CHAPTER 1
THE HEBREW ALPHABET AND VOWELS

The Hebrew alphabet consists entirely of consonants, the first being א (Aleph) and the last being ת (Taw). It has 23 letters, but שׂ (Sin) and שׁ (Shin) were originally counted as one letter, and thus it is sometimes said to have 22 letters. It is written from right to left, so that in the word written אשׁ, the letter א is first and the letter שׁ is last. The standard script for biblical Hebrew is called the **square** or **Aramaic script**.

A. **The Consonants**
1. *The Letters of the Alphabet*

Table 1.1. The Hebrew Alphabet

1	א	Aleph	*7*	ז	Zayin	*13*	מ	Mem	*19*	ק	Qoph
2	ב	Beth	*8*	ח	Heth	*14*	נ	Nun	*20*	ר	Resh
3	ג	Gimel	*9*	ט	Teth	*15*	ס	Samek	*21*	שׂ	Sin
4	ד	Daleth	*10*	י	Yod	*16*	ע	Ayin	*22*	שׁ	Shin
5	ה	Hey	*11*	כ	Kaph	*17*	פ	Pe	*23*	ת	Taw
6	ו	Waw	*12*	ל	Lamed	*18*	צ	Tsade			

To master the Hebrew alphabet, first learn the signs, their names, and their alphabetical order. Do not be concerned with the phonetic values of the letters at this time.

2. *Letters with Final Forms*

Five letters have **final forms**. Whenever one of these letters is the last letter in a word, it is written in its final form rather than its normal form. For example, the final form of Tsade is ץ (contrast צ). It is important to realize that the letter itself is the same; it is simply written differently if it is the last letter in the word. The five final forms are as follows.

Table 1.2. Consonants with Final Forms

Normal Form	כ	מ	נ	פ	צ
Final Form	ך	ם	ן	ף	ץ

(1) In מלך (*mlk*), מ (the first letter, reading the Hebrew right to left) has the normal form, but the last letter in the word is כ in its final form (ך).

(2) In לכם (*lkm*), the כ has the normal form, but the מ has the final form (ם).

Blackboard 1.1. The Use of Final Forms of Letters
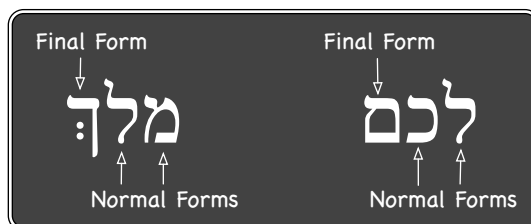
3. Confusing Letters

Hebrew can be difficult to read because many letters look very similar. Observe the letters in the following chart. In each box, you see a series of letters that look similar to one another. Be sure that you can distinguish which letter is which.

Table 1.3. Easily Confused Letters

ע צ	ס מ ט ם	י ו ו ז ן	ד ר ך
ב כ פ	ה ח ת	נ ג ו	

4. The Phonetic Value of the Alphabet

For learning purposes, Hebrew consonants can be divided conveniently into six groups: **begadkephat** letters, sibilants, שׂ and ק, gutturals, liquids, and nasals. These six groups are not built around phonetic definitions of the Hebrew consonant system, although some phonetic terminology is used. These groups simply provide a framework for learning to pronounce the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

a. Begadkephat Letters

Referred to as the begadkephat letters (from the artificial memory words בְּגַד כְּפַת), the letters ב, ג, ד, כ, פ, and ת are unique in that each has two distinct phonetic values. Each of these may be found with a dot called a **Daghesh Lene** (e.g., בּ) or without the Daghesh Lene (e.g., ב).

  (1) If the Daghesh Lene is present, the letter is a **plosive**, like the English *B*.

  (2) If there is no Daghesh Lene, the sound is a **fricative** or **spirant** (there is a strong breathing sound, as with the English *V* sound).

