Lesson 3: Further Niceties of the Writing System, Pronouns

Part 1.
A further distinction is made in the conventional pronunciation of the consonants, such that the beth, gimmel, daleth, kaph, peh, and taw have two pronounced forms: a hard and a soft pronunciation. Thus, beth is pronounced like b (ב), or as v (ו). This distinction in pronunciation is marked by a dot in the middle of the Aramaic letter, or a line beneath the Roman letter:

- ב b
- ב (pronounced like v)
- ג g
- ג (conventionally, no distinction is made in pronunciation)
- ד d
- ד (pronounced like the th in “that,” or no distinction is made)
- ק k
- ק (pronounced like the ch in “Chutzpah,” identical to כ)
- פ p
- פ (pronounced like ph in “phone”)
- ט t
- ט (pronounced like the th in “thick” or “these”)

In other words, the letter with the dot is pronounced hard, while the letter without is pronounced soft. This process by which a “hard pronunciation” is turned soft is called spirantization. The “soft consonants” are referred to as fricatives, spirants, or spirantized consonants, while the “hard consonants” can be referred to as stops or unspirantized consonants.

Collectively, the consonants are called begadkephat letters or bgdkpt letters.

Whether or not a letter is pronounced hard or soft depends, in part, on the place of the letter within a word or within a sentence. In general, if a vowel precedes a begadkephat letter it is soft, if a consonant precedes it then it is hard. For example, the word for son is bar, or בָּר. However, it may also be pronounced /var/, or בָּר.
when it is preceded by a prefix, such as a preposition or in this case a conjunction:וָבֵנוֹ ("and-a-son"). Although בֵנוֹ is pronounced like /uvar/ it is transliterated by convention b"n. Sometimes even a preceding word that ends in a vowel can affect the next word’s begadkephat consonant, making it soft.

For the sake of consistency, in the vocabulary lists, in the exercises, and when discussing individual words, I have rendered all begadkephat consonants that stand first in a word as stops.

Being cognizant of whether a begadkephat letter is pronounced hard or soft is important because it will often (but not always) reveal whether a preceding shewa represents the absence of a vowel or a murmured vowel. Thus, in the case of בֵנוֹ the hard peh suggests that the shewa under the samekh represents the absence of a vowel, which also means that the word begins with a closed syllable. If the shewa represented a murmured vowel, then that would result in a soft peh and the absence of a dot in the peh. Another example is provided by בֵנוֹ; in this case, the shewa beneath the resh must represent the absence of a vowel since a murmured vowel would result in a soft taw. Consider also the masculine plural absolute participle בֵנוֹ; the shewa must represent a murmured vowel since the beth is soft.

Part 2.
A complication to this system of distinguishing hard from soft begadkephat consonants is that the same mark can also indicate that a consonant, any consonant aside from gutturals (נ, צ, צ, ט) and ר (ד), is doubled. For example, בֶּטַנְוֹ represents this problem well. The first dot, inside the kaph, indicates that the consonant is to be pronounced “hard” (since it occurs first in the word), while the second dot, inside the taw, indicates that the consonant is doubled (and thus also pronounced “hard”). We would transliterate בֶּטַנְוֹ as katteh.

Note the two rules:
1) Whenever a consonant appears twice in a row, with no intervening vowel, it is always pronounced hard.
2) A murmured vowel never occurs before a doubled consonant.
Exercise 3a.
Transliterate the following passage from Ezra 5:6, 5:17:

חֵרְשָׁנָה אֲשֶׁר תָּקָם דַּי-שָׁלֵה חַיָּה. ..וְעַל צַלְוֹשׁ מֶלֶךְ.

Part 3.
The pronouns in Aramaic have the following forms:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1cs “I”</td>
<td>אֵלֶּה</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2ms “you”</td>
<td>אֲנָתָנְה</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2fs “you”</td>
<td>אֲנָתָנְה</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3ms “he”</td>
<td>אֵלֶּה</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3fs “she”</td>
<td>אֵלֶּה</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

They are used in many respects like English pronouns. Notice, however, that Aramaic, unlike English, distinguishes between masculine and feminine genders in the 2nd and 3rd persons. These gender distinctions for the 2nd and 3rd persons will also be found in the verb forms.

Exercise 3b.
Based on what you know of Aramaic orthography and syllabification, transliterate the pronouns from the preceding chart:

<table>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1cs “I”</td>
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</table>
Part 4.  
Syntax of Nominal Expressions  
In many languages, including Aramaic, one does not always need the verb “to be” when creating sentences of the sort: “The king is good.” In cases of this sort Aramaic simply juxtaposes the noun (אָמַר) with the adjective (םֶלְכָּה), sometimes with the adjective (a predicate adjective, to be precise) coming before the noun:

This sentence can be distinguished from the phrase “the good king” by the word order and the state of the adjective (absolute, that is, without the י , - ending). In the phrase “the good king” the adjective always follows the noun and agrees with the noun in its gender, number and state:

Sometimes, a sentence will juxtapose two nouns, such as in the sentence “I am the king,” which if translated word-for-word from Aramaic would be “I king.” In these cases, the word that functions as the subject of the clause usually comes first. The word that follows is considered the predicate (even though in Aramaic it is not a verb).

Here “the king” is technically the predicate of the phrase and comes second. Sometimes, however the predicate can come first and the subject second and this can lead to confusion. For example, one can imagine a sentence of the type below in which either noun could function as the subject or predicate. In these cases, context is the only guide as to which should be considered the subject and which the predicate.

In cases where the predicate is a prepositional phrase, the prepositional phrase usually appears second, preceded by the subject.

Introductory Lessons in Aramaic by Eric D. Reymond 20
Exercise 3c.
Translate the following sentences into Aramaic, utilizing the vocabulary that follows the exercise:

1. He is the king.
2. He is in the house.
3. We are in the house.
4. They are before the king.
5. Accordingly, all are there.
6. Before they were there, we were before the king.

Vocabulary:
Prepositions:

! (or l) = “in” or “by”

! (or l) = “as” or “like”

= before (referring to place)

= before (referring to time)

Adverbs:

, “thus” or “accordingly”

= “there”

Conjunction:

, “and”, “or”, “but”. The single conjunction can be translated in a number of ways based on the context of a passage. Sometimes the conjunction does not need to be translated.

Its pronunciation varies according to a number of variables outlined below:

When it is followed by /
, /
, and /
 it becomes /
;

when it is followed by a consonant+murmured vowel, it also turns to /
;

when it is followed by “” the yodh loses its shewa and the letters together are written: ”;

when it is followed by an ultra-short vowel, the corresponding full vowel replaces it (e.g., - + = - and - + = -).

Nouns:

= “letter” ( = “the letter”) f.

= “house” ( = “the house”; two syllables bay-tà) m.
= "all" (kōl) (also spelled כֹּל, kol)
מל = "king" (מל = "the king") m.
פָּרֶשֶׁת = "copy" m.

N.B.
The Aramaic expression "the house," מִלְתָּן, contains a vowel-consonant combination called a diphthong, in this case -ay- (pronounced like the common word "eye"); this diphthong affects the following begadkephat letter as if it were simply a vowel, making the pronunciation of taw soft.