

Cross - Jewish Scripts Throughout History

Week 1 Exercise – Transcribing Hebrew

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In preparation for studying how Hebrew writing developed and changed over time, this week's exercise is about how to read the Hebrew script and transcribe it into the Latin alphabet (i.e. into our native script). The method of Hebrew writing we are learning is that of the Tiberian pointing of the Masoretic text (discussed in Week 4), which is the standard format found in all modern printed Hebrew Bibles.

Attached below are two tables, one that is a key for transcribing the consonants, the other, the vowel pointings of the Hebrew script. **Using these tables, you will be able to read all of the consonants and vowel pointings.** These will be handy references for the entire class. **They were written by me and are geared towards a basic understanding of Hebrew writing for our purposes,** not for the purposes of learning how to read Hebrew, although they will serve as a good first step in that regard. Hints for pronunciation are given, meant to allow you to read the Hebrew text out loud consistently in a way similar to how Biblical Hebrew is pronounced in American universities, which is similar (but not identical) to how Hebrew—biblical and not—is pronounced by modern Hebrew speakers in Israel and beyond). I have not included a full discussion of the phonetics of Biblical Hebrew!

Transliterating the Hebrew Script – consonants

	<u>Letter name</u>	<u>Transliteration</u>	<u>Standardized pronunciation</u>
א	aleph	ʾ	Silent; pronounce its vowel only. ¹
ב	bet	b	Like <i>b</i> or <i>v</i> (if it bears a dagesh lene; see below)
ג	gimel	g	
ד	dalet	d	
ה	he	h	
ו	waw	w	Pronounce like <i>w</i> or <i>v</i> . ²
ז	zayin	z	
ח	het	ħ	A harsher <i>h</i> like in the Scottish <i>loch</i> .
ט	tet	ʈ	Like <i>t</i> .
י	yod	y	Like in <i>year</i> .
כ	kaf	k	
ך	“final” kaf (at word end)	k	

¹ Say the word “hello” but in a British accent, i.e. “ello”...that little “click” you make before the *e* sound is a glottal stop. For another example, try saying “bottle” in a British accent, i.e. like “BAH-ull.” The sound between the syllables that you make with the extreme back of your tongue is a glottal stop. This is equivalent to the Arabic *hamza*. *Aleph* is not pronounced when reading Biblical Hebrew.

² The *waw* is often pronounced in biblical scholarship as the letter *w* is in German.

ל	lamed	l	
מ	mem	m	
ם	“final” mem (at word end)	m	
נ	nun	n	
ס	samekh	s	
ע	ayin	‘	Silent; pronounce its vowel only. ³
פ	pe	p	Like <i>p</i> or <i>f</i> (if it bears a dagesh lene; see below)
ף	“final” pe (at word end)	p	
צ	tsade	ʒ	Like in <i>itsy bitsy</i> .
ץ	“final” tsade (at word end)	ʒ	
ק	qof	q	
ר	resh	r	
שׁ	sin	ś	Like <i>s</i> .
שׂ	shin	š	Like <i>ship</i> .
ת	taw	t	

³ *Ayin* is a guttural like aleph, but is both harsher in sound and voiced (for “voiced,” cf. the sound *b* versus the sound *p*: *b* is voiced, *p* is unvoiced). It is identical to Arabic ع.

Transliterating the Hebrew Script – vocalization pointings

Vowels do not receive their own dedicated signs in Hebrew, like in an **alphabet**. Instead, they are added to consonants, making a consonant+vowel syllable. Vowels are not typically written in Hebrew but are found in texts of the Hebrew Bible. The examples below use the consonant *mem* (מ) as an example, combined with each possible pointing.

<u>Pointing</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Transliteration</u>	<u>Pronunciation</u>
ִ	hireq	mi ⁴	As in <i>mitt</i>
ֵ	tsere	mē	As in <i>may</i>
ֶ	segol	me	As in <i>men</i>
ַ	patah	ma	As in <i>map</i>
ָ	qamets	mā	As in <i>mall</i>
ֹ	holem	mō	As in <i>mode</i>
ֺ	qibbuts	mu ⁵	As in <i>move</i>
ְ	shewa	m or mē	“m” or “muh” ⁶
ֻ	hatef segol	mě	Like an “e”-sounding shewa

⁴ Some *hireqs* stand for a longer i-vowel, i.e. \bar{i} .

⁵ Some *qibbuts* stand for a longer u-vowel, i.e. \bar{u} .

⁶ A murmured vowel, like in the word *believe*, pronounced “buh-LEEVE”: the “uh” vowel in the first syllable is equivalent to the shewa. Depending upon the environment in which the consonant written with the shewa is in, the shewa may not have been pronounced at all, making it simply a marker of the end of a syllable. For this reason, in transcriptions of Hebrew, shewas are often not represented at all. The rules for this are relatively complex.

חֶּ	hatef patah	mă	Like an “a”-sounding shewa
חֶׇ	hatef qamets	mǒ	Like an “o”-sounding shewa
מֶ	dagesh	⁷	
מֶה	qamets he ⁸	mâ	Like qamets
מֵי	tsere yod	mê	Like tsere
מִי	segol yod	mê	Like segol
מִיִּ	hireq yod	mî	Like hireq
מִיִּי	shureq	mû	Like qibbuts
מִיִּיִּ	plene holem	mô	Like holem

Note: the name for consonants used in vowel writings, seen in the final six examples above (qamets he through plene holem) are *matres lectionis* (Latin for “mothers of reading”), or

⁷ There are two possibilities for what the dagesh stands for. The rules for differentiating between these are complex. Here is a basic rule of thumb:

1. The consonant is *doubled* (as in *cabbage*)—this usage is called the *dagesh forte* (“strong *dagesh*”);
2. If the dagesh is on one of the “bgadkfats” consonants (ב, ג, כ, פ, and ת), the consonant *may* be pronounced in a way that completely restricts the airflow out of the mouth (the technical term for this is *plosive*); otherwise, a “bgadkfats” consonant is pronounced in a way that the airflow is not completely restricted (the technical term for this being a *fricative*). This usage is called the *dagesh lene* (“light *dagesh*”). English speakers have a hard time pronouncing a “bgadkfats” consonant that bears the *dagesh forte* differently than one that does not. For this reason, by convention, only the ב, כ, and פ are pronounced differently than ב, כ, and פ. The former are pronounced *v*, *kh* (like a rougher version of ח, het), and *f*, whereas the latter are pronounced *b*, *k*, and *p*. Note that *bgadkfats* consonants can also receive the *dagesh forte*, i.e. be doubled, and if they are doubled, they are the plosive type.

⁸ This and the following vowel writings that use a combination of a vowel sign with a consonant are called “*plene* spellings,” *plene* being Latin for “full(y).”

just *matres* (singular *mater*) for short. We will study this phenomenon closely! There are three *matres* in Hebrew: he (ה), waw (ו), and yod (י).

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ
וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תְּהוֹמוֹת וְבַהֲוֹי וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל-פְּנֵי תְּהוֹמוֹת

Exercise 1:

Transcribe **the consonants only** of the Hebrew text at the top of the page. Remember, Hebrew reads from right to left!

Example:

בְּרֵאשִׁית br'št

Exercise 2:

Transcribe **the consonants and the vowels** of the Hebrew sentences above.

Example:

בְּרֵאשִׁית bĕrē'sīt

Note: This can be pronounced “buh-ray-SHEET.”

Bonus Question: Do you notice any discrepancies between your transcription of just the consonants versus your transcription of both consonants and vowels? (hint: it has something to do with the *plene* vowels; see note 10 above) What problems could this lead to, theoretically and in practice?

Exercise 3:

Try to translate the Hebrew! Use the dictionary below for help.

Dictionary

Pronunciation tip: accent all words on the last syllable unless otherwise noted.

אלהים	noun. God
ארץ	noun. earth (pronounced 'ER-es)
את	(untranslatable; marks the direct object ⁹ of a verb)
על	preposition. upon, near, beside
ברא	verb. to create
ב	preposition. in, on, by
בהו	noun. nothingness
ה	particle. the
היתה	verb. to be
חשך	noun. darkness (pronounced HO-šek)
פני	noun. face

⁹ The direct object in the sentence "The woman wrote the letter" is "the letter." The verb is "wrote." The subject is "the woman."

רשית noun. **beginning**

שמים noun. **heavens**

תהום noun. **abyss**

תהו noun. **wasteland**

ו particle. **and**