Table 1.4. The "Begadkephat" Letters

	בּ	גּ	דּ	כּ	פּ	תּ
With Daghesh Lene	*B* as in *boy*	*G* as in *good*	*D* as in *dot*	*K* as in *kite*	*P* as in *paste*	*T* as in *tin*
	ב	ג	ד	כ	פ	ת
Without Daghesh Lene	*V* as in *very*	*GH* as in *dog house*	voiced *TH* as in *then*	*C* as in *cool*	*F* as in *fix*	unvoiced *TH* as in *thin*

Do not think of the begadkephat letters as twelve different letters. There are only six. In a given word the same begadkephat letter will sometimes be written with, and sometimes without, a Daghesh Lene, according to rules we will learn in the next chapter. The Daghesh Lene is used only with these six begadkephat letters.

b. The Gutturals

Hebrew has four guttural letters: א, ע, ה, and ח. The sounds of these letters are made at the back of the throat. For English speakers, the "sounds" of א and ע are especially odd. The letter א is a mild "glottal stop," the tiny sound made by the tightening of the throat before the *oh* sound in *uh-oh*. But for all practical purposes, א has no sound at all. א was necessary, however, because originally Hebrew was written with no vowels. Writing without vowels obviously posed a problem if, for example, a word began with a vowel sound. Some letter had to be an "empty" consonant to show that there was a vowel there, and א had that role. The ע is a strong "glottal stop," and it has a much stronger guttural sound. It is important to try to pronounce the letters distinctly. Today, people frequently treat א and ע as redundant (both having no sound) and also treat ה and ח as redundant (both having an H sound). Biblical Hebrew does not confuse these letters.

Table 1.5. The Gutturals

א	Almost no sound; a weak glottal stop. The tiny sound made by the tightening of the throat before the *oh* sound in *uh-oh*.
ע	A strong glottal stop. Exaggerate the sound made by the tightening of the throat before the *oh* sound in *uh-oh*, and add a slight but hard *G* sound. Somewhat similar to the final guttural sound of the English *-ING* ending.
ה	*H* as in *hot*.
ח	Like *H* but with friction at the back of throat; like the *CH* in Scottish *loch*.

c. The Sibilants

These are the S-type letters. They are created by passing air between the teeth. These letters differ from one another in several respects as described in the chart below.

(1) **Voiced** refers to a consonant that is pronounced while using the voice (e.g., the sound of *Z*); **unvoiced** refers to a consonant pronounced without using the voice (e.g., the sound of *S*).

(2) To English speakers, ס and שׂ appear to be redundant letters, but probably most speakers of biblical Hebrew could distinguish the two.

Table 1.6. The Sibilants

ז	*Z* as in *Zion*; voiced
ס	*S* as in *sack*; a sharp *S* made with teeth; unvoiced
צ	*TS* as in *hats*; unvoiced but emphatic

שׂ	*S* as in *seen*; a softer *S* than the Samek; unvoiced and slightly aspirated
שׁ	*SH* as in *sheen*; unvoiced and strongly aspirated

d. Velar (Emphatic) T and K

The letter ט is a *T* sound that may have been pronounced more on the palate than was the case with its counterpart ת (the ת seems to have been pronounced with the tongue on the back of the teeth). The letter ק is a *K* that was probably pronounced further back in the throat, more in the back of the palate, than כ. These two consonants are pronounced more emphatically and are called **velars**. The צ is also a velar.

Table 1.7. ט and ק

ט	a *T* made more on the palate, as in *tot*; may have had a glottal sound
ק	a *K* sound at the back of the throat; no English analogy

e. The Nasals

A **nasal** is a sound made by vibrating the vocal chords while obstructing the flow of air through the mouth with the lips or tongue with the result that air and its sound comes out the nose instead of the mouth. Hebrew has two nasals: מ (which obstructs airflow with the lips) and נ (which obstructs airflow with the tongue on the palate). These are like their English counterparts *M* and *N*.

Table 1.8. The Nasals

מ	*M* as in *miss*
נ	*N* as in *now*

f. The Linguals

A **lingual** is a consonant sound made by causing the airstream the flow over the sides of the tongue, as in the English *L* and *R*.

Table 1.9. The Liquids

ל	*L* as in *look*
ר	*R* as in *read*

g. The Glides (Semivowels)

A **semivowel** or **glide** is a consonant with a vowel-like sound; sometimes they are actually used as vowels. For example, English *Y* is a consonant in *yoke* but a vowel in *easy*. Hebrew has two semivowels: ו and י.

ו	*W* as in *wish* (modern pronunciation: like *V* in *very*)

יֹ	Y as in yes

h. Phonetic Classification of the Letters

The above categorization of the letters is represented in the following table. Unvoiced consonants are italicized; voiced consonants are bold. The velars ק and ט are also plosive like כ, not fricative like כ. Notice also that the begadkephat letters are in three classes: labials (made with the lips), palatals (made on the palate), and dentals (made with the front teeth). As you can see, the begadkephat letters are subdivided by whether they are voiced or unvoiced and whether they are fricative or plosive.

Table 1.10. Letters Phonetically Classified

Class	Fricative	Plosive	Velars	Nasals	Glides	Other
Labials	ב פ	ב פ		מ	ו	
Palatals	ג כ	ג כ	ק		י	
Dentals	ד ת	ד ת	ט	נ		
Gutturals						א ה ח ע
Sibilants			צ			ז ס שׂ שׁ
Linguals						ל ר

i. Summary of the Pronunciation of the Hebrew Consonants

The following chart summarizes the phonetic values of the Hebrew alphabet.

Table 1.11. Pronunciation of the Hebrew Consonants

א almost silent	ח CH of loch	פ P of paste
ב B of boy	ט T of tot	פ F of fix
ב V of very	י Y of yes	צ TS of hats
ג G of good	כ K of kite	ק K at back of throat
ג GH of dog house	כ C of cool	ר R of read
ד D of dot	ל L of look	שׂ S of seen
ד TH of the	מ M of miss	שׁ SH of sheen
ה H of hot	נ N of now	ת T of tin
ו W or V	ס S of sack	ת TH of thin
ז Z of zoo	ע strong glottal stop	

5. *Writing Hebrew Letters*

You obviously will want to learn to write Hebrew letters. Everyone develops his or her particular style for writing Hebrew letters, but use the following guidelines.

(1) Remember that Hebrew is written from right-to-left. Thus, the general motion of your hand should be right-to-left rather than left-to-right.

(2) Be sure that your letters are standard and recognizable to all people who know Hebrew. Do not develop an eccentric style.

(3) Make your writing clear by including the small marks that distinguish similar letters. Your בּ should not look like כּ. Final Nun (ן) should drop below the rule line; Waw (ו) should not.

(4) On the other hand, you do not need to imitate the very formal style of the Hebrew letters found in a Hebrew Bible. Simple lines, as found in the letters below, suffice. The stroke order found in the letters below will help you write clear letters that move from right to left.

B. **The Concept of Vowel Points**

1. *Background*

Biblical Hebrew was originally written without vowels; the tradition of how to vocalize correctly the Hebrew text was passed down orally from one generation to the next. Eventu-

ally, the scribes realized that some way of writing down the vowels had to be devised if the correct pronunciation was not to be lost or corrupted. They were not willing, however, to deface the sacred text by inserting large vowels (like the Roman letters A, E, or U) that would require moving aside the received letters. Instead, they created a system of dots and lines to represent vowels. They were able to insert these minute vowels around the Hebrew letters of the text without having to move the letters. The vowels signs are called **vowel points**. By about the seventh century A.D., the current system of vowel pointing was made the standard. The scribes who devised this system are commonly called the Masoretes, and thus the standard text they produced is called the **Masoretic Text** (MT).

2. Simple Vowels and Their Classes

(1) Hebrew vowel points are written below the consonants, or to the left of the consonants, or raised and to the left of the consonants, as in the examples below.

   (a) The vowel Hireq is a small dot written under a consonant. It is pronounced like the English *I* in *hit*. Thus, מִ is *MI* as in *miss*.

   (b) The vowel Holem is a small, raised dot slightly to the left of its consonant. It is pronounced like the *O* in *hole*. מֹ would be pronounced *MO*.

(2) A vowel is pronounced *after* the consonant that it is with. Thus, מִ is *MI* and not *IM*.

(3) Hebrew vowels may be described in three categories: simple vowels, pointed vowel letters, and reduced vowels. All make use of vowel points (reduced vowels are described below; pointed vowel letters are described in chapter 2).

(4) Hebrew has long and short vowels, but the quantity of a vowel in a given word can change depending on what happens to that word. If a word is altered (for example, by the addition of a suffix), a long vowel may be replaced by a short vowel, or a short vowel by a long one. A vowel that can undergo this kind of change can be called **changeable**. We learn how vowels change in chapter 4.

(5) The Hebrew vowels are divided into three classes called a-class, i-class, and u-class. Generally, vowels change within their classes (this is not an invariable rule). A long a-class vowel (Qamets) might become a short a-class vowel (Pathach) but will not normally become a short u-class vowel (e.g., Qibbuts).

Table 1.12. The Simple Vowel Points

Class	Symbol		Name	Quantity	Sound
A	�ַ	בַ	Pathach	short	*A* of *cat*
A	ָ	בָ	Qamets	long	*A* of *father*
I	ִ	בִ	Hireq	short	*I* of *hit*
I	ֶ	בֶ	Seghol	short	*E* of *set*
I	ֵ	בֵ	Tsere	long	*E* of *hey*

U	ֻ	בֻ	Qibbuts	short	*U* of *cut*
U	ׁ	בֹ	Holem	long	*O* of *whole*
U	ׇ	בׇ	Qamets Hatuph	short	*O* of *tote*

Under the column "Symbol," you can see both how the vowel looks when written with a consonant (in this case, בּ) and how it looks by itself. There are three ambiguities in the vowels listed above.

(1) A single vowel symbol ◌ָ is used for both the Qamets and Qamets Hatuph. In order to distinguish the two, you must know how to tell a short syllable from a long syllable. This is discussed in chapter 3.

(2) The vowel Holem written with the letter Shin or Sin is confusing. A Shin with Holem looks like this: שֹׁ. A Sin with Holem looks like this: שֹׂ. Sometimes a single dot does double duty, so that Sin with Holem looks like this: שֹ.

(3) Holem is in some words "unchangeable." When unchangeable, it stays the same and will not be transformed into a different vowel. For example, in שֹׁפֵט ("judge") it is unchangeably long. In different words, however, Holem will change. The reason for this is described in the next lesson.

3. The Reduced Vowels

Sometimes a simple long or short vowel will become an extremely short or "reduced" vowel. Hebrew has four such "reduced" vowels. These are analogous to the very short sound for the *E* many people use when pronouncing "because" (as bᵉcause).

Table 1.13. The Reduced Vowels

Name	Symbol		Sound	Transliteration
Shewa	ְ	בְ	*E* of *because*	ĕ
Hateph Pathach	ֲ	אֲ	*A* of *aside*	ă
Hateph Seghol	ֱ	אֱ	*E* of *mechanic*	ĕ
Hateph Qamets	ֳ	אֳ	first *O* in *tomato*	ŏ

The three vowels with the name Hateph are also called **composite Shewas**. They are almost always found with gutturals and not with the other letters.

C. **Other Introductory Matters**

1. Basic Transliteration

From time to time, you will see Hebrew words written in transliteration, that is, written with Roman characters. The following chart gives you standard transliterations for the consonants and vowels you have learned. By practicing transliterating Hebrew words in the early

stage of your learning, you can better associate the Hebrew letters with their phonetic values. At the same time, you should never rely on transliteration for reading and pronunciation. Learn to read and pronounce Hebrew letters. Using the following table, the word אָדָם would be transliterated as *ʾāḏām*, and שַׂר would be transliterated as *śar*.
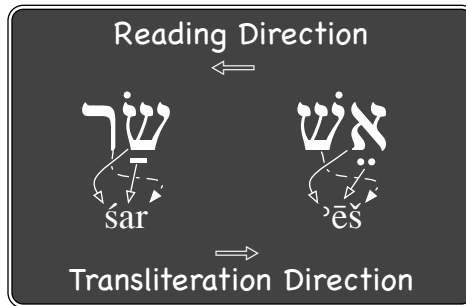
Table 1.14. Transliterations for Consonants and Basic Vowels

א	ʾ	ו	*w*	מ	*m*	ר	*r*	ַ	*a*
ב	*b*	ז	*z*	נ	*n*	שׂ	*ś*	ָ	*ā*
ב	*b̲*	ח	*ḥ*	ס	*s*	שׁ	*š*	ִ	*i*
ג	*g*	ט	*ṭ*	ע	*ʿ*	ת	*t*	ֶ	*e*
ג	*g̲*	י	*y*	פ	*p*	ת	*t̲*	ֵ	*ē*
ד	*d*	כ	*k*	פ	*p̲*			ֻ	*u*
ד	*d̲*	כ	*k̲*	צ	*ṣ*			ֹ	*ō*
ה	*h*	ל	*l*	ק	*q*			ָ	*o*

2. Reading a Hebrew Word

Read the word from right to left and pronounce the consonant before you pronounce a vowel that is below or to the left of that consonant.

Blackboard 1.2. Pronouncing Hebrew with Vowel Points

3. Basic Accentuation

In Hebrew, words are normally accented on the last syllable of the word (the ultima). Not infrequently, however, the accent is on the second to last syllable (the penult). In this textbook, words accented on the ultima have no special mark, but words accented on the penult are marked as follows: מֶ֫לֶךְ.

4. Gender in Nouns

Every noun in Hebrew is masculine or feminine. There is no neuter gender. We will learn more about gender in nouns in chapter 5. Every noun in the vocabulary is marked with Ⓜ

for masculine nouns and ☐F☐ for feminine nouns. If a noun has both ☐M☐ and ☐F☐ with it, that means that it could be either gender.

5. *Nouns in Construct*

The normal or **lexical** form of a noun is called the **absolute** form in Hebrew. For example, דָּבָר is an absolute noun and means "word" or "a word." There is also a form of the noun called the **construct**. Think of the construct form as always having the English "of" after it. The construct form of דָּבָר is דְּבַר, and it means "word of." Notice in דְּבַר the Shewa under the ד and the Pathach under the בּ.

A construct noun followed by an absolute noun forms a **construct chain**. For example, דְּבַר מֶלֶךְ means "a word of a king" (that is, "a king's word"). *The construct noun is always in front of the absolute noun*.

Blackboard 1.3. The Basic Construct Chain
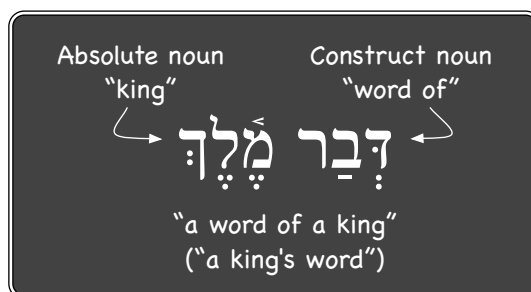
(1) In some cases, the absolute noun and the construct look exactly the same; in other cases, they are different. You will learn about this in chapter 12.

(2) For now, focus on memorizing the absolute form of each noun and on familiarizing yourself with the construct forms. Exercises in the workbook will help you get used to seeing construct forms.

(3) In the vocabulary lists, you will see the construct singular form of each noun given between two vertical lines like |דְּבַר|.

Below is an example of how a noun is listed in the vocabulary.

D. **Vocabulary**

Learn the following vocabulary words and use these words to practice the pronunciation of Hebrew words with simple vowels. Distinguish the sounds of begadkephat letters with Daghesh Lene from those without it. In all of the words given in the list below, ◌ָ is Qamets and not Qamets Hatuph.

In this textbook, there are four categories of vocabulary.

(1) *Core Vocabulary*: These are the essential words for memorization. Each of these words appears frequently in the Hebrew Bible, and some appear hundreds of times.

(2) *Inflected Vocabulary*: In the early chapters, some words will be given in an inflected form (like the English *saw* from the verb *see*). These words will enable you to begin reading simple sentences and will serve as reference points as you progress in the grammar.

(3) *Proper Names*: The names of people and places; these are easy to recognize.

(4) *Reading Vocabulary*: These are words that you need in order to read a specific biblical passage in the lesson. These words either are inflected in a pattern that you have not yet studied or are relatively uncommon words and therefore not in the core vocabulary.

1. Core Vocabulary

אָדָם	human, Adam Ⓜ |אָדָם|
אֶ֫רֶץ	earth, land Ⓕ |אֶרֶץ|
אֵשׁ	fire Ⓕ |אֵשׁ|
דָּבָר	word, thing Ⓜ |דְּבַר|
דַּ֫עַת	knowledge Ⓕ |דַּעַת|
זָקֵן	old (adjective); elder, old man (noun) Ⓜ |זְקַן|
חָצֵר	village, courtyard ⒻⓂ |חֲצַר|
מֶ֫לֶךְ	king Ⓜ |מֶלֶךְ|
עֶ֫בֶד	servant Ⓜ |עֶבֶד|
צֹאן	flock (of sheep or goats) (s or p collective) Ⓕ |צֹאן|
שַׂר	ruler, leader, prince Ⓜ |שַׂר|
שֹׁפֵט	judge, leader Ⓜ |שֹׁפֵט|