

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 ׀ were used to indicate "a" class vowels, ם to indicate "e" and "i" class vowels, and ׁ to indicate "o" and "u" class vowels. Early Hebrew grammarians coined the term *matres lectionis* (literally, "mothers of reading") to designate these letters. The two consonants most frequently used as vowel indicators are ם and ׁ.

Table of Full Vowels

Name	Sign	Position with Consonant	Sound	Illustration
1. qáměš	ⴊ	ⴊ	ā, as in <i>car</i>	אָב father
2. pátāḥ	-	ⴊ	ǎ, as in <i>car</i>	בַּת daughter
3. šérê	ⴌ	ⴊ	ē, as in <i>they</i>	אֵל God
4. šérê-yôd	׳	ⴊ	ê, as in <i>they</i>	בֵּית house of
5. seḡôl	ⴎ	ⴊ	ě, as in <i>met</i>	שֶׁקֶל shekel
6. ḥírēq-yôd	׳	ⴊ	î, as in <i>marine</i>	הִיא she
7. ḥírēq	.	ⴊ	ĩ, as in <i>sit</i>	עִם with
8. ḥólēm	.	ⴊ	ō, as in <i>row</i>	לֹא not
9. ḥólēm-vāv	ׁ	ⴊ	ô, as in <i>row</i>	אוֹר light
10. qáměš-ḥāṭúf	ⴊ	ⴊ	õ, as in <i>cost</i>	כָּל all of
11. šúrēq	ׁ	ⴊ	û, as in <i>rule</i>	הוּא he
12. qıbbúš	ⴌ	ⴊ	ũ, as in <i>pull</i>	שֻׁלְחָן table

(A *múnaḥ* 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.)

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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 qámēs, šērē, šērē-yôd, ĥîrēq-yôd, ĥólēm, ĥólēm-vāv, and šûrēq. 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-yôd (שֵׁרְיָ) is represented as ê, ĥîrēq-yôd (חִירְיָ) as î, ĥólēm-vāv (חֹלְמָוּ) as ô, and šûrēq (שׁוּרְקָ) as û. These vowels can never be shortened and are therefore said to be characteristically or unchangeably long.

(2) The short vowels are pátāḥ, s^egôl, ĥîrēq, qámēs-ḥāṭûf, and qîbbûš. (Note that in Modern Hebrew, pátāḥ is pronounced exactly like qámēs. In this grammar, however, it is transliterated as “ă” in order to distinguish it from qámēs, which is transliterated as “ā”.)

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 ĥîrēq-yôd and ĥîrēq, or between šûrēq and qîbbûš, just as no distinction is made between qámēs and pátāḥ.

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

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 yôds in šērē-yôd and ĥîrēq-yôd, as well as the vāvs in ĥólēm-vāv and šûrēq, 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 Qámēs (אָ) and qámēs-ḥāṭûf (אַ) have the same form, although one represents a long “a” class vowel and the other a short “o” class vowel. Qámēs-ḥāṭûf occurs either where a ĥólēm has been shortened [cf. XVII.47.2(1), p. 158; Glossary, “Shortening of Vowels,” p. 442], or as a constituent part of a ḥāṭēf-qámēs, as in Pe Guttural verbs [cf. XXII.66.3(2)(b), p. 225].

2.7 When ĥólēm (חֹ) precedes the letter ׀, it may combine with the dot

II.3 HALF-VOWELS

over the right hand tip of ׀ 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 ׀, it may combine with the dot over the left hand tip of ׀. The word for "enemy," for example, sometimes appears as שֹׁנֵי, *šōnē*.

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

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

2.9 One sometimes encounters a pātāḥ-yōd or a qāmēš-yōd 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 (׀) 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 qāmēš indicates that it has combined with the yōd 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," פְּרִי (*perî*), has a pronunciation which sounds like "pree."

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

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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 כ) 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 pātāḥ, s'egōl, and qāmēš-ḥāṭūf.

- plus : equals -: , called ḥāṭēf-pātāḥ
- ∴ plus : equals ∴: , called ḥāṭēf-s'egōl
- ⴚ plus : equals ⴚ: , called ḥāṭēf-qāmēš

The ḥāṭēf-pātāḥ (-:) is sounded like a hurried pātāḥ, the ḥāṭēf-s'egōl (∴:) as a hurried s'egōl, and the ḥāṭēf-qāmēš (ⴚ:) as a hurried qāmēš-ḥāṭūf. (Please note that ⴚ: 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) אָנִי ḥāṭēf-pātāḥ, translated "I"
- (2) אָנוּשׁ ḥāṭēf-s'egōl, translated "man, mankind"
- (3) חֲלִי ḥāṭēf-qāmēš, translated "sickness"

EXERCISES

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

Example: אָ אַ אֲ אִ אֵ אֶ אֹ אֻ אֺ אֱ אִי אֵי אֶי אֹי אֻי אֺי
etc. בָּ בַּ בְּ בִּי בֵּי בֶּי בֹּי בֻּי בֹּי

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:

- אָג = ḥāṭēf-pātāḥ, pronounced like "egg"
- אָר = ḥāṭēf-s'egōl, pronounced like "are"
- בַּיִת = ḥāṭēf-qāmēš, pronounced like "bait"

II EXERCISES

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| (1) אָג | (9) גֵּיט | (17) טָר | (25) לֶת | (33) סֵר |
| (2) אָר | (10) דֶּן | (18) טוּל | (26) לִין | (34) סוּן |
| (3) פִּית | (11) דוּר | (19) יֵט | (27) מֵט | (35) פִּיא |
| (4) פִּיד | (12) הֵיט | (20) יוּס | (28) מִין | (36) פִּט |
| (5) פִּות | (13) הֵג | (21) יֵש | (29) מֶן | (37) רוּת |
| (6) פִּל | (14) הוּל | (22) פִּק | (30) נִיד | (38) שֵל |
| (7) פִּן | (15) וִיל | (23) פִּר | (31) נִת | (39) שֵל |
| (8) גֵן | (16) וֵת | (24) פִּיל | (32) נֵט | (40) תוּל |

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4. We learned that ך 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.

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| (1) לון | (3) וּשם | (5) מוֹת | (7) וִיהי |
| (2) רוּת | (4) וִיהי | (6) בוּש | (8) קום |

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

- (1) יָד (2) יוּם (3) אִיש (4) יֵש (5) בֵּית (6) שִים

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

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| (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: אֶלֶף, *alēf*; בֵּית, *bēt*; etc. [The accent mark used in אֶלֶף and elsewhere in this list is explained in 8.1(1).]

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| (1) אֶלֶף | (7) זַיִן | (13) מֶם | (19) קוֹף |
| (2) בֵּית | (8) חֵית | (14) נוּן | (20) רוּש |
| (3) גִּמְל | (9) טֵית | (15) סִמְך | (21) שִין |
| (4) דָּלֶת | (10) יוּד | (16) עִין | שִין |
| (5) הָא | (11) פֶּף | (17) פֶּא | (22) תוּ |
| (6) וּו | (12) לֶמֶד | (18) צִנִּי | |

8. Here is a similar list of the vowels. Transliterate these and practice pronouncing them.

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| (1) קָמֶז | (5) סְגוֹל | (9) חוֹלָם וּוּ |
| (2) פֶּתַח | (6) חֵירֶק יוֹד | (10) קָמֶז חֲטוּף |
| (3) אֲרִי | (7) חֵירֶק | (11) שׁוּרֶק |
| (4) אֲרִי יוֹד | (8) חוֹלָם | (12) קְבוּץ |

9. Transliterate the proper names listed below and practice pronouncing them in Hebrew.

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| (1) בֵּית לֶחֶם | (9) לָבָן | (17) שָׂרָה |
| (2) גֵּד | (10) מִנְשָׁה | (18) שָׂכָם |
| (3) גִּזְשָׁן | (11) נֶתָן | (19) שְׁלֹמֹה |
| (4) דָּוִד | (12) סָדָם | (20) שָׁם |
| (5) הָגָר | (13) עֵשׂוּ | (21) שָׁפָן |
| (6) כְּנַעַן | (14) פְּאָרָן | (22) תֵּל אָבִיב |
| (7) כְּלָב | (15) קַדְשׁ | (23) תָּמָר |
| (8) לָאָה | (16) רַחֵל | (24) יִשְׂרָאֵל |

- 33) סָרַף
34) סוּרָף
35) פִּיֵּא
36) פֶּטַח
37) רוּבֵן
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