

Chapter 2

The Hebrew Vowels

2.1 Hebrew Vowels. You might be surprised to learn that originally the Hebrew language had no *written* system of vowels. This does not mean, however, that Hebrew vowels did not exist. While they did not exist in written form, they had always been present in the *spoken* form of the language. If we were to take the vowels out of the English writing system, these vowels would still be present in the spoken form. Let us use the English translation of Deut 6:5 as an example: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart.” Without the vowels, we are left with a series of consonants, much like the ancient written form of Hebrew: Lv th Lrd yr Gd wth ll yr hrt. In order to read this sentence out loud, you would need to rely on your knowledge of English and supply the necessary vowels. In the same way, when Joshua read the entire law of Moses to the Israelites (Josh 8), he had before him a consonantal text with no vowels. This required Joshua to supply from memory the necessary vowels when reading. Fortunately for us, this is not the case today. In the second half of the first millennium A.D., a group of dedicated scribes called *Masoretes* became concerned with preserving the oral tradition or spoken form of Hebrew. They developed an elaborate system of vowel notation called *pointing*. This pointing system was designed to preserve the spoken system of vowels in the written text. Because the masoretic scribes considered the biblical text to be sacred, their vowel symbols were designed in such a way as never to alter the original consonantal text. To do this, the Masoretes developed vowel symbols that were placed under, inside (to the left) or above the consonantal characters. Let us look once again at Deut 6:5 but this time in Hebrew. You will notice that the consonants are exactly the same in both examples. In the second example, however, the masoretic vowel pointing system has been added. Notice that the majority of symbols exist below the consonants with occasional symbols inside (to the left) or over the consonants.

ואהבת את יהוה אלהיך בכל לבבך (without vowels)

וְאֶהְבֶּתְּ אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לִבְבְּךָ (with vowels)

2.2 Hebrew Vowel Charts. In the following charts, the Hebrew vowels are presented in four major vowel classes: short, changeable long, unchangeable long and reduced. Within these vowel classes, there are five vowel types (a, e, i, o, u), though not all are attested in each of the vowel classes. Each vowel will appear with the consonant בּ in order to show the position of the vowel with respect to its consonant. It is important to note that the vowel is pronounced after the consonant with which it is associated. For example, בּא is pronounced *ba* and not *ab* and בּו is pronounced *bo* and not *ob*. Remember that while Hebrew is written from right to left, English transliteration is written from left to right.

Study each of the following vowel charts with care. For each vowel, you should be able to identify its vowel class, vowel name and transliteration. The transliteration system is fairly simple for vowels. All a-type vowels are transliterated with some form of the letter a. This is the same for each subsequent class of vowels. In transliteration, changeable long vowels have a horizontal line (macron) over the letter: *ā, ē, ō*. Unchangeable long vowels have a small upside down “v” (circumflex) over the letter: *â, ê, î, ô, û*. Short vowels are unaltered: *a, e, i, o, u*. Reduced vowels exhibit what looks like a small “u” placed above the letter: *ă, ě, ǒ*. For now, do not be concerned about the physical similarity between the Qamets (בּא, changeable long *ā*) and the Qamets Hatuf (בּא, short *o*). You will learn how to distinguish between them in the next chapter.

Finally, you should begin the process of becoming familiar with the pronunciation value of each vowel. Learning the sound for each vowel will take some time. Be patient.

2.3 Hebrew Vowel Chart 1: Short Vowels.

| | <i>Symbol</i> | <i>Vowel Name</i> | <i>Pronunciation</i> | <i>Transliteration</i> |
|---------------|---------------|-------------------|------------------------------|------------------------|
| <i>a-type</i> | ַ | Pathach | <i>a</i> as in <i>bat</i> | <i>a</i> |
| <i>e-type</i> | ֶ | Seghol | <i>e</i> as in <i>better</i> | <i>e</i> |
| <i>i-type</i> | ִ | Hireq | <i>i</i> as in <i>bitter</i> | <i>i</i> |
| <i>o-type</i> | ֹ | Qamets Hatuf | <i>o</i> as in <i>bottle</i> | <i>o</i> |
| <i>u-type</i> | ֻ | Qibbuts | <i>u</i> as in <i>ruler</i> | <i>u</i> |

2.4 Hebrew Vowel Chart 2: Changeable Long Vowels. In our system of vowel classification (2.15), i-type and u-type vowels are not attested in the changeable long category.

| | <i>Symbol</i> | <i>Vowel Name</i> | <i>Pronunciation</i> | <i>Transliteration</i> |
|---------------|---------------|-------------------|------------------------------|------------------------|
| <i>a-type</i> | ָ | Qamets | <i>a</i> as in <i>father</i> | <i>ā</i> |
| <i>e-type</i> | ֵ | Tsere | <i>e</i> as in <i>they</i> | <i>ē</i> |
| <i>o-type</i> | ֹ | Holem | <i>o</i> as in <i>role</i> | <i>ō</i> |

2.5 Hebrew Vowel Chart 3: Unchangeable Long Vowels.

| | <i>Symbol</i> | <i>Vowel Name</i> | <i>Pronunciation</i> | <i>Transliteration</i> |
|---------------|---------------|-------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------|
| <i>a-type</i> | ֶּה | Qamets He | <i>a</i> as in <i>father</i> | <i>â</i> |
| <i>e-type</i> | ֵי | Tsere Yod | <i>e</i> as in <i>they</i> | <i>ê</i> |
| | ֶי | Seghol Yod | <i>e</i> as in <i>better</i> | <i>ê</i> |
| <i>i-type</i> | ִי | Hireq Yod | <i>i</i> as in <i>machine</i> | <i>î</i> |
| <i>o-type</i> | ֹו | Holem Waw | <i>o</i> as in <i>role</i> | <i>ô</i> |
| <i>u-type</i> | ֻו | Shureq | <i>u</i> as in <i>ruler</i> | <i>û</i> |

2.6 Hebrew Vowel Chart 4: Reduced (Hateph) Vowels. In this class, i-type and u-type vowels are not attested.

| | Symbol | Vowel Name | Pronunciation | Transliteration |
|--------|--------|----------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| a-type | ְּ | Hateph Pathach | a as in <i>amuse</i> | ă |
| e-type | ֶֶ | Hateph Seghol | a as in <i>amuse</i> | ě |
| o-type | ֹֹ | Hateph Qamets | a as in <i>amuse</i> | ō |

2.7 Shewa. You will notice in vowel chart 4 that each reduced vowel (ְּ, ׇ, ׈) exhibits a pair of vertical dots on the right side of the vowel symbol. These vertical dots also occur without an accompanying vowel (ֿ). This vowel sign is called *Shewa*. The Shewa is not listed in the above vowel charts because it is not like any other vowel. It does not belong to any phonetic class: a, e, i, o, u. There are two types of Shewa in Hebrew: *Silent Shewa* and *Vocal Shewa*. The Silent Shewa has a zero value and is never pronounced and never transliterated. The Vocal Shewa maintains a *hurried* pronunciation and sounds like the *a* in *amuse*. It is transliterated either as an upside-down *e* (ֿ, *bə*) or as a superscript *e* (ֿ, *b^e*). In the next chapter, you will learn how to distinguish between Silent and Vocal Shewa.

2.8 Holem over the שׁ and שׂ. In some instances, when the vowel symbol Holem (וּ) is used with שׁ (Sin) or שׂ (Shin), the two dots combine into one dot over the consonant. For example, we would expect to see something like יִשְׁבִּים (yōšē^e bîm) with two distinct dots. But the two dots will sometimes combine into a single dot (יִשְׁבִּים) which will serve two purposes. It distinguishes between שׁ (š) and שׂ (ś) and it also serves as the changeable long *ō* vowel (Holem). You will learn in the next chapter that *all initial consonants must be followed by a vowel*. Given this rule, the dot over the שׁ, in the above example, must also function as the Holem vowel.

2.9 Daghes Forte. There is another pointing symbol to be discussed at this point, the *Daghes Forte*. You know his brother, the *Daghes Lene*. In chapter 1, you learned that six Hebrew consonants have two different pronunciations - the *begadkephat* letters. In order to distinguish between the two pronunciations, a small dot (*Daghes Lene*) was inserted into

the consonant (בּ for the hard *b* and ב for the soft *v*). The Daghesh Forte looks exactly like the Daghesh Lene. The effect of the Daghesh Forte, however, is to *double the consonant in which it occurs*. For example, the Hebrew word הַשָּׁמַיִם (the heavens) has a Daghesh Forte located in the Shin (שׁ). When pronouncing or transliterating this word, therefore, it should be rendered with two Shins (שׁשׁ), *haššāmayim*. The Daghesh Forte can occur in any consonant except the gutturals (א, ע, ה, ח) and ך. The gutturals and ך, therefore, will never take a Daghesh Lene or Forte. Also like the Daghesh Lene, a Daghesh Forte can occur in a *begadkephat* consonant. It is important to note that when a Daghesh Forte occurs in a *begadkephat* consonant, it doubles the hard pronunciation and not the soft. In the next chapter, you will learn how to tell the difference between the Daghesh Lene and the Daghesh Forte when they appear in *begadkephat* letters.

2.10 Vowel Letters. We must conclude our study of the Hebrew vowels by discussing what are called *vowel letters*. The ancient Hebrew scribe was well aware of the difficulties associated with reading texts without vowels. To this end, as early as the tenth century B.C., the innovative scribes would use, on occasion, certain Hebrew consonants to indicate different vowel sounds. The consonants א and ה were generally used to indicate the *a* vowels (but others also). The י was used to indicate the *i* and *e* vowels and the ו was used to indicate *u* and *o* vowels. A good example of this phenomenon is the variable spelling of David's name. Originally it was spelled דָּוִד (*dwd*). But later, it was spelled דָּוִיָּד (*dwyd*). In the second example, you will notice the insertion of י to indicate the *i* vowel in the second half of the name. The י is not functioning as a consonant but as a vowel. In other words, certain Hebrew letters can be either consonantal or vocalic. By far, the י and ו are the most frequently used vowel letters. The unchangeable long vowels can also be called vowel letters and the most common vowel letters are Hireq Yod (יְ), Holem Waw (וֹ) and Shureq (וּ). Finally, note that ה is used as a vowel letter only at the end of a word as in תּוֹרָה (law) and יִבְנֶה (he will build).

2.11 Defective Writing. You have just learned that certain vowels (unchangeable long vowels) use a consonant in the formation of their symbol and that these are called vowel letters. Sometimes, a vowel letter is written without the consonant ך or ך. This phenomenon, known as *defective writing*, occurs with measured frequency. It should also be noted that when these vowels are written with the consonants it is called *full writing*. The full or defective spelling of a word makes no difference in the meaning of a word. Study the following chart and memorize how each of these vowel letters will appear when written defectively.

| | Full Writing | | Defective Writing | |
|---------|--------------|---|-------------------|--------------------|
| Example | בו | > | ב | Holem Waw to Holem |
| | שׁוֹפָר | > | שָׁפָר | ram's horn |
| Example | בו | > | בִּי | Shureq to Qibbuts |
| | מִדּוּעַ | > | מִדְּעַ | why? |
| Example | בִּי | > | בִּי | Hireq Yod to Hireq |
| | דָּוִד | > | דָּוִד | David |

There is no certain way to always predict when a vowel will be written defectively. Familiarity with vocabulary and frequent exposure to this phenomenon will help you in the identification of defectively spelled words. Study a few more examples.

| | | | |
|-----------|---|-----------|---------------|
| תּוֹרוֹת | > | תּוֹרַת | laws |
| מוֹעֵד | > | מוֹעֵד | meeting place |
| עֲמוּד | > | עֲמֹד | pillar |
| שְׁבוּעָה | > | שְׁבִיעָה | oath |

2.12 Summary. After working through this chapter, you should be able to identify the Hebrew vowel symbols by name. You should also be able to write, pronounce and transliterate the vowels (including the Shewa, בִּי). In other words, make sure that you master the information in the summary below before moving on to the exercises.

1. Summary Hebrew Vowel Chart

| | <i>a</i> | <i>e</i> | <i>i</i> | <i>o</i> | <i>u</i> |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|----------------------|--------------------------|----------------|
| <i>Short</i> | בִּ Pathach | בֶּ Seghol | בִּי Hireq | בֹּ Qamets Hatuf | בֻּ Qibbutz |
| <i>Changeable Long</i> | בָּ Qamets | בֵּ Tsere | | בּוֹ Holem | |
| <i>Unchangeable Long</i> | בָּה Qamets He | בֵּי / בִּי Tsere Yod / Seghol Yod | בִּי Hireq Yod | בּוֹ Holem Waw | בּוּ Shureq |
| <i>Reduced</i> | בְּ Hateph Pathach | בֶּ Hateph Seghol | | בּוֹ Hateph Qamets | |

- The Daghesht Forte (בּ) doubles the consonant in which it appears. It can occur in any consonant except the gutturals and ג.
- The unchangeable long vowels (2.5) may also be called vowel letters because of the presence of ם or ן in the formation of the vowel symbol.
- Defective writing is that phenomenon in which a vowel letter is written without the consonant ם or ן. There are three patterns of defective writing to be learned.

בּוֹ > בּוֹ Holem Waw to Holem

בּוּ > בּוּ Shureq to Qibbutz

בִּי > בִּי Hireq Yod to Hireq

2.13 Jots and Tittles. “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled” (Matt 5:17-18 AV).

A “jot” refers to the Yod (י) in Hebrew, which is the smallest letter in the alphabet. The “tittle,” literally “horn,” probably refers to those smallest of marks that distinguish similar letters from each other, such as Dalet (ד) which has a tittle, and Resh (ר) which does not.

Gordon P. Hugenberger

Senior Pastor, Park Street Church

Boston, Massachusetts

2.14 The Spelling of David’s Name. Given that David lived before the invention of internal vowel letters (*matres lectionis*) in Hebrew, it is certain that he and his contemporaries would have spelled his name as דוד rather than דוד. Consistent with this assumption, the spelling דוד appears in a recently discovered ninth century B.C. Aramaic inscription from Tel Dan. While there are difficulties in the interpretation of the inscription, this word offers the earliest extra-biblical reference to David.

Reflecting this same early spelling convention, the “shorter” (defective) spelling דוד appears 669 out of 672 times in Samuel and Kings. On the other hand, the “full” (*plene*) spelling, דוד, appears in every one of the 272 occurrences of this name in the post-Exilic books of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah. Ezekiel occupies a mid-point in this transition: “David” appears twice as דוד (37:24-25) and twice as דוד (34:23-24).

In view of this development, it is remarkable that the book of Isaiah consistently spells “David” using the earlier “defective” spelling דוד (Isa 7:2, 13; 16:5; 22:9, 22; 29:1; 37:35; 38:5; 55:3). This practice is expected for Isaiah 1-39, chapters which are generally attributed to the eighth century B.C. prophet Isaiah. The example in chapter 55, however, is tantalizing, even if it is not decisive, because many modern scholars date Isaiah 40-55 to the late Exilic or post-Exilic period.

Gordon P. Hugenberger

Senior Pastor, Park Street Church

Boston, Massachusetts

2.15 Advanced Information: Alternative Vowel Classification. Originally, there were only three vowel classes in Hebrew: a-class, i-class and u-class. The other vowel classes (e-class and o-class) developed later. The e-class developed from the original i-class and the o-class developed from the original u-class. For this reason, most grammarians prefer to divide Hebrew vowels into three (a, i, u) rather than five (a, e, i, o, u) classes. By doing this, e-class vowels are considered to be a subset of the i-class and o-class vowels are considered to be a subset of the u-class. Other grammarians, however, divide Hebrew vowels into the five classes with which most students are familiar from their study of English. In this grammar, we have adopted the five-class system. For your reference, the following chart shows both categorization systems together. Note that this information is not presented for memorization but so that you might be familiar with other grammar presentations.

| | <i>a-class</i> | <i>i-class</i> | | <i>u-class</i> | |
|------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------|----------------|----------|
| | <i>a</i> | <i>e</i> | <i>i</i> | <i>o</i> | <i>u</i> |
| <i>Short</i> | כֵּי | כֵּי | כִּי | כֹּי | כֻּי |
| <i>Changeable Long</i> | כֵּי | כֵּי | | כֹּי | |
| <i>Unchangeable Long</i> | כֵּה | כֵּי / כִּי | כִּי | כֹּו | כֻּו |
| <i>Reduced</i> | כֵּי | כֵּי | | כֹּי | |