

06 Guides to Hebrew Verb Study

The Hebrew Alphabet

The Ancient Hebrew language is one of the oldest written languages. The earliest written language (according to modern scholars) is the Proto-Sinaitic script, which the Biblical Hebrew language directly descends from. Over time, Proto-Sinaitic became the Phoenician Script also known as "Paleo Hebrew". The Paleo Hebrew Script is the script the Torah was originally written in, and Paleo Hebrew is the ancient language the Israelites spoke in Bible Times. Here is what the Paleo Hebrew Script looked like (and the Hebrew Alphabet the ancient Hebrews would have known):

										
kaf	yod	tet	het	zayin	waw	he	dalet	gimel	beyt	'alef
k	y	t	h	z	w	h	d	g	b	·
										
taw	šin	reš	qop	šade	pe	'ayin	samek	nun	mem	lamed
t	š	r	q	š	p	·	s	n	m	l

We need to state clearly here all Hebrew scripts go from right to left, the opposite direction of our modern English language. When we are asked "Why does Hebrew go right to left?" we reply simply "That is just how the Hebrew mamas taught the Hebrew babies." All ancient languages go from right to left. Paleo Hebrew was the ONLY script the Scriptures (TaNaK) were written with until after the return from the Babylonian exile. After the Exile, the Prophet and Scribe Ezra, changed the script to the script we use today, ironically called Biblical Hebrew. In reality, this script is really the ancient Aramaic Script. Aramaic was the language of the Babylonians and Persians. The Jews in exile in Babylon and Persia had grown accustomed to this foreign language during the Exile. The Aramaic language had the same 22 letter alphabet as Paleo Hebrew. The letters had the same names, and same sounds, but looked different. (Compare the chart below with the chart above). Ezra began using the Aramaic Script (and established the Aramaic Script as the ONLY Script for Biblical manuscripts) to make it easy for the Israelite Exiles to re-learn their Scriptures and their ancient faith. The Script Ezra used (Aramaic) is still the script we see today in Hebrew TaNaKs and Siddurim. (The word "Siddurim" comes from the Hebrew verb "SaDaR" which means "to put in order". A Hebrew Siddur (plural "Siddurim") is a Hebrew Prayer book for synagogue service.) Another way of stating this is to state that in our modern Hebrew TaNaKs, we see the Hebrew language in Aramaic letters. Here is the Biblical Hebrew (Aramaic) Aleph Bet (Alphabet):

ט	ח	ז	ו	ה	ד	ג	ב	א
Tet (T)	Chet (Ch)	Zayin (Z)	Vav (V/O/U)	He (H)	Dalet (D)	Ghmel (G)	Bet (B/V)	Alef (Silent)
ס	נ	נ	מ	מ	ל	ך	כ	י
Samech (S)	Nun (N)	Nun (N)	Mem (M)	Mem (M)	Lamed (L)	Khaf (Ch)	Kaf (K/Ch)	Yod (Y)
ת	ש	ר	ק	ץ	צ	ף	פ	ע
Tav (T/S)	Shin (Sh/S)	Resh (R)	Qof (Q)	Trade (Tz)	Trade (Tz)	Fe (F)	Pe (P/F)	Ayin (Silent)

The ancient Hebrew language (including Paleo Hebrew and Aramaic) did not have a written system of vowels. Only the consonants were written. Between the fifth and tenth centuries of the Common Era, Karaite Hebrew Scribes (called the Masorites) of the Ben Asher family developed a system of vowels to be added to the Biblical Hebrew texts. The Texts they codified became known as the Masoretic Text. These vowel points were added to the text in a way that the consonants were not changed. The vowels are a system of dots and dashes above, below, and in between the Hebrew consonants. The doctrine of inerrancy (that the TaNaK was written by Elohim through men, and is infallible) to a Hebrew means that the consonants are inerrant, whereas the vowels are just an aid for pronunciation. It is imperative to understand that the consonants are the only factor in determining the meaning of a Hebrew word (though the context is also important). The vowels were not compelled and added to Torahs by the Masoretic scribes until c. 980 CE. Here is a table of the Masoretic vowel pointings with the Hebrew letter Bet (pronounced like a "B"):

בְּ	בֵּי	בֶּי	בִּי	בִּי	בִּי	בִּי	בִּי	בִּי	בִּי	בִּי
bi	be	bi	ba	bo'	bo	bu	be	be'	ba'	ba'

Here is an example of a Hebrew text with vowels (Remember, Hebrew goes right to left):

וְאַהֲבַתְּ לְרֵעִי כְמוֹתִי

VaYikra (Leviticus) 19:18 b "And you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Transliteration: "ve ahav-ta le-re-a-kha Ka-mo-kha."

Hebrew Verb Syntax & Basic Hebrew

To learn and understand Hebrew well, one must learn about Hebrew verb syntax. First and foremost almost all Hebrew nouns and adjectives derive from Hebrew verbs. Secondly, all Hebrew verbs have three consonants. Thus, when determining the meaning of a noun or adjective, one needs to find the three consonant verb root, and then the meaning of the word will be clear. Let me explain by using some simple examples (Remember Hebrew is right to left):

The Hebrew word below is the verb to see (pronounced **Ra-aH** Consonants are in capital letters, the (-) represents the letter aleph)

By adding a prefix, this verb becomes the noun for a vision (i.e. Daniel's) (pronounced **MaR-eH** Consonants are in capital letters, the (-) represents the letter aleph.)

Let's now discuss verb tenses. By adding a prefix, this verb's tense changes. It becomes the verb to appear (pronounced **NiR-aH** Consonants are in capital letters, the (-) represents the letter aleph.)

By adding another prefix, this verb's tense changes. It becomes the verb to show (pronounced **HiR-aH** Consonants are in capital letters, the (-) represents the letter aleph.)

By adding another prefix, this verb's tense changes to the future tense. He will see (pronounced **YiR-aH** Consonants are in capital letters, the (-) represents the letter aleph.)

The Hebrew word below is the verb to rule (pronounced **MaLaKH** Consonants are in capital letters.)

By pronouncing this word with different vowels, it becomes the word for King (pronounced **MeLeKH** Consonants are in capital letters)

By adding a suffix, MaLaKH becomes feminine for Queen (pronounced strong > **MaL-KHaH** Consonants are in capital letters) (Notice the Final Kaf is no longer the last letter, thus it is no longer in final form)

By adding a different suffix, the verb becomes masculine plural for Kings (pronounced **MeLaKHIM** Consonants are in capital letters.)

MaL-KHoT Consonants are in capital letters.)

By adding a different suffix, it becomes the word for Kingdom. (pronounced **MaL-KHuT** (Consonants are in capital letters.)

The Hebrew word below is the verb to "to protect" or to guard or to watch. (pronounced **SHaMaR** Consonants are in capital letters.)

By adding a consonant, the verb changes to the noun Guard (or Watcher (pronounced **SHoMeyR**. Consonants are in capital letters.)

By adding a prefix and suffix, the verb changes to the noun Watch (or Guard (as in third watch of the night or a change in the king's guard. (pronounced **MiSH MeReT** Consonants are in capital letters)

The two most frequently used designations for deity in the Hebrew Scriptures are: ("Elohim" for "God"-This is a plural word, and is also translated as "gods" in the TaNaK-see Exodus 20:3 for example) and ("YHVH" or "LORD"). The singular form for the word "Elohim" is pronounced "el" and looks like this in Hebrew: