

Lesson 2: Vowels

Vowels are indicated through certain consonants as well as signs that appear above and below the letters. Therefore, some consonants may serve either as a true consonant, or as the marker of a vowel. Usually when consonants are used to mark vowels, the vowels they are marking are “long vowels.” But, not every “long vowel” is represented with such a consonant. Consonants that mark vowels help make the pronunciation of a word more obvious to a reader and these consonants are, therefore, called *matres lectionis*, Latin for “mothers of reading.”

In order to distinguish true consonants from *matres*-consonants, it is helpful to represent the *matres*-consonants as superscript letters in transcription.

Although the vowels are labeled either “long” or “short,” this nomenclature does not describe the length of their pronunciation. The vowels in Biblical Aramaic are not distinguished by the length of time it takes to pronounce them, but rather by their distinct sounds. Thus, we will speak of a “short /a/” and this describes a sound distinct from “long /a/”, but both would have had the same quantity, i.e., length of pronunciation.




Like the Aramaic consonants, the vowels may be transliterated into the Roman alphabet. Long vowels are distinguished from short vowels by a macron, i.e., a line over them (short /a/ = a; long /a/ = ā).

Part 1:


Below are the vowel signs and the consonants that sometimes accompany them. In this list, the vowel signs are represented beneath or above the letter *beth*; their transliterated forms, and their approximate, conventional pronunciation follow.

- 𐤁[̣] a marks short /a/, conventionally pronounced like the *a* in the English word “mat.”
- 𐤁^{̣̄} ā marks long /a/, conventionally pronounced like the *a* in the English colloquial word “pa,” or “father.” Sometimes, especially at the end of a word, it is also represented as 𐤁^{̣̄} or 𐤁^{̣̄} (bā^h, bā[’]). The same symbol also marks a short /o/; see below.
- 𐤁^{̣̇} e marks the short /e/ sound, conventionally pronounced like the *e* in the English name “Ed,” or in the word “less.”

- ܐ e, ē marks a short or long /e/ sound. In either case, the vowel is conventionally pronounced like the *ay* in say, or like the *ey* in convey. Sometimes it is also represented as ܐܝ e^y, ē^y; ܐܝ̇ e[̇], ē[̇], and ܐܝܗ e^h, ē^h. Distinguishing between the short and long e is often difficult. For the beginning student, it will be helpful to transliterate this symbol with e universally and subsequently to learn those places where the symbol represents ē.
- ܝ i marks the short /i/ sound, conventionally pronounced like the *i* in “pit.”
- ܝܝ ī^y marks the long /i/ sound, conventionally pronounced like the *e* in the name “Pete,” or like the *i* in the word “latrine” and “saline”. Note the extra *yodh*. This confirms that the i-vowel is long.
- ܐܘ o marks the short /o/ vowel, conventionally pronounced like the *aw* of the word “paw.” Note that this vowel is very close to the ā. When these vowel symbols were invented and applied to the consonantal text, there might not have been a distinction between the o and ā sounds. All the same, it is conventional to distinguish two vowels in transliteration and pronunciation. Learning where ܐ represents ā and where it represents o is not easy. I have tried to disambiguate between the two vowels in transliteration.
- ܐܘܘ ō^w marks the long /o/ vowel, conventionally pronounced like the *oa* of “coat,” or like the *o* of “rote.” It is sometimes also written without the *waw* complement: ܐ = ō.
- ܐܘ u marks the short /u/ vowel, conventionally pronounced like the *oo* of “cook.”
- ܐܘܘ ū^w marks the long /u/ vowel, conventionally pronounced like the *oo* of “noon,” or the *u* of “tune.”
- ܐ̇ ̇ This is the shewa symbol and marks a murmured vowel, conventionally pronounced like the *a* in “above.” The shewa symbol also marks the absence of a vowel. Determining which of these two alternatives the shewa represents will sometimes prove difficult.

 ä
 ě
 ö

These three symbols represent ultra-short vowels, essentially like the murmured vowel in nature, but each having a slightly distinct quality. Typically these vowels appear under guttural consonants (i.e., א, ה, ע, and ח; sometimes also before or after ג and ק and sometimes before ל, נ, and ר). Unlike the shewa, which only sometimes should be pronounced, these three symbols always represent the presence of a pronounced vowel.

 ay Occasionally, one finds a vowel and consonant that are pronounced together. The most common in Biblical Aramaic is the short /a/ + *yodh*, which is pronounced like the English word “eye.” Note that in this case the shewa symbol marks the absence of a vowel.

Note that when a *kaph* appears last in a word it has this form: ק; it is conventional to write this with a shewa symbol (קְ), though this shewa symbol does not represent a vowel sound.

Also important to understanding how Aramaic words were pronounced, is understanding where the stress falls. Usually, it falls on the last syllable of a word. Occasionally it falls on the next-to-last syllable, in which case the stressed syllable is indicated by an accent mark (˘): כְּתִבּוּ.

Exercise 2a.

Now, try transliterating the following words including their vowels and translating the words not translated for you. Determining which letters are true consonants and which are *matres*-consonants will become much clearer as you begin to understand the forms of nouns and verbs.

מֶלֶךְ → melek (“king”)

כֶּסֶף (“silver”) (Because the shewa is the first vowel of the word, it is pronounced.)

בֵּית

בְּתוּן

כתב
כתבו

מלכין תקיפין הוו על ירושלם

ושליטין בכל עבר נהרה

ומרה בלו נהלה מתיהב להון

Part 2:

As mentioned above, distinguishing between the shewa that represents a murmured vowel, and the shewa that represents the absence of a vowel is sometimes rather difficult. In general, when a short vowel (/a/ , /e/ , /i/ , /o/ , /u/) comes before a shewa, the shewa represents the absence of a vowel; when a long vowel (/ā/ , /ē/ , /ī/ , /ō/ , /ū/) comes before a shewa, the shewa represents a murmured vowel. For example, because _ˆ denotes a short vowel, the shewa following it in מלכא (“the king”) represents the absence of a vowel. Similarly with the short /i/ in יכתב (“he writes”). On the other hand, in הודעך (“he let you know”) the ^ˆ represents a long vowel and thus the shewa following it is pronounced. (There are exceptions, but this holds true, by-and-large for most words.)

Exercise 2b.

Distinguish the shewas that represent murmured-vowels from those that represent the absence of vowels by transliterating these words:

כספא (“the silver”)

הודעך (“he let you know” or “he caused you to know”)

אנתון (“you” for masculine plural entities)

אמרין (“those who are saying”) (The _ˆ symbol represents ā here.)

בנין (“building”)

בניה (“The one who is building”) (The _ˆ symbol represents ā here, as does ה_ˆ.)

Remember:

The ultra-short vowels (ܐ ă, ܝ ǐ, ܘ ǔ) are always pronounced.

Exercise 2c.

This is the beginning of a letter, embedded in the biblical book of Ezra (4:11).

Transcribe it:

דְּנָה פִּרְשָׁגָן אֲגַרְתָּא דִּי שְׁלַחוּ עֲלוּהִי
עַל אֲרַתְחַשְׁשֶׁתָּא מְלָכָא - עֲבַדְיָךְ אֲנִשׁ עֲבַרְנָהְרָה
וּבְעֵנַת יַדִּיעַ לְהוּא לְמֶלְכָא דִּי יְהוּדָיָא דִּי

“This (is) a copy of the letter that they sent to him:

‘To: Artaxerxes, the king --- (From:) your servants, the people of Avar-Naharah.

Now, let it be known to the king that the Jews/Judaeans who”

Part 3: Syllabification and Vowels

Each syllable begins with a consonant. A syllable never begins with a vowel. There are two kinds of syllables, those that have only a consonant + a vowel (called “open” syllables) and those syllables that have a consonant + a vowel + a consonant (called “closed” syllables).

In the word הוֹדְעָךְ (hō^w-də-‘āk) (“he let you know”) the first syllable is considered “open” because it begins with a consonant, but does not have a consonant at its end, rather it ends with the long ō vowel. The second syllable is also an open syllable. However, the last syllable is a closed syllable because it begins and ends with a consonant.

Short vowels (ܐ , ܝ , ܘ , ܝ̄ , ܘ̄ , and ܘ̄ [when it represents o]) typically occur in only two places within a word:

- 1) In a closed syllable,
- or 2) in an accented syllable (either the last syllable of a word or in a syllable with an accent mark (ˈ): כְּתִבּוּ).

Long vowels (ܐ̄ , ܝ̄ , ܘ̄ , ܝ̄̄ , ܘ̄̄ , and ܘ̄̄ [when it represents ā]) most often occur in open syllables, but can also occur in closed syllables, no matter the position of the stress. (This, incidentally, distinguishes the vowel patterns in Aramaic from those in Biblical Hebrew, where long vowels appear only in open syllables or in stressed

closed syllables; i.e., in Hebrew, long vowels do NOT occur in closed, unstressed syllables, but they DO in Aramaic.)

Given a form like הוֹדְעָךְ, it is impossible for a beginning student to know whether or not the first syllable is closed or open, whether it should be pronounced as a three-syllable word /hō-də-‘āk/ or as a two syllable word /*hōd-‘āk/. The correct pronunciation is, in fact, difficult to know with certainty. It is easiest if beginning students simply assume that all long vowels are in open syllables, unless otherwise indicated. This assumption results in the transliteration hō^wdə‘āk.

The words above, מַלְכָא, בְּסַפְּא, אַנְתּוֹן, and בְּנִין, each begin with a closed syllable. Each of these closed syllables contains a short vowel.

The words הוֹדְעָךְ, אַמְרִין, and בְּנִיא begin with an open syllable. Each of these open syllables contains a long vowel. This means that the following shewa in each word represents a murmured vowel.

Another characteristic of Aramaic syllabification is that when two shewas occur side-by-side, such as in the word יְכַתְּבוּן, the first represents the absence of a vowel while the second represents a murmured vowel.

Remember that many Aramaic words have a shewa in their first syllable. In almost every case, the shewa that appears in the first syllable of a word represents a murmured vowel and should be pronounced.

Exercise 2d.

Transliterate the following passage based on Ezra (5:4):

אֲדִין בְּנָמָא אַמְרוּ לְהוֹן

מִן אַנּוֹן שְׂמָהָת גְּבַרְיָא דִּי דְנָה בְּנִינָא בְּנִין

Then, thus, they asked them:

“What are the names of the men who are building this building (lit., who this building are building).”

Exercise 2e.

Transcribe the following (from Ezra 5:5) into Aramaic script:

wə‘ē^yn ’ēlāhāhōn hāwāt ‘al śābē^y yəhū^wdāyē[’]

wəlā[’] baṭṭilū^w himmō^w

“The eye of their God was over the elders of the Judaeans and they (i.e., the elders) did not stop them (i.e., the builders).”

Vocabulary:

Prepositions:

לְ = “to” or “for”

מִן = “from”

עַל = “to” or “against” or “over” or “according to”

Adverbs:

לֹ = this particle negates verbs

אֲ = “also”

Short words:

אֲדִין = “then”

אִתִּי = “there is”

הוּא = “he”

הִיא = “she”

וְ = “and” or “but”

יָדוּעַ = “known”

לְהוּא = “let it be” (Note that the first syllable contains a short /e/ vowel in an open syllable. This is the exception to the rule pointed out above. The ultra-short vowel beneath the *heh* is secondary; the older form of the word would have been /leh-wē’/.)