

# The Routledge Introductory Course in Biblical Hebrew

Lily Kahn



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*The Routledge Introductory Course in Biblical Hebrew* provides a comprehensive introduction to Biblical Hebrew language and texts. Combining a fresh and innovative approach with an in-depth treatment of the language, it presents the essentials of biblical grammar and vocabulary in an engaging and systematic way. Unlike other Biblical Hebrew courses, it is structured around a series of vibrant and memorable stories, with each story reinforced by grammar explanations, supportive exercises, and a concluding genuine biblical text. This coherent focus encourages students to engage with the text actively and facilitates their mastery of the language to the full.

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- clear and detailed grammar explanations supported by plentiful examples
- an extensive assortment of varied and stimulating exercises designed to reinforce new grammar and develop students' ability to use Biblical Hebrew actively
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- coherent chapter organization to consolidate and reinforce learning consistently at each step of the course
- grammar summary, two-way glossary and subject index presented at the back of the book for easy access
- a user-friendly text design with original illustrations and clear presentation of the Hebrew script.

Written by an experienced instructor and extensively trialled at UCL, *The Routledge Introductory Course in Biblical Hebrew* will be an essential resource for all students beginning to learn Biblical Hebrew.

Lily Kahn is Lecturer in Hebrew in the Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies at University College London. Her publications include *Colloquial Yiddish* (2012), also published with Routledge, and *The Verbal System in Late Enlightenment Hebrew* (2009).

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First published 2014  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-0-415-52479-7 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-415-52480-3 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-85730-5 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon  
by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the people who have contributed to this book in so many positive ways.

I wish to thank Andrea Hartill and Isabelle Cheng at Routledge for their unstinting dedication to the project and for their expert guidance throughout the writing and publication process. I am also very grateful to Geraldine Martin and Helena Power for their great skill and efficiency in the copyediting and production of the volume.

I am greatly indebted to Willem Smelik and Sally Gold for introducing me to Biblical Hebrew with such skill and devotion, and to Coralie Gutridge for inspiring me with her verb parsing mnemonic. Special thanks go to Ada Rapoport-Albert for her continual encouragement (as well as for her suggestion that the horse should have a love interest). I also gratefully acknowledge Aaron Rubin, Siam Bhayro, and an anonymous reviewer for their support of this book and for their many helpful comments.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my Biblical Hebrew students in the Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies, UCL, who have so kindly class-tested drafts of this textbook over the past few years, providing invaluable feedback and countless insightful contributions.

I am extremely grateful to James Holz for the illustrations, as well as for his never-ending encouragement, companionship, and numerous excellent suggestions.

Finally, I would like to thank Kai Kahn for her constant enthusiasm and support.



Map of biblical Israel

# Introduction

## Contents

- Introduction to Biblical Hebrew
- The Hebrew Bible
- About this course

## 1. Introduction to Biblical Hebrew

---

Hebrew is a fascinating language with a rich history spanning 3,000 years. It is a member of the Afro-Asiatic language family, which is a large group of languages spread throughout much of northern Africa and the Middle East. Within this family Hebrew belongs to the Semitic subgroup, which includes many other important ancient languages such as Akkadian (the language of the Babylonian Empire), Aramaic (the language of portions of the Bible and several key biblical translations), Classical Arabic, and Ge'ez (the language of the Ethiopian Church).

The precise origins of Hebrew are not completely clear, but it is thought to have emerged in the Levantine region of Canaan (corresponding roughly to present-day Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria) in the late second or early first millennium BCE. It is very closely related to other ancient Canaanite dialects then in use in the same region such as Moabite (in present-day Jordan) and Phoenician (the language of a seafaring people from the Canaanite coastal areas). It is also closely related to Ugaritic (from the city-state of Ugarit in modern Syria) and Aramaic (spoken by Aramean tribes in parts of present-day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq). These languages are known to us from written evidence (clay and stone inscriptions containing e.g. letters, administrative documents, and poetry) from the mid- to late second millennium BCE. These writings reveal these languages to have a high concentration of common features, which has led linguists to classify them together as a subgroup called 'Northwest Semitic'.

We have some evidence of early Hebrew from inscriptions found in the Canaanite region dating from the early first millennium BCE. However, by far the most substantial body of writing in the language is the Hebrew Bible. The texts making up this literary compendium are themselves widely believed to span a period of nearly a thousand years, with the earliest portions possibly dating to as early as 1200 BCE and the latest ones to the last few centuries BCE. The language of these texts is not uniform, but contains many variations that most likely reflect differences in geography, chronology, register, and literary style.

Traditionally the language of the Hebrew Bible has been divided into three different types, each reflecting a different phase of biblical history, geography, and/or literary genre. The first type, ‘Archaic Biblical Hebrew’, is made up of certain poetic texts whose linguistic features and style seems to be most clearly rooted in the tradition of more ancient Northwest Semitic languages such as Ugaritic. These texts may date to as early as 1200–900 BCE, though it is possible that they were composed later and that the use of certain archaic elements was a poetic convention outlasting the early historical period.

The second type, ‘Standard Biblical Hebrew’, consists of the prose narrative and legal texts of the Pentateuch and Former Prophets (see below), which are believed to date to the so-called ‘monarchic’ or ‘First Temple’ period of ca. 900–586 BCE, when the Israelites had an independent kingdom centred around a temple in Jerusalem. The extent to which this language reflected the spoken idiom of the people is unclear; it may have been a somewhat artificial standard literary language based on the Jerusalem dialect (this can be compared to the concept of ‘the Queen’s English’).

The monarchic period ended in ca. 586 BCE when the Babylonian Empire conquered the kingdom, destroyed the Temple, and exiled many of the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the surrounding areas to Babylon. After 537 BCE, when the Babylonian Empire was conquered by Persia, the exiled population was allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. However, a large diaspora population remained in Babylon and Persia over the next few centuries. The biblical texts written in this ‘Second Temple’ or ‘post-exilic’ period are traditionally categorized as ‘Late Biblical Hebrew’; some of them, e.g. Esther and Daniel (which we will read towards the end of this course), may indicate a Babylonian or Persian setting and a degree of influence from Aramaic (the main language of the Babylonian and Persian empires in the second half of the first millennium BCE) as well as Persian. Alternatively, it is possible that these texts are not all necessarily later than their Standard Biblical Hebrew counterparts, and that many of the linguistic differences may reflect sociological or geographical factors such as the author’s local dialect.

The composition of the latest texts included in the biblical canon, which most likely took place in the last few centuries BCE, is considered to mark the end of the biblical phase of Hebrew. The language remained in written use in the centuries immediately following the close of the biblical canon, most prominently in the compendium of Jewish oral law called the Mishna and in rabbinic biblical exegesis called midrash. However, while these texts bear some linguistic similarities to Late Biblical Hebrew, they undeniably represent a very different historical form of the language.

## ■ 2. The Hebrew Bible

---

The Hebrew Bible is not so much a book as rather a rich compendium of literature spanning almost 1,000 years and including a diverse variety of genres ranging from



dramatic prose narrative to legal codes, prophecy, philosophy, moral guidance, and poetry. Learning to read the Hebrew Bible in the original is a uniquely exciting and rewarding experience because it brings this ancient and yet timeless literary treasure-house to life with a vividness that no translation can ever capture. This course is designed to provide a sound introduction to some of the key narrative texts of the Hebrew Bible so that, whatever your prior level of experience with biblical stories, you will come away with a solid grounding in its organization and contents, and be able to read and appreciate it independently.

The Hebrew Bible is divided into three major sections:

- **The Pentateuch** (also known as the **Torah** or **Five Books of Moses**)  
This section tells the story of the creation of the world and the early history of the Israelite people.
- **The Prophets**  
This section is divided into the **Former Prophets**, a narrative chronicle of the pre-exilic monarchic period, and the **Latter Prophets**, primarily consisting of poetic texts on prophetic and ethical themes.
- **The Writings**  
This section contains a diverse mix of texts including both poetry and narrative on a range of historical, ethical, philosophical, and other topics.

Each of these three sections contains a number of individually named books, adding up to twenty-four in total. Each book is divided into chapters, and each chapter is further divided into individual numbered verses. As you progress through this course you will be introduced to many of these books.



**Check the companion website for a summary of the contents of each biblical book.**

### ■ 3. About this course

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This course is designed to give the beginning learner a solid grounding in Standard Biblical Hebrew grammar, vocabulary, and texts. It is intended to be used over the course of one academic year, though depending on the setting, pace, and amount of time available it may be spread over two years. It is primarily designed for the classroom, but can be used for self-study as well. By the end of the course the learner will have been familiarized with all of the main points of Biblical Hebrew grammar, have been introduced to the most frequently appearing biblical vocabulary, and have acquired the skills necessary to read the Hebrew Bible independently as well as to progress to intermediate courses and more advanced points of syntax, text-critical, and translation issues.

The course is based around a cycle of graded stories introducing the grammatical points and vocabulary while involving the student in a continuously developing narrative arc. These stories are not based directly on biblical stories, but feature characters and storylines similar to those one would find in the Hebrew Bible. Each story has been designed to present the relevant grammar and vocabulary in a pleasant and memorable way and to make the process of learning Biblical Hebrew painless and enjoyable.



**Check the companion website for English translations and audio recordings of each story.**

After each story comes a section explaining the new grammatical points introduced. This is followed by a variety of exercises including transformation and gap-filling tasks, parsing (i.e. grammatically analysing) biblical words, translating English narrative passages into Biblical Hebrew (in the early units, these relate to the introductory stories, but as the course progresses they switch to adaptations of biblical stories), and answering comprehension questions in Biblical Hebrew about the biblical texts at the end of each unit (see below). The exercises are designed to reinforce the language in context, to expose the learner to a wide variety of biblical narratives, and to develop confidence in dealing with authentic texts from a very early stage.



**Check the companion website for a complete answer key and additional exercises.**

At the conclusion of each unit, an authentic biblical text is introduced. We will focus on narrative rather than legal or poetic texts, giving learners a clear grounding in some of the most famous stories of the Hebrew Bible in roughly sequential order, starting with the creation story at the beginning of the Pentateuch and continuing through to the books of Esther and Daniel at the end of the Writings. The texts are carefully graded so that in the early units they are heavily abridged (though never rewritten), so as to provide an overview of the story in question without overwhelming the reader with unfamiliar grammar and vocabulary. As the course progresses, the texts gradually increase in complexity and length so that by the middle of the book the reader is studying unadapted biblical narratives, with no changes except the omission of occasional verses to maintain a manageable length.



**Check the companion website for English translations and audio recordings of each biblical text.**

The course focuses on Standard Biblical Hebrew prose (though towards the end excerpts from Esther and Daniel give a taste of a somewhat different type of biblical language). This part of the course will not only give learners a good feel for the organization of the Hebrew Bible and close familiarity with a wide selection of key biblical texts and characters, but also the ability to tackle other portions of this endlessly rewarding compendium of writings independently and confidently.

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## Unit One

### Contents

- History of the Hebrew writing system
- Consonants
- Vowels
- Handwriting

## 1. History of the Hebrew writing system

---

The Hebrew writing system, like the language itself, has a long and fascinating history that can be traced to the beginning of the second millennium BCE. It is likely to derive ultimately from Egyptian hieroglyphs, in which a single word could be represented by a naturalistic picture. For example, this is the Egyptian hieroglyph meaning ‘head’:



This symbol, along with a number of other Egyptian hieroglyphs, is thought to have been adopted by a people speaking a Semitic language, who simplified it to this:



The creators of this writing system, which is called ‘Proto-Sinaitic’, started to use their simplified hieroglyphs not to indicate individual words but rather to denote the first *consonant* of the word that each hieroglyph had previously represented. Thus, the symbol that had originally meant ‘head’, which sounded something like *resh* in the

Semitic language spoken by the writers of Proto-Sinaitic, became generalized to represent not only the word *resh*, but simply the first consonant of that word, *r*, wherever it occurred. The original name of each symbol was retained even after it had ceased to represent that word.

This Proto-Sinaitic consonantal alphabet is thought to have spread through Canaan and to have been adopted by the speakers of various Semitic languages, where it developed into several variants. One such variant was the Phoenician alphabet, which in turn evolved into the early Hebrew alphabet, called ‘Paleo-Hebrew’. The Phoenician and Paleo-Hebrew alphabets functioned in the same way as their Proto-Sinaitic predecessors, but their symbols were highly simplified and stylized. For example, here’s the Paleo-Hebrew letter *resh*; it’s still just recognizable as a very basic representation of a head, but it’s much less obvious than the Proto-Sinaitic version.



The Paleo-Hebrew alphabet was written from right to left with no difference between capital and lower case letters. It was probably used to write Hebrew at least until the Babylonian Exile of the early sixth century BCE. In the earliest stages vowels weren’t recorded in writing, but during the course of the First Temple period a few of the consonants started to be used in certain restricted circumstances to indicate the presence of vowels.

In the period following the Babylonian Exile many Jews adopted the Aramaic language and began to use its alphabet (which was itself also an offshoot of the Phoenician writing system) to write Hebrew. A variant of this Aramaic alphabet, often called ‘square’ or ‘block’ script, became the standard Hebrew alphabet in the subsequent centuries, and by the early Common Era the Jews had completely abandoned Paleo-Hebrew. Although they both derived from the same Phoenician ancestor, the shapes of letters in the square script were generally quite different from those of their Paleo-Hebrew counterparts. For example, our old friend *resh* took on this appearance:



The square script remained primarily consonantal, and as the text of the Hebrew Bible became canonized the writing system could not be adapted directly to introduce systematic vowel letters into the biblical texts. However, in the second half of the first millennium CE various systems consisting of dashes and dots evolved to record vowels

precisely without interfering with the consonantal alphabet already in place. One of these, known as the Tiberian system, became dominant and has remained the chief vehicle for vocalizing biblical texts down to the present day. Since the evolution of the vocalization system it has been possible to read the Hebrew Bible with relative certainty regarding the pronunciation of vowels (the pronunciation of certain vowels, as well as the original consonants, is still disputed in scholarly circles, but this need not worry you at this point!).

## ■ 2. Consonants

Here's the full consonantal Hebrew alphabet in the square script. There's some debate concerning the original pronunciation of some of these consonants, and there are varying systems currently in place for pronouncing them. In this course we'll use the modern Israeli pronunciation, as this is commonly used in many university and other settings around the world and will make it easier for you if you are studying Modern Hebrew as well.

Letter	Name	Pronunciation
א	<i>alef</i>	silent (see point A below)
ב	<i>bet</i>	b (see point C)
ו	<i>vet</i>	v (see point C)
ג	<i>gimel</i>	g (see point C)
ד		
דּ		
ה	<i>he</i>	h as in 'house'
הּ		at end of word: silent (see point A)
וּ	<i>waw</i>	v (may originally have sounded like w)
וֹ		silent (see point A)
ז	<i>zayin</i>	z
ח	<i>het</i>	ch as in 'Bach'*,†
ט	<i>tet</i>	t
י	<i>yod</i>	y
יּ		silent (see point A)

Letter	Name	Pronunciation
כ	<i>kaf</i>	k (see point C)
ח	<i>khaf</i>	ch as in ‘Bach’ (see points C and D)
ך	final <i>khaf</i>	ch as in ‘Bach’ (appears at end of word only; see points B and D)
ל	<i>lamed</i>	l
מ	<i>mem</i>	m
ם	final <i>mem</i>	m (appears at end of word only; see point B)
נ	<i>nun</i>	n
ן	final <i>nun</i>	n (appears at end of word only; see point B)
ס	<i>samekh</i>	s
ע	<i>ayin</i>	silent (see point A)
פ	<i>pe</i>	p
ף	<i>fe</i>	f
פּ	final <i>fe</i>	f (appears at end of word only; see point B)
צ	<i>ṣadi</i>	ts as in cats
ץ	final <i>ṣadi</i>	ts as in cats (appears at end of word only; see point B)
ק	<i>qof</i>	k (see point D)
ר	<i>resh</i>	r (guttural, as in German or Modern Hebrew)
ש	<i>sin</i>	s (see point D)
שׁ	<i>shin</i>	sh
ת } תּ }	<i>taw</i>	t (see points C and D)

\* If it's hard to tell ח from ה, try this memory aid: they both have the shape of a house, but ח has a hole in the side.

† The consonants *het*, *tet*, and *ṣadi* are commonly transliterated into the Roman alphabet by means of a letter with a dot underneath.

Some consonants require more explanation:

### A. Silent letters

- The letters א and ע were originally pronounced as consonants but are silent in the Israeli pronunciation. א was originally a glottal stop. (If you pronounce the English ‘uh-oh’, the sound you hear between the two words is a glottal stop.) ע was a pharyngeal sound, similar to a glottal stop but pronounced in a slightly different place in the throat. Although they’re now silent, they’re still considered consonants just like all the others.
- In addition, ה, ו, and י are silent in certain circumstances. We’ll examine this point in Unit 2.

### B. Final forms

The following five letters have a special form (called **final**) when appearing at the end of a word:

Final form	Standard form
ך	ח
ם	מ
ן	נ
ף	פ
ץ	צ

Points to note:

- There’s no difference in pronunciation between these final letters and their non-final equivalents; it’s simply a historical quirk of the alphabet.
- The symbol ם, which is called *shewa* (and will be discussed in depth in Unit 2, Grammar point 4), is typically added to final ך, i.e. ךם. This is purely a convention of the writing system and has no effect on pronunciation.
- It may be helpful to note that ך, ן, ף, and ץ look a bit as if the lower half of the standard form has been flattened out so that it extends downwards, while ם looks as though the standard form has been squashed into a box shape.



### C. Begadkefat letters

The following six consonants have two variants, one with a dot (called a *dagesh*) in the middle and one without:

With <i>dagesh</i>	Without <i>dagesh</i>
בּ	ב
גּ	ג
דּ	ד
הּ	ה
טּ	ט
תּ	ת

These six pairs of consonants are called *begadkefat* letters (the name is an acronym composed of the six consonants with *dagesh*). Originally the *dagesh* was used to indicate a difference in pronunciation between the two otherwise identical letters. However, in modern Israeli pronunciation the distinction is preserved in only three of the pairs: בּ vs ב, כּ vs כ, and טּ vs ט, while the other pairs are pronounced identically. This is all you need to know for now, but we'll examine the *dagesh* again more thoroughly in Unit 2.

### D. Consonants with identical pronunciations

The following pairs of consonants have identical pronunciations:

Consonants	Pronunciation
וּ, ו	v
ח, כּ, ךּ	ch as in 'Bach'
טּ, תּ, ת	t
קּ, ק	k
שּׁ, ש	s

This phenomenon can be attributed to changing pronunciation in the history of Hebrew: originally, each of these pairs of consonants represented different sounds, but in modern Israeli pronunciation these differences have been lost. Unfortunately, this means

that there's a certain degree of rote memorization required when learning words containing one of these consonants.

## ■ 3. Vowels

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### A. Matres lectionis

As discussed above, the Hebrew alphabet originally indicated only consonants but then started using the letters ה, ו, and י in certain cases as approximate vowel markers. This still wasn't very clear, but narrowed it down a bit. Let's look at an example, a word meaning 'instruction' or 'law' that at an early stage of Hebrew would theoretically have been spelled as follows (though at that point of course the Paleo-Hebrew alphabet would most likely have been used):

תר

This spelling could have represented a large variety of sounds including *tar*, *tir*, *tor*, *tur*, *tore*, *tora*, *tura*, etc., which would be frustrating for a reader. (You may be experiencing a bit of that frustration now, as unless you already recognize this word you can have no way of knowing how to read it – but don't worry; by the end of this unit the correct pronunciation will be revealed!)

However, by adding ו to represent a vowel in the middle of the word and ה to represent the final vowel, you get this:

תורה

This would have made it easier to read the word because now it was clear that the vowel in the middle was *o* or *u* (the sounds closest to the sound *w*, which may have been the original consonantal value of ו) while the one at the end was *e* or *a*, which are the vowels that seem to be closest to ה, the consonantal value of ה. There was still some ambiguity, but at least now the choice was only between *tora*, *tore*, *tura*, and *ture*.

Each of these consonantal vowel markers is called a *mater lectionis* ('*mater*' for short; plural *matres lectionis*). The term is Latin for 'mother of reading' (because they help you to read!). The development of the *matres lectionis* was the first step towards a vowel notation system. However, it wasn't a perfect system as a) it wasn't precise enough to indicate all vowels systematically, and b) it was used inconsistently within the biblical text, i.e. in one instance a word may appear with a *mater lectionis* while in another instance it may not. When a *mater lectionis* appears in a word, the word is said to be spelled **plene** (Latin for 'fully'), whereas when it is absent the same word is said to be spelled **defectively**. Therefore, modifications to this arrangement were

required in order to ensure that the biblical text could be read accurately and consistently. These modifications arose in the form of the pointing system.

**B. Pointing** ➔ 394 See Reference grammar A1 for summary

The Tiberian vocalization system is a complete method for recording Hebrew vowel sounds. However, it has some complexities of its own, so don't worry if aspects seem confusing at first – you'll soon get used to them.

According to this system, Hebrew has five basic vowels: *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, and *u* (like Spanish or Italian). However, these basic vowels fit into four separate categories, which are labelled in terms of length: short vowels, reduced vowels, tone-long vowels, and vowels with *matres lectionis*. Each vowel has its own name. It might seem confusing and inconvenient to have to learn the names for all of these vowels, but they're actually very important because they will play a big role in many aspects of Hebrew grammar and will therefore be referred to again and again throughout this course. So make the effort to get to know them now and it will quickly start to pay off!

Let's start with the short vowels, which are as follows (the circle represents a consonant, as each vowel symbol is inserted either above or below the consonant that it follows when the word is pronounced).

Note that each vowel is pronounced *after* the consonant that it **points** (appears below or above), never before.

You'll see that the first row, labelled 'vowel class', lists only three vowels (*a*, *i*, and *u*), and that all five vowels are grouped under these three headings. This is because at a very early stage in the development of the Semitic languages there seem to have been only three vowels: *a*, *i*, and *u*, and the other two vowels seem to have been offshoots of these original three. This is not immediately important for us, but will become relevant later when we are looking at various aspects of Biblical Hebrew grammar, so you can ignore the point for now but come back to it at a later date.

**Short vowels**

Vowel class	A	I		U	
Sound (approximate)	a	e	i	o	u
Symbol	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙	⊙
Name	<i>pataḥ</i>	<i>segol</i>	<i>hireq</i>	<i>qameṣ ḥaṭuf</i>	<i>qibbuṣ</i>

Next, here are the reduced vowels. These are easy to remember once you've learned the short vowels – they're identical to the short vowels, except that *shewa* (the symbol ⊙) has been added to the right-hand side. *Shewa* is actually itself considered a reduced vowel and can be used independently to point a consonant, indicating a very short *e*

sound like the *e* in the English word ‘begin’. In fact, the reduced vowels are also often referred to as ‘composite *shewas*’. (We’ll look at the *shewa* in more detail in Unit 2, Grammar point 4.) These reduced vowels are pronounced exactly like their short equivalents. Don’t worry now about when and why they’re used instead of the short vowels; for now just memorize them, and we’ll soon come back to them. Note that there’s no reduced equivalent of *hireq* or *qibbuṣ*.

### Reduced vowels

Vowel class	A	I		U	
Sound (approximate)	a	e	i	o	u
Symbol	◌ְ	◌ֵ	—	◌ֹ	—
Name	<i>ḥatef pataḥ</i>	<i>ḥatef segol</i>	—	<i>ḥatef qameṣ</i>	—

Now let’s look at the tone-long vowels. Again, you may be wondering what the difference is between these vowels and their short or reduced equivalents. In the Tiberian system, there would have been a difference in length or pronunciation between the tone-long and short vowels. However, in modern Israeli pronunciation both sets are pronounced identically, i.e. *qameṣ* is pronounced the same as its short counterpart *pataḥ*. This can be frustrating for the learner because it makes the difference between long and short vowels seem annoyingly arbitrary, but don’t worry – soon you’ll learn some patterns that will help you remember which type of vowel is used where.

### Tone-long vowels

Vowel class	A	I		U	
Sound (approximate)	a	e	i	o	u
Symbol	◌ָ	◌ֵ	—	◌ֹ	—
Name	<i>qameṣ</i>	<i>ṣere</i>	—	<i>ḥolem</i>	—

In addition, note two important points about the tone-long vowels:

- There’s no such thing as a tone-long *i* or *u* sound.
- The same symbol, ◌ָ, is used to represent two completely different sounds: you were first introduced to it as short *o*, but now you’ve seen that it can also be used to represent tone-long *a*. Don’t worry about this for now – in Unit 2 you’ll be given an easy guideline for recognizing which sound it represents in any given word. Until then, just assume that every time you see this symbol it represents the tone-long vowel *qameṣ*.

Finally, let's look at the group consisting of vowel symbol plus *mater lectionis*. These are vowels that had a *mater lectionis* in the consonantal script from an early point in the history of written Hebrew. When the Masoretes added vocalization to these words, the vocalization was actually more precise than the *mater lectionis*, and thereby can be thought of as having made the *mater lectionis* redundant. Let's look back at our earlier example of תורה. The Masoretes added a *holem* and *qameš* (as well as a *dagešh*) to the initial *begadkefat* consonant ת, resulting in the precisely vocalized form תֹּוֹרָה. Because the vocalization is so specific, one could in theory now leave out the two *matres lectionis*, and simply spell the word תֹּר, which would be just as clear. However, since the Hebrew Bible was by that period already a canonized sacred text, the consonants could not be changed, so the Masoretes left the *matres lectionis* intact. This resulted in a series of vowels consisting of a combination of a tone-long (or, more rarely, short) vowel and one of the three *matres lectionis* ה, ו, or י.

Vowels with *matres lectionis*

Vowel class	A	I		U	
Sound (approximate)	a	e/ey	i	o	u
Symbol	הֹ	יֵ הֵ יִ הִ	יִ	וֹ הֹ	וּ
Name	<i>qameš-he</i>	<i>šere-yod</i> <i>šere-he</i> <i>segol-yod</i> <i>segol-he</i>	<i>hireq-yod</i>	<i>holem-waw</i> <i>holem-he</i>	<i>shureq</i>

Points to note:

- None of these vowels may appear at the beginning of a word.
- Combinations with ו and י may appear in the middle or at the end of a word.
- Combinations with ה may appear only at the end of a word.
- Combinations with ו and י are often referred to as **historically long** or **unchangeably long**, for reasons that will become clear in the next few units.
- In Israeli pronunciation these vowels are usually pronounced the same as their tone-long, short, and reduced counterparts.
- However, the vowels יֵ and יִ usually have the sound *ey* (as in the English 'hey!'), which is actually a **diphthong** (a combination of two different vowels) rather than a simple vowel.

You may now be wondering how you can tell whether a given ה, ו, or י is functioning as a consonant or *mater lectionis* on any given occasion. In almost all cases, there's a very simple way to work this out.

i. ה

- If it's at the end of a word and is *not* pointed, then it's functioning as a *mater lectionis*, e.g. תּוֹרָה 'instruction'; 'law'.
- Otherwise, it's a consonant. (ה appears as a consonant at the end of a word only very rarely; this will be explained in Unit 14.)

ii. י

- If it's pointed, e.g. ים 'sea', or followed by a vowel with *mater lectionis*, e.g. יום 'day', then it's functioning as a consonant.
- If it's *not* pointed or followed by a vowel with *mater lectionis*, e.g. מי 'who', then it's functioning as a *mater lectionis*.

iii. ו

- If it's pointed with an A-class vowel, I-class vowel, or *shewa*, e.g. וים 'and a sea', or appears unpointed at the end of a word, e.g. אביו 'his father', then it's functioning as a consonant.
- If it's pointed as ו and has no other vocalization, then it's the vowel/*mater lectionis* combination *shureq*.
- If it's pointed with *holem*, there's some potential for confusion because the same symbol could theoretically be a consonantal ו pointed with *holem*. However, in practice this is almost never a problem because the vowel/*mater lectionis* combination is always directly preceded by an unpointed consonant, as in תּוֹרָה, which indicates that the *holem-waw* is serving as that consonant's only vowel. If the ו were functioning as a consonant pointed with *holem*, the preceding consonant would have to have its own vowel, e.g. עוֹן 'sin'.

## ■ 4. Handwriting

Learning to write Biblical Hebrew is very straightforward. Here are the slightly simplified forms of the block consonants conventionally used in handwriting; use the chart to learn the correct way of forming the letters and then practise copying them out

until they become familiar. (The pointing is even easier as you can just copy the dots and dashes without the need for special practice!)



## ■ Exercises

1. Read the following common Biblical Hebrew words out loud, pronouncing them and naming the letters. Translations are given for each word. This and subsequent exercises are printed from right to left to help you get into the habit of reading Hebrew in the correct direction.



Check your answers to this and all subsequent exercises in the key on the companion website.



Check the companion website for flashcard quizzes on this and all subsequent units.

- .1 סוס 'horse'
- .2 עיר 'town'; 'city'
- .3 היכל 'palace'; 'temple'
- .4 מי 'who'
- .5 שדה 'field'
- .6 הר 'mountain'
- .7 אצל 'near'; 'next to'
- .8 זהב 'gold'
- .9 איש 'man'
- .10 גדול 'big'

2. Copy the words from exercise 1 in handwriting.





## Unit Two

### Contents

- Syllables
- Tone
- Vowel preferences
- *Shewa* (silent and vocal)
- *Dagesh* (weak and strong)
- *Qamesh* vs. *qamesh haṭuf*
- Guttural consonants
- Quiescent **⌘**

In this unit we'll look at a few other essential features of the Hebrew writing system, while at the same time learning some key vocabulary and characters in preparation for starting to read Hebrew texts in Unit 3.

### ■ 1. Syllables

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#### A. *Types of syllable*

Hebrew words, like their English counterparts, can be broken into smaller units of pronunciation called **syllables**. For example, the English word 'horse' has one syllable, while the word 'city' can be divided into two, ci- and -ty. The way that words are divided into syllables differs from language to language, and within languages there may be different types of syllables with different combinations of consonants and vowels. In Hebrew, there are very clear rules determining how words are divided into syllables. It's vitally important that you start to understand and learn how to apply these rules now, because much of the grammar that we'll be looking at throughout this course is affected by them. Here they are:

- All syllables (with only one exception!) begin with a consonant (as opposed to pointing or a *mater lectionis*).
- All syllables must have one vowel or diphthong.
- A syllable may end with a consonant or a vowel (i.e. pointing or a *mater lectionis*).

When you take all of these rules into account, it means that there are only two kinds of Hebrew syllables:

- i. **Open syllables:** syllables consisting of a consonant + vowel/diphthong
- ii. **Closed syllables:** Syllables consisting of a consonant + vowel/diphthong + consonant.

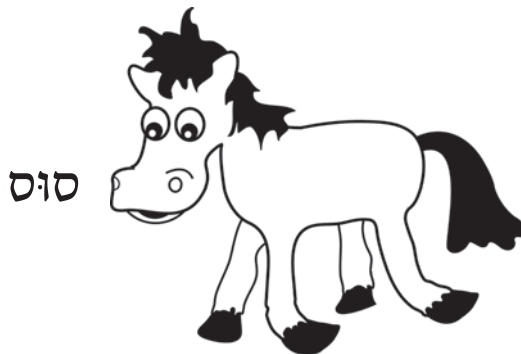
Let's look at each of these in turn.

- i. **Open syllables (consonant + vowel/diphthong)**

It's easy to remember why this type of syllable is called 'open' if you think of it like this: there's nothing blocking in or protecting the vowel at the end of the syllable; it can run away or keep stretching out as long as it likes because there's no consonant closing it in! The word **מה** 'what' is an example of an open syllable: it consists of the consonant **מ**, followed by the historically long vowel **הֹ**. (Even though **ה** is sometimes a consonant, it's functioning here as a *mater lectionis* and therefore counts as a vowel.)

- ii. **Closed syllables (consonant + vowel/diphthong + consonant)**

Again, the name gives you a fitting description for this type of syllable. For example, look at the following word, which means 'horse':



This word is a closed syllable that starts with the consonant **ס** followed by the historically long vowel **וּ**, and then 'closes' with the consonant **ד**. Think of the final consonant as a lid or wall that closes off the syllable, ensuring that the vowel in the middle can't escape!

### ***B. Words with more than one syllable***

These words we've just looked at are easy because they're **monosyllabic** (they have only one syllable), so all you have to do is decide whether it's open or closed. However, many words in Hebrew have more than one syllable, so you have to know how to

divide them into different syllables. Keeping in mind the rules we've just looked at, this will be easy. For example, look at the following word, which means 'king':



This word is composed of two syllables. The first one, **מֶ**, is an open syllable consisting of the consonant **מ** and the short vowel **ֶ**. The second is a closed syllable consisting of the consonant **ל**, the short vowel **ֶ**, and the final 'closing' consonant **ך**. So we can divide the word into syllables like this:

מֶ \ לֶךְ

By contrast, a word might have two open syllables, e.g. **תּוֹרָה**, which can be divided as follows:

תּו \ רָה

## ■ 2. Tone

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### A. Tonic syllables

Along with syllable types, another important feature of Biblical Hebrew is **tone** (also called **stress** or **accent**, i.e. the syllable that is emphasized when you pronounce the word). In English the syllable with the tone can vary from word to word, e.g. *palace*, *pronounce*, *imagination*. In Hebrew, by contrast, the tone is typically on the final syllable, as in **זָהָב** 'gold'. The syllable with the tone is known, logically, as **tonic**. However, in some cases the tone may be on the **penultimate** (second-to-last) syllable,

e.g. מֶלֶךְ ‘king’. In this course it is assumed that the final syllable is tonic; when this is not the case, the tonic syllable will be marked with the symbol ֹ. For example, the word מֶלֶךְ will be written as מֶלֶךְֹ. If you don’t see ֹ, it means that the tone is on the final syllable, as expected.

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Note that ֹ is a learning aid only; it’s not actually used to indicate non-final tone in authentic biblical texts.

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### B. Pretonic and propretonic syllables

Hebrew syllables have different labels depending on where they are in relation to the tone. The syllable immediately before the tonic syllable is called, sensibly, **pretonic**, while the one before that is called **propretonic**. Any syllables even farther away from the tone are also propretonic (though some grammarians label them **distant**). Conversely, syllables following the tone are called **posttonic**, but these are comparatively uncommon. Hebrew words rarely have more than three or four syllables, so you won’t usually have to deal with more than one or two propretonic syllables in the same word.

This labelling system is illustrated in the word יְרוּשָׁלַיִם, meaning ‘Jerusalem’, which has five syllables (the most you’ll ever have to deal with by far!). Note that the final syllable is spelled defectively, without י (resulting in an unusual situation whereby *hireq* appears on the right side of the final *mem* and is pronounced before it, i.e. *-im*).

1	2	3	4	5
ם	לַ	שָׁ	רוּ	יְ
posttonic	tonic	pretonic	propretonic	propretonic (or distant)

## ■ 3. Vowel preferences ☞ 395 See Reference grammar A2 for summary

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You may be wondering why it’s so important to know how to divide and label syllables right now! One of the reasons this is necessary is because different vowels are found in different types of syllables, and this will have significant implications for the pointing system as well as many grammatical issues. Here’s a basic reference list of which types of syllables the different vowels may be found in. Don’t feel that you have to absorb it all at once, but keep it in mind as you’ll be coming back to these points time and again throughout the course.

## A. Tone-long vowels prefer:

- i. Open or closed tonic syllables, e.g. **זֶהָב**, **תּוֹרָה**
- ii. Open pretonic syllables, e.g. **זֶהָב**

## B. Short vowels prefer:


- i. Unstressed closed syllables, e.g. **מֶלֶךְ**
- ii. Open tonic syllables, e.g. **מֶלֶךְ**

C. Reduced vowels and vocal *shewa* prefer:

Open prepretonic syllables, e.g. **יְרוּשָׁלַיִם**

## D. Historically long vowels can be found in any type of syllable.

#### 4. *Shewa* 395 See Reference grammar A3 for summary

Now we'll look at another important feature of the Hebrew writing system, the symbol , called *shewa*. The *shewa* is used to perform two different functions, and actually has two different names depending on the function. We'll look at each type of *shewa* in turn.

##### A. *Silent shewa*

The first type of *shewa* is called the **silent shewa**. The name describes its function, as it's used to signal the absence of a vowel. As such, it appears at the end of a closed syllable, pointing a consonant directly preceded by a short vowel. It's typically found in the middle of a word, but in certain cases it appears at the end; one of these is in the final consonant **ךְ**, as you've seen, and you'll meet the others later in the course. Look at the following word, which means 'queen':

This word clearly illustrates this function of the silent *shewa*: it points the **ךְ**, which is immediately preceded by the short vowel *patah*. The *shewa* is telling us that this is indeed the end of the syllable and there's no vowel here.



## B. Vocal shewa

The second type of *shewa* is called **vocal**. Again, the name reveals something of its function: in contrast to its silent counterpart, this one is actually a vowel sound. Historically it's a very short *e* sound as in the *e* in the English word 'begin'. However, just to complicate matters, in modern Israeli pronunciation the vocal *shewa* is not usually pronounced, making it identical to the silent *shewa* as far as sound is concerned. This means that you have to learn a few rules so that you'll be able to identify vocal *shewas* with confidence. The vocal *shewa* behaves in the opposite way from the silent *shewa* in that it appears only in *open* syllables. It can appear in four different places within a word:

### i. Beginning of word

Consider the word **יְרוּשָׁלַם**. As you saw above, this word can be divided into five syllables, **יְ - רוּ - שָׁ - לַ - ם**; the vocal *shewa* is pointing the first syllable, which is open.

### ii. After long vowel

Look at the following word, which means 'judges' and appears frequently in the Hebrew Bible:

**שֹׁפְטִים**

This word can be divided into three syllables:

**שׁ \ פְּ \ טִים**

You may be wondering how it's possible to tell that the first syllable is open and ends after the **שׁ** rather than being closed and ending after **שֹׁפְ**, with the *shewa* marking the end of the closed syllable. If you look back to the list of vowel preferences, you'll find the answer: the *holem* pointing the initial consonant **שׁ** is a long vowel (in this case it's actually historically long, but spelled defectively so it looks as if it's tone-long), and as you can see from the list, long vowels usually avoid closed syllables that aren't tonic. Therefore, by process of elimination, the *shewa* must be vocal, and as such is part of its own open syllable.

### iii. After silent shewa

As a rule, whenever you see two *shewas* in a row, the first one is silent and the second one is vocal. (In fact, the Masoretic pointing conventions don't allow for the existence of two vocal *shewas* next to each other – more on this later!) You can see an example of this in the phrase **מְשֻׁפְּחוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם** 'the families of Jerusalem': the first *shewa* in **מְשֻׁפְּחוֹת** is silent, closing the

first syllable, while the second one is vocal, representing the vowel in the open syllable פִּ.

iv. Pointing strong *dagesh* (see below)

## ■ 5. Dagesh ☞ 395 See Reference grammar A4 for summary

The *dagesh*, like the *shewa*, has two variants, each of which has its own function and name. (The Masoretes developed an excellent vocalization system, but their penchant for using the same symbol to serve two different functions can be very frustrating for students!) The two variants are called the **weak *dagesh*** and **strong *dagesh***, and they're used in quite different circumstances: the weak *dagesh* appears only in the six pairs of *begadkefat* letters, while the strong *dagesh* can be found in almost any letter. Let's look at each type of *dagesh* in more detail.

### A. Weak dagesh

The weak *dagesh* (also called by its Latin name, *dagesh lene*) appears as a rule in each of the six *begadkefat* letters ב, ג, ד, כ, פ, and ת when the letter isn't following a vowel, i.e. in one of the following two positions:

- i. At the beginning of a word, e.g. פִּסָּף
- ii. Directly following a silent *shewa*, e.g. מִלְפָּה

Conversely, a *begadkefat* letter directly following a vowel doesn't take the weak *dagesh*, e.g. הִיכֵל.

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This principle often applies to *begadkefat* letters at the beginning of a word when that word follows another word ending in a vowel, e.g. שָׂדֵה גָדוֹל 'a big field' instead of שָׂדֵה גְדוֹל. This convention isn't invariable, so just be aware that you'll encounter it when reading biblical texts but that it's not universal. (It's actually governed by rules, but you don't need to learn them at this stage.)

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### B. Strong dagesh

The **strong *dagesh*** (also known by the Latin term *dagesh forte*), in contrast to its weak counterpart, can appear in any consonant except א, ה, ח, ע, and ר.<sup>1</sup> Its function

<sup>1</sup> Strong *dagesh* does actually appear in some of these letters on very rare occasions in the Hebrew Bible, but these are anomalies that need not concern you now.

is very different from that of the weak *dagesh*: it indicates that the consonant in which it appears is **doubled** (pronounced for twice as long as a single consonant). Doubled consonants occur sometimes in English: for example, say ‘unnatural’ out loud and then ‘a natural’: you’ll see that the *n* sound in ‘unnatural’ is actually held for longer.

