

Ross Lesson 2: Vowels and Syllables LECTURE NOTES

1. Original Hebrew writing system (and therefore transmission of Hebrew biblical texts) was *consonantal*. That is, no vowel signs were represented orthographically.

1.1 No writing system perfectly represents all the sounds and words of any language.

1.2 Purpose of orthography: to signal *sufficient* information to a language user/native speaker to know the words and forms of words intended by the communicator.

1.2.1 Can we understand English without vowels? Try it!

FRGDSLVDTHWRLDTHTHGVHSNLYBGTTNSN

That's pretty difficult? What if we add some spaces?

FR GD S LVD TH WRLD THT H GV HS NLY BGTTN SN

1.2.2 Here's how the first words of Gen 1:1 look in Hebrew without vowels, then with.

בראשית ברא אלהים

בְּרָאשִׁית בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים

2. The use of the *mater* to mark vowels.

2.1 Due to potential ambiguities in the Hebrew consonantal text, Jewish scribes, by the 6th C, BC, were inserting certain consonants symbols into the text to mark vowels. This was not always done consistently.

mater

matres

matres lectionis

2.2 Most common *mater* letters indicating vowel sound:

ה

ו

י

2.3 Exx. of ambiguities where using a *mater* would have been helpful:

בָּת (bat daughter)	עַל (‘al over, upon)
בָּת	עַל
בֵּית (bêt house of)	עַלְהָ (‘ôlâ offering)

3. Masoretic vowel pointing

3.1 During the Exile and Diaspora (6th C. BC, and beyond), Hebrew was spoken less and less, as Jews began interacting with their neighbors in Greek and Aramaic.

3.2 Starting around AD 600 and throughout the medieval period, Jewish scribes (collectively termed *Masoretes*) began to adopt a system of written vowel pointing in order to preserve the vocalization of the consonantal text that they had received.

Pointed text:

Unpointed text:

3.3 Location of vowel points: most are immediately below, and a few are to the left of or above the consonant. (See Gen 1:1 above.)

3.4 Masoretic vowel points were superimposed upon the received consonantal text with the system of *matres lectionis*, creating a situation where sometimes a syllable was doubly marked for the vowel. So, where no *mater* existed, a Masoretic vowel point was inserted. And where a *mater* already existed, the *Masoretes* still placed their vowel point, but left the *mater* where it was. They were preservers of the reading tradition and in no way sought to add a *mater* where one hadn't been placed, or to remove one already there.

בּוּ ‘between’ (without *mater* yod, rare) בִּין ‘between’ (with *mater* yod, common)

4. Hebrew Vowels with English Transliteration: A Simplified Vowel Chart

Here is a chart with the vowels of Hebrew. Since vowels cannot exist alone, I am using the consonant **ה** as an aid to pronunciation of the vowels, but note well that vowels can appear under any consonant. You need to be able to recognize the name of the vowel, its transliteration, its sound quality and length.

Sound Quality	Tone Short	Tone Long	Historically Long
A	ָ (patah; a)	֑ (qāmes; ā)	ָ֑ (qāmes-hē'; â)
E	ֵ (segôl; e)	֒ (sērê; ē)	ֵ֒ (sērê-yôd; ê)
I	ַ (hîreq; i)	ַ (none)	ַַ (hîreq-yôd; î)
O	ֶ (qāmes-hâtûp; o)	ֶ (hôlem; ô)	ֶֶ (hôlem-wâw; ô)
U	ָָ (qibbûs; u)	ָ (none)	ָָָ (šûreq; û)

Now: Memorize the simplified chart below with the vowel signs of Hebrew and their transliteration. You will need to be able to reproduce the vowels on this chart on your second quiz.

Sound Quality	Tone Short	Tone Long	Historically Long
A	ָ ba	֑ bā	ָ֑ bâ
E	ֵ be	֒ bē	ֵ֒ bê
I	ַ bi	ַ (none)	ַַ bî
O	ֶ bo	ֶ bō	ֶֶ bô
U	ָָ bu	ָ (none)	ָָָ bû

5. Hebrew Syllables

5.1. **One vowel = one syllable.** Every Hebrew syllable has at least one vowel, so, the number of vowels = the number of syllables.

דְּבָר (word) has 2 vowels, and so 2 syllables.

הָרָץ (the land) has 3 vowels, and so 3 syllables.

5.2. Every Hebrew syllable has at least one consonant (to lead the vowel). [Every vowel needs a consonant!] Thus, **every syllable has at least one consonant plus one vowel.**

Let “c” = consonant; “v” = vowel.

- Open syllable:** has only one cons. and one vowel: cv

לֹא מִצְלָה

- Closed syllable:** has a cons., a vowel, and a cons.: cvc

מַתָּ בָּשָׂ דָם, דְּבָר

The last syllable in

Notice: historically long vowels (vowel point plus the mater) constitute a complete vowel; do not confuse the mater as a consonant. Thus, מִ consists of one cons (מ) + one vowel (יִ).

5.3. **Important rule: every Hebrew consonant has a corresponding vowel or shewa (more about those in Lesson 3) unless the consonant is the final letter!** For ex.,

a. בֵּית (*bêt* = “house of”) Is the ’ here a vowel (mater) or a consonant? Well, does it have a vowel point or a shewa below/beside it? If not, then it’s a vowel, forming part of the historically long vowel called *sérê-yôd*. Vowels (maters) don’t have vowels under them!

b. יְלֵד (*yéled* = “boy, youth”) Is the ’ here a vowel (mater) or a consonant? Well, does it have a vowel point or a shewa below/beside it? Yes! Therefore, it’s a consonant, not a mater. Only consonants can take vowels under them!

5.4. **Accent:** Standard accent (or tone) in BH (Biblical Hebrew) is on the **final syllable**. Therefore, if a word’s accent is on the final syllable, for purposes of our beginning study, it’s unmarked. If the accent is on a non-final syllable, accent/tone is indicated as follows:

- BH textbooks place the symbol ֊ over the cons. that begins the stressed syllable:

רֹבֶּ בְּרָאָן

- English transliteration will place the symbol ’ over the stressed vowel:
ré / keb ’é / res

6. Rules for Hebrew Syllables¹

1 2

3 4

5

דְּבָר / בָּר אָרֶץ / אָרֶץ דְּבָרִים / בָּרִים

1. CASL: A Closed Accented Syllable prefers a Long vowel.
2. OPSRL (Old Preachers' Sermons R Long): An Open Pretonic Syllable Requires a Long vowel.
3. CUSS: A Closed Unaccented Syllable requires a Short vowel.
4. OAS(i)S: An Open Accented Syllable prefers a Short vowel.

5. OOPS ROSS Vocal Shewa: An Originally Open Propretonic Syllable Reduces the Original Short Syllable to Vocal Shewa.

Note:

דְּבָר = “word”

אָרֶץ = “land”

דְּבָרִים = “words”

7. Furtive patah (Ross 2.8)

נָח > נָחַ

רוּחַ > רֹוחַ

[The symbol > means *develops into/becomes*.]

¹ I happily acknowledge my debt to Dr. Russell Fuller (of Southern Seminary) for distilling these simple rules and teaching them in his grammar. The mnemonic devices, however, are the product of my own sick imagination.