

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 (בּ), or as v (בְּ). This distinction in pronunciation is marked by a dot in the middle of the Aramaic letter, or a line beneath the Roman letter:

בּ	b
בְּ	<u>b</u> (pronounced like v)
גּ	g
גְּ	<u>g</u> (conventionally, no distinction is made in pