



Hebrew for the Rest of Us
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Table of Contents

Preface	viii
Abbreviations	xiv
Week 1: “Getting to Know You”: Consonants and the History of Hebrew	
1 It Doesn’t Look Like Greek to Me - The Hebrew Alphabet	1
2 Whose Language is Dead? - The History of Hebrew	12
Week 2: “Getting to Know All About You”: Vowels and How We Got the OT	
3 Get the Point? - The Hebrew Vowels	17
4 Canon, Text, and Versions	32
Week 3: Roots, Clauses, and Function Words	
5 Getting to the Root of the Matter - Hebrew Word Roots	49
6 “Yes, Virginia, There Are ... Clauses”	65
7 Wow! - The Conjunction Waw and Friends	76
8 Prepositions Come Before	88
Week 4: Nominals	
9 What’s in a Name? - Overview of Nominals	99
10 Be Sure You Read This! - The Article	106
11 A Tale of Two States - Case Functions	112
12 An Apt Description - Adjectives	133
Week 5: Verbals	
13 Where the Action Is - Overview of Verbs	147
14 When the Perfect Comes - Perfect Forms	169
15 There’s Nothing Wrong with ... Imperfect Forms	181

16	Where There's a Will, There are ... Volitional Forms	191
17	To Infinitives and Beyond! - Infinitives & Participles	200

Week 6: A Method to Our Madness

18	What Do You Mean? - Hebrew Word Studies	221
19	Tools of the Trade - Books in Paper and Electronic Form	234
20	If It's Not Poetry, It's ... Hebrew Prose	247
21	It May Not Rhyme, But It's Still ... Hebrew Poetry	258

Appendices

1	Hebrew Songs	273
2	Word Study Guide	277
3	Action Figures	280

W E E K 1

“Getting to Know You” Consonants and the History of Hebrew

C H A P T E R 1

“It Doesn’t Look Like Greek to Me” The Hebrew Alphabet

Objectives

1. Be able to write the letters of the Hebrew consonants in order
2. Be able to name the letters
3. Understand the two kinds of Daghesh
4. Be able to transliterate the Hebrew letters into English letters

Introduction

If you have skimmed this book at all and found that these letters “do not look like Greek to you,” that’s a good thing! The Hebrew alphabet is quite different in appearance from the Greek and, even more, from the English alphabet. I have decided that the best thing to do is to jump right in to learning the letters and the vowels and to alternate chapters that supply background information. This will give you a little extra time to learn the shapes and sounds well.

If you have already learned the Greek alphabet from studying Mounce’s *Greek for the Rest of Us*, you will note some similarities with Hebrew, because both the Greeks and the Israelites got their alphabet from the Phoenicians. The Greeks simply converted into vowels some of the Semitic letters that represented sounds that the Greeks didn’t use and added a few extras for Greek sounds not represented

in Hebrew. We in turn get the English alphabet from the Greeks through Latin. Watch for similarities in order and in the names of the Greek letters.

The Hebrew alphabet consists of 22 (some count 23) letters with a total of 28 forms. These 22 (or 23) letters constitute the consonants alone. Originally the vowels, though pronounced, were not written. We will learn the vowels in chapter three.

This chapter consists of two parts. The first is a writing guide teaching you the letters. Its purpose is to show you the proper order of strokes to write each letter. The letters are initially placed in an order to help you distinguish those that are similar in shape. After you master writing the forms, practice writing them in alphabetical order. If you want to, you can make flash cards with the letter on one side and the name of the letter on the other (see www.teknia.com for a document).

Remember three things: (1) Hebrew is read right to left and anytime we write in Hebrew, it is in Hebrew order; when we write in English it is in English order. (2) In this chapter we are discussing only the consonants. (3) *Have fun with this!* You will enjoy doodling in Hebrew and answering when your friends and family say, "What's that?"

The second part is a chart of all the forms of the Hebrew alphabet in alphabetical order. Its purpose is to provide you with the necessary information to learn the names and the order of the letters, plus a few other things, just for reference.

You may find it helpful to learn the letters in groups: the first five, then the next five, then the last twelve in three groups of four. Many people learn them in a song. Also, comparison with the order of the English alphabet will help in learning (e.g., **נ מ ל כ** \Leftrightarrow *k l m n*). The last column gives a guide to pronunciation. Since there were no audio recorders 3,000 years ago, we cannot know exactly how words were pronounced. In fact, the Bible itself indicates that there were various pronunciations at different times and places, just as words are pronounced differently in New York than in North Carolina today. So, the pronunciation guide is approximate and designed mostly to be helpful for learning.

The Names and Shapes of the Hebrew Letters

The names of the Hebrew letters are simply words that start with that sound. So, the second letter *Bet* begins with the sound *b*. As children we learn phrases like "A is for apple;" if we named our letters as the Phoenicians did, we would call the first letter *apple*. That's not really so strange, though, when you remember that we have a letter named "double-u."

Whereas we write our English letters sitting on the line, Hebrew letters sort of hang from the upper line. To learn the shapes, Hebrew letters may be categorized according to length and width. One letter does not reach the lower line; most do reach the lower line; a few extend below the bottom line; one extends above the top line. We treat narrow letters first, then wide ones, moving from simple to more complex strokes.

Directions

1. *Trace* the printed strokes starting at the top.
2. *Copy* the letters in the remaining space.
3. *Repeat* the name of the letter aloud each time you write it (a rhyming English word is in italics below the name of each letter to indicate proper vowel sounds).

Narrow Letters

ז ז ם
Zayin
buy in

ג ג ן
Gimel
dimple

Wide Letters

כ
Kaph
cough

פ פ ך
Pe
pay

ף ף ם
Final Pe
pay

ס
Samek
saw deck

ק ק ך
Qof
laof

Resh
ray + sh

He
hay

Ḥet
khay th

Taw
cow

Beth
bay + th

Final Mem
hem

Dalet
ma + let

Final Kaf
cough

Alef
ah + ref

Ayin
eye in

Tsade
ma + day

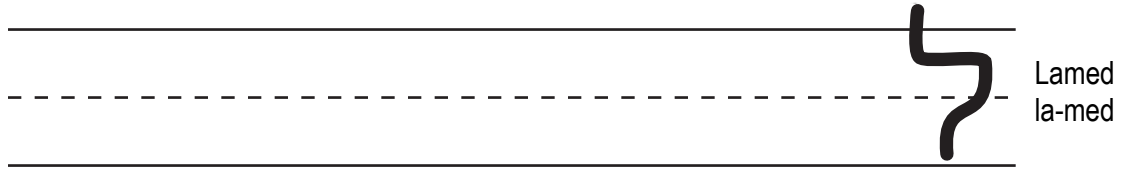
Final Tsade
ma + day

Sin
seen

Shin
Sheen

Mem
hem

Tet
date



The Hebrew Letters in Alphabetical Order, Etc.

The chart of the Hebrew alphabet is given below. In explanation, let me point out some things about each column.

1. The square forms of the letters given above are the shape used in Jesus' day. There are six letters known as *begadkephat* (**B**eth, **G**imel, **D**aleth, **K**aph, **P**e, and **T**aw) letters that may be written with or without a dot (called a *Daghesh*) inside that letter resulting in a change in sound. The *Daghesh* is present when these letters begin a syllable and serves to mark their sounds as hard (or plosive) rather than soft.
2. There are five letters which, when found at the end of a word, have a form different than when they are located elsewhere in the word. These are known as final forms.
3. Many works use transliteration instead of the Hebrew letters. So, you will need to be able to convert Hebrew letters into transliterated symbols and vice versa. Unfortunately, there are a number of different transliteration systems. The one given here is that used by Gary D. Pratico and Miles V. Van Pelt, *Basics of Biblical Hebrew*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).
4. The sounds of the Hebrew letters are approximated by similar sounds indicated by the sounds of the **bold** letters in the English words listed in the last column. Again, we don't know exactly how they were pronounced but scholars can come up with a fair approximation by comparison of manuscript spellings, by comparison of words in cognate languages, and by seeing how other ancient languages like Greek transliterated Hebrew words.
5. Finally, the Hebrew letters were also used for numbers (the Greeks followed them with a similar system).

Name	Square Forms	Final Forms	Transliteration	Modern Sound	Numeric Vaule
Alef	א		ʾ	(silent)	1
Bet	ב		<i>b</i>	boy	2
	בּ		<i>b̄</i>	very	
Gimel	ג		<i>g</i>	girl	3
	גּ		<i>ḡ</i>	girl	
Dalet	ד		<i>d</i>	dog	4
	דּ		<i>d̄</i>	the	
He	ה		<i>h</i>	help	5
Waw	ו		<i>w</i>	way	6
Zayin	ז		<i>z</i>	zero	7
Ḥet	ח		<i>ḥ</i>	chemistry	8
Tet	ט		<i>t</i>	tin	9
Yod	י		<i>y</i>	yell	10
Kaf	כ	ך	<i>k</i>	kangaroo	20
	כּ		<i>k̄</i>	chemistry	
Lamed	ל		<i>l</i>	loud	30
Mem	מ	ם	<i>m</i>	marry	40
Nun	נ	ן	<i>n</i>	noun	50
Samek	ס		<i>s</i>	see	60
Ayin	ע		ʿ	(silent)	70
Pe	פ	ף	<i>p</i>	paint	80
	פּ		<i>p̄</i>	photograph	
Tsade	צ	ץ	<i>ṣ</i>	hits	90
Qof	ק		<i>q</i>	kangaroo	100
Resh	ר		<i>r</i>	red	200
Sin	ש		<i>ś</i>	see	300
Shin	שׁ		<i>š</i>	shed	300
Taw	ת		<i>t</i>	tin	400
	תּ		<i>t̄</i>	thin	

The Other Kind of Daghes

As I explained above, the **Daghes** serves to indicate a hard (or plosive) sound in the *begadkephat* letters and occurs only in these six letters. This particular Daghes is called the **Daghes Lene**. There is another Daghes, called the **Daghes Forte**, that indicates the doubling of a letter. So, **ב** without Daghes Forte is transliterated *b*, and **ב** with Daghes Forte is transliterated *bb*. Daghes Forte can occur in any letter (including the *begadkephat* letters) except for **א**, **ה**, **ו**, **ע**, and **ך**. These four letters are called guttural letters (because the sounds are made in the back of the throat) and cannot be doubled.

Exercises

1. On a separate sheet of paper, practice writing the letters of the alphabet in alphabetical order. (a) Write each letter five times, repeating the name of the letter each time you write it; begin with Alef, then Beth without Daghes and Beth with Daghes, etc., not forgetting the five final forms. (b) You might sing the "Hebrew Alef Beth" song in the appendix. Then (c) write each letter once in alphabetical order, again naming the letter as you write. Complete the alphabet five times.
2. Below are the words from Isa 66:17. For now, treat the Daghes in all the *begadkephat* letters as Lene and all those in other letters as Forte by writing the letter twice. So, **ב** = *bb*, **ב** = *b*, and **ב** = *bb*. Below the Hebrew text, copy the Hebrew words in Hebrew. Below your copy of the Hebrew text, give a transliteration, remembering that English is transliterated left-to-right. Finally, alphabetize the words in the verse by writing the number, 1-16, above each word in the first line to indicate the order. One word is done as an example.

4

הַמִּתְקַדְּשִׁים וְהַמְטַהְרִים אֶל הַגְּנוֹת אַחַר אֶחָד בַּתּוֹךְ

אֶל

כִּי

אכלי בשר החזיר והשקץ והעכבר יחדו יספו נאם יהוה

2. Transliterate the following Hebrew words.

אל _____	אכלי _____
אחר _____	בשר _____
אחד _____	החזיר _____
במוך _____	נאם _____
הגנות _____	יהוה _____

3. Transliterate each of the following biblical names back into Hebrew letters. Can you figure out who or what they represent? You will need to supply the vowels in English.

Transliteration	Hebrew	English Name
a. <i>šlmh</i>	שלמה	Solomon
b. <i>byṭ lḥm</i>		
c. <i>rwṭ</i>		
d. <i>ʾbymlk</i>		
e. <i>dwḏ</i>		
f. <i>ʾḥrm</i>		
g. <i>ḏnyʾl</i>		
h. <i>bnymyn</i>		
i. <i>yhzqʾl</i>		

Advanced Information and Curious Facts

You may wonder how we know the order of the Hebrew alphabet. The answer comes from Hebrew poetry. There are a number of poems in the Bible that are alphabetic acrostic poems; that is, the first word of each verse begins with a successive letter of the alphabet. This is almost impossible to bring out in English. The best example is Ps 119. The reason it has 176 verses is because 176 is a multiple of 22 (by a factor of 8). Each group of eight verses begins with the same letter of the alphabet. Many English versions give the name of each letter at the beginning of each stanza.

One more interesting tidbit. Rev 13:16 says the number of the beast out of the earth is the number of a man, 666 (six hundred sixty-six). One of the ancient identifications of him was Nero. How did they come up with this? Someone realized that if you take the Latin name Nero Caesar and transliterate it into Hebrew (with an additional Hebraizing final Nun), the sum of the numeric values of the Hebrew letters is 666. Here we go:

Caesar	Neron
\aleph \aleph \aleph	\aleph \aleph \aleph \aleph
$200 + 60 + 100 +$	$50 + 6 + 200 + 50$
=666	