However, in modern Israeli pronunciation doubling has been lost, and therefore, as in the case of the long and short vowels, and vocal and silent *shewa*, the difference between a consonant with a strong *dagesh* and one without it is impossible to hear. This means that you just have to memorize whether a given consonant in a given word takes a strong *dagesh*.

On the bright side, though, in most cases deciding whether a given *dagesh* is strong or weak is very simple: if you see a *dagesh* in a letter that’s not *begadkefat*, it *must* be strong. Take the example הַסּוּס, which means ‘the horse’ (it’s just the familiar word סוּס with a prefix added to it; we’ll look at this in Unit 3). As soon as you see the *dagesh* in the ס, you know it has to be strong because ס is not a *begadkefat* letter. Originally, then, the word would have been pronounced as if it had two *samekhs* in a row, i.e. הַסְסוּס.

This illustrates another important point: since a consonant with strong *dagesh* is doubled, that means that it’s actually part of *two* syllables: the consonant is only written once, but adding the strong *dagesh* is a shorthand way of indicating the presence of two identical consonants there. The first of these doubled consonants closes the previous syllable, while the second one forms a separate, open syllable, like this: סוּס \ הַסְ. This is why, referring back to point iv of the previous section, a *shewa* pointing a consonant with strong *dagesh* *must* be vocal: it serves as the vowel of this open syllable.

Note therefore that the strong *dagesh* doesn’t usually appear at the beginning or end of a word. (There are a few exceptions to this rule, but they will be pointed out later.)

The only situation where it may not be so immediately obvious which type of *dagesh* you’re dealing with is in a *begadkefat* letter. *Begadkefat* letters can be doubled just like other consonants, which means that theoretically the *dagesh* in a given *begadkefat* letter could be strong instead of weak. However, there’s a very simple guideline for distinguishing the two:

A *dagesh* in a *begadkefat* letter is **strong** if it follows a vowel, e.g. הַפְסֵף ‘the silver’; ‘the money’. Note that this is the exact opposite of the situations in which a weak *dagesh* is found.

## ■ 6. Qameṣ vs. qameṣ ḥaṭuf

Now that you know about syllable structure it’s time to learn an easy way to distinguish the identical-looking symbols *qameṣ* and *qameṣ ḥaṭuf*. There are only two contexts in which you’ll find *qameṣ ḥaṭuf*:



### A. Closed unstressed syllables

The symbol ◌̣ is invariably *qames ḥaṭuf* when it appears in a closed, unstressed syllable. An example of this is the ◌̣ in the first syllable of the word חִכְמָה ‘wisdom’, which divides into two syllables as follows: מָה \ חִכְ.

### B. Immediately preceding ḥaṭef qames

An example of this is the ◌̣ pointing the first syllable of the word בְּאֵנִיהַ ‘in a ship’.

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In all other cases the symbol is the tone-long vowel *qames*.

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## ■ 7. Guttural consonants

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The following four Hebrew consonants form a special class called **gutturals**:

א            ה            ח            ע

In addition, ך is considered a ‘half’-guttural in that it has some of the special properties of the other gutturals, but not all.

The gutturals have the following characteristics that distinguish them from other consonants:

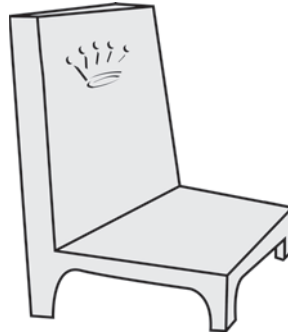
- They can’t be doubled, i.e. they never appear with strong *dagesh* (this applies to ך as well as the other gutturals).<sup>2</sup>
- They can’t be pointed with vocal *shewa*. Instead, they may be pointed with one of the reduced vowels. (You can think of the reduced vowels as variants of vocal *shewa* designed specially for the unreasonable, demanding gutturals, which won’t accept the normal vocal *shewa* like the other, more agreeable, consonants. In this case ך doesn’t behave like a guttural, as it’s happy to be pointed with vocal *shewa*, e.g. רְחֹב ‘city square’).
- They often prefer to be pointed with A-class vowels (don’t worry about this point too much for now, but it will become relevant later).

<sup>2</sup> As mentioned above, there are a very few exceptions to this rule, but don’t worry about them now!

## ■ 8. Quiescent א

Although the consonant א is not usually considered a *mater lectionis*, often when appearing at the end of a syllable it **quiesces** (becomes silent), meaning that it has no pointing and is not considered a consonant for syllabification purposes. You can see this in the word וַיֹּאכְלוּ ‘and they ate’. If a word ending in **quiescent** (silent) א is directly followed by another word beginning with a *begadkefat* letter, the weak *dagesh* is often left out of the *begadkefat* letter because the quiescent א is not considered a consonant. You can see this in the following phrase, meaning ‘a large throne’:

כִּסֵּא גָדוֹל



## ■ Exercises

1. Go back to Unit 1, Exercise 1 and divide each of the words into syllables, noting how many syllables there are and whether each syllable is open or closed.
2. Read the following words and decide whether the *shewa* in each word is vocal or silent.

וְזָהָב 'and gold' .1

מִשְׁתֶּה 'banquet' .2

שֻׁלְחָן 'table' .3

מְאֹד 'very' .4

מְלָכִים 'kings' .5

רְשָׁעִים 'wicked men' .6

מִשְׁפָּחָה 'family' .7

3. Read the following words and decide whether each *dagesh* (there may be more than one in a word) is weak or strong.

1. 'woman'; 'wife' אִשָּׁה .1

2. 'son' בֵּן .2

3. 'banquet' מִשְׁתֶּה .3

4. 'family' מִשְׁפָּחָה .4

5. 'camels' גַּמְלִים .5

6. 'the table' הַשֻּׁלְחָן .6

7. 'the king' הַמֶּלֶךְ .7

8. 'inside of' בְּתוֹךְ .8

9. 'the day' הַיּוֹם .9

10. 'where' אַיֵּה .10