16:23)           | (23) רחל (Gen. 29:6)      |
| (8) הגר (Gen. 16:1)              | (24) אברהם (Gen. 17:5)    |
| (9) חזקיה (2 Kgs. 18:1)          | (25) שרה (Gen. 17:15)     |
| (10) פננץ (Gen. 12:5)            | (26) שדרך (Dan. 1:7)      |
| (11) ישראל (Gen. 35:10)          | (27) שכם (Judg. 9:6)      |
| (12) פלב (Num. 13:6)             | (28) שלמה (2 Sam. 12:24)  |
| (13) לאה (Gen. 29:16)            | (29) שם (Gen. 9:23)       |
| (14) לבן (Gen. 24:29)            | (30) שפן (2 Kgs. 22:9)    |
| (15) משה (Exod. 2:10)            | (31) תל אביב (Ezek. 3:15) |
| (16) נבכדנאצר (2 Kgs. 24:1)      | (32) תמר (Gen. 38:6)      |

11. Practice spelling aloud the names listed above.

Example:

בית לחם, "bêt-yôd-tāv/lāmēd-ḥêt-(final) mēm."

## LESSON II

### 2. Vowels

Ancient Hebrew had no written system of vowels. The language was read and spoken according to an oral tradition handed down from generation to generation.

At an early period in the development of the language certain consonants began to function not only as consonants but also as vowel indicators. Thus א and ה were used to indicate "a" class vowels, ע to indicate "e" and "i" class vowels, and ו to indicate "o" and "u" class vowels. Early Hebrew grammarians coined the term *mātres lectionis* (literally, "mothers of reading") to designate these letters. The two consonants most frequently used as vowel indicators are ע and ו.

Table of Full Vowels

| Name            | Sign | Position with Consonant | Sound                  | Illustration   |
|-----------------|------|-------------------------|------------------------|----------------|
| 1. qāmēš        | ˆ    | אֶ                      | ā, as in <i>car</i>    | אֶבֶר father   |
| 2. pātāḥ        | -    | אָ                      | ā, as in <i>car</i>    | בַּת daughter  |
| 3. šērē         | ˙    | עֶ                      | ē, as in <i>they</i>   | אֱלֹהִים God   |
| 4. šērē-yôd     | ˙    | עֵ                      | ē, as in <i>they</i>   | בֵּית house of |
| 5. sēgôl        | ˙    | עִ                      | ē, as in <i>met</i>    | שֶׁקֶל shekel  |
| 6. ḥîrēq-yôd    | ˙    | וֵ                      | î, as in <i>marine</i> | הִיא she       |
| 7. ḥîrēq        | -    | וֹ                      | î, as in <i>sit</i>    | עִם with       |
| 8. ḥôlēm        | ˙    | וֶ                      | ō, as in <i>row</i>    | לֹא not        |
| 9. ḥôlēm-vāv    | ˙    | וֹ                      | ō, as in <i>row</i>    | אֹר light      |
| 10. qāmēš-ḥāṭûf | ˆ    | וֶ                      | ō, as in <i>cost</i>   | כָּל all of    |
| 11. šûrēq       | ˙    | וּ                      | û, as in <i>rule</i>   | הוּא he        |
| 12. qîbbûš      | ˙    | וֹ                      | û, as in <i>pull</i>   | שֻׁלְחָן table |

(A múnah appears under the word שֶׁקֶל to indicate the accented syllable. This practice will be followed throughout this grammar whenever a word is accented on a syllable other than the final syllable.)



**Notes:**

**2.1** The vowels listed above are designated *full vowels* in order to distinguish them from the *half-vowels*, which will be discussed later.

**2.2** For grammatical purposes these vowels are divided into *long vowels* and *short vowels*. This distinction will be especially important for our understanding of the formation of nouns and verbs.

(1) The long vowels include qāmēš, šērē, šērē-yōd, hīrēq-yōd, hōlēm, hōlēm-vāv, and šūrēq. In order to indicate the long vowels that include one of the vowel letters (*matres lectionis*) a circumflex accent is used in representing their sound. Thus šērē-yōd ( שֵׁרֵי ) is represented as ē, hīrēq-yōd ( הִירֵק ) as î, hōlēm-vāv ( הוֹלֵם ) as ô, and šūrēq ( שׁוּרֵק ) as û. These vowels can never be shortened and are therefore said to be characteristically or unchangeably long.

(2) The short vowels are pātāh, sēgōl, hīrēq, qāmēš-ḥāṭūf, and qībbūš. (Note that in Modern Hebrew, pātāh is pronounced exactly like qāmēš. In this grammar, however, it is transliterated as “ā” in order to distinguish it from qāmēš, which is transliterated as “a”.)

**2.3** The sounds given in the table above only roughly approximate those of spoken Hebrew. Often in the spoken language no noticeable distinction is made between hīrēq-yōd and hīrēq, or between šūrēq and qībbūš, just as no distinction is made between qāmēš and pātāh.

**2.4** Most of the vowels stand directly below the consonants with which they are to be pronounced. The exceptions are hōlēm, hōlēm-vāv, and šūrēq.

**2.5** The vowels were originally designed so that they could be inserted into a consonantal text without actually lengthening the text. In other words, a pointed text (one supplied with vowels) of a given book of the Hebrew Bible should be exactly the same length as the unpointed text of the same book. This means that the yōds in šērē-yōd and hīrēq-yōd, as well as the vāvs in hōlēm-vāv and šūrēq, were already present in the consonantal text of Hebrew manuscripts (as *matres lectionis*) before they were pointed as vowels. It was the consonants and not the vowels that determined the length of Hebrew texts.

**2.6** Qāmēš ( אָ ) and qāmēš-ḥāṭūf ( אַ ) have the same form, although ‘one represents a long “a” class vowel and the other a short “o” class vowel. Qāmēš-ḥāṭūf occurs either where a hōlēm has been shortened [cf. XVII.47.2(1), p. 158; Glossary, “Shortening of Vowels,” p. 442], or as a constituent part of a ḥāṭēf-qāmēš, as in Pe Guttural verbs [cf. XXII.66.3(2)(b), p. 225].

**2.7** When hōlēm ( הּ ) precedes the letter װ, it may combine with the dot



### II.3 HALF-VOWELS

over the right hand tip of װ to produce a single dot that thus serves a double purpose. Moses' name, for example, is sometimes written as מֹשֶׁה, *Mōšēh*.

Likewise, whenever ḥólēm follows the letter װ, it may combine with the dot over the left hand tip of װ. The word for "enemy," for example, sometimes appears as שֹׁנֵא, *šōnē*.

Some printed editions, however, separate the ḥólēm from the diacritical points over װ and װ. The *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS) is one such edition. It thus prints "Moses" as מֹשֶׁה and "enemy" as שֹׁנֵא.

**2.8** Ḥólēm and ḥólēm-vāv are often used interchangeably. For example, the masculine plural adjective for "good" may be written either as טוֹבִים, *tō-vîm*, or as טוֹבִיִּם.

**2.9** One sometimes encounters a pătăḥ-yôd or a qāmēṣ-yôd at the end of a Hebrew word. These two combinations sound alike and are pronounced somewhat like "ai" in the word "aisle," except the "a" sound is always long.

Whenever the consonant vāv ( ם ) is added to this ending, as often happens in plural noun endings, the resultant sound is simply that of long "a" followed by "v." Thus the word for "his sons," בָּנָיו (Gen. 9:8), is pronounced bā-nāv. A circumflex accent over the second qāmēṣ indicates that it has combined with the yôd to form a characteristically long vowel. The following vāv functions as the final consonant in the word.

### 3. Half-Vowels

In addition to the full vowels listed above, Hebrew makes use of other vowels that could best be described as semi-vowels or half-vowels. They represent full vowels that have been abbreviated for phonetical purposes.

In order to understand half-vowels, we must begin with the ševā ( שְׁוָא ), hereafter referred to as *sheva*.

There are two classes of sheva, the *vocal sheva* and the *silent sheva*. Our concern here is with the former. The vocal sheva is written like a modern colon, except that it is placed below the line. It stands underneath a consonant either at the beginning of a word or at the beginning of a syllable within a word. The first vowel sound in the Hebrew Bible is a vocal sheva, בְּרֵאשִׁית, *berēšît*, "in (the) beginning" (Gen. 1:1).

Note that in this example the vocal sheva is represented in transliteration by a small "e" raised above the line. It has a short, abbreviated sound, pronounced somewhat like the first syllable in the word "severe." The Hebrew word for "covenant," for example, is בְּרִית, (*berît*), pronounced as if it were written "breet." Likewise, the word for "fruit," פֶּרִי (*perî*), has a pronunciation which sounds like "pree."

The simple vocal sheva may also be combined with three of the short vowels

to form compound shevas. Compound shevas are still to be classified as half-vowels and as such they are always vocal and never silent. Compound shevas arose because of the difficulty of pronouncing the gutturals (א, ה, ח, ע, and sometimes ר) with simple vocal shevas. Normally, therefore, a simple vocal sheva will not appear beneath a guttural but will be replaced by one of the three compound shevas.

The three short vowels found in compound shevas are pátāḥ, s'gôl, and qáměš-ḥāṭúf.

- plus : equals - , called ḥāṭěf-pátāḥ
- ∴ plus : equals ∴ , called ḥāṭěf-s'gôl
- ⴢ plus : equals ⴢ , called ḥāṭěf-qáměš

The ḥāṭěf-pátāḥ (-) is sounded like a hurried pátāḥ, the ḥāṭěf-s'gôl (∴) as a hurried s'gôl, and the ḥāṭěf-qáměš (ⴢ) as a hurried qáměš-ḥāṭúf. (Please note that ⴢ always represents a half-vowel of the "o" class and never of the "a" class.)

Examples of words written with gutturals followed by compound shevas:

- (1) אני ḥāṭěf-pátāḥ, translated "I"
- (2) אנוש ḥāṭěf-s'gôl, translated "man, mankind"
- (3) חלי ḥāṭěf-qáměš, translated "sickness"

## EXERCISES

1. Write each letter of the alphabet with each of the vowel signs given in the table of full vowels.

Example: א אִ אֵ אֹ אֻ אֶ אִי אֵי אֹי אֻי אֶי  
etc. ב בִ בֵ בֹ בֻ בֶ בִּי בֵּי בֹּי בֻּי

2. Practice pronouncing the letters with the vowels until you are thoroughly familiar with the sounds.

3. The following combinations of Hebrew letters and vowels sound like English words with which you are familiar. However, the combinations for the most part have no meaning in Hebrew. See if you can discover an English word that matches each of the sounds.

Example:

- אֶג = 'eg, pronounced like "egg"
- אֶר = 'ar, pronounced like "are"
- בֵּית = bêt, pronounced like "bait"



## II EXERCISES

|           |           |            |           |            |
|-----------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|
| (1) אָג   | (9) גִּיט | (17) טָר   | (25) לֶת  | (33) סָף   |
| (2) אָר   | (10) דֶּן | (18) טוּל  | (26) לִין | (34) סוֹן  |
| (3) פִּית | (11) דוּר | (19) יֵט   | (27) מֶט  | (35) פִּיא |
| (4) גִּיד | (12) הִיט | (20) יוּס  | (28) מִין | (36) פֶּט  |
| (5) פוֹת  | (13) הֶג  | (21) יֶש   | (29) מֶן  | (37) רוֹת  |
| (6) פֶּל  | (14) הוּל | (22) כֶּק  | (30) נִיד | (38) שֶל   |
| (7) בֶּן  | (15) וִיל | (23) פֶּר  | (31) נֶת  | (39) שֶל   |
| (8) גֶּן  | (16) וֶת  | (24) כִּיל | (32) נֶט  | (40) תוּל  |

4. We learned that ם and ן can function not only as consonants but also as vowels (*matres lectionis*). See if you can determine which of the following words use ן as a consonant and which use it as a vowel.

|          |            |            |            |
|----------|------------|------------|------------|
| (1) לוֹן | (3) וָשֶׁם | (5) מוֹת   | (7) וִיהִי |
| (2) רוֹת | (4) וִיהִי | (6) בּוֹשׁ | (8) קוֹם   |

5. See if you can determine which of the following words employ ם as a consonant and which employ it as a vowel.

|         |          |           |          |           |           |
|---------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|-----------|
| (1) יָד | (2) יוֹם | (3) אִישׁ | (4) יֶשׁ | (5) בֵּית | (6) שִׁים |
|---------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|-----------|

6. Point the following words (supply them with vowels) by consulting a dictionary or word list.

|           |          |          |          |
|-----------|----------|----------|----------|
| (1) אדמה  | (3) חלום | (5) חמור | (7) נחלה |
| (2) אלהים | (4) חלי  | (6) חצי  | (8) ערבה |

7. Listed below are the letters of the alphabet written in their full Hebrew forms. Transliterate the Hebrew names for these letters and practice pronouncing them.

Example: אֱלֶף, *ālēf*; בֵּית, *bêt*; etc. [The accent mark used in אֱלֶף and elsewhere in this list is explained in 8.1(1).]

|            |            |             |            |
|------------|------------|-------------|------------|
| (1) אֱלֶף  | (7) וִין   | (13) מִם    | (19) קוֹף  |
| (2) בֵּית  | (8) חֵית   | (14) נוֹן   | (20) רֵישׁ |
| (3) גִּמְל | (9) טֵית   | (15) סִמְךָ | (21) שִׁין |
| (4) דָּלֶת | (10) יוֹד  | (16) עֵין   | שִׁין      |
| (5) הָא    | (11) פֶּךָ | (17) פֶּא   | (22) תוֹ   |
| (6) וּו    | (12) לֶמֶד | (18) צִדִּי |            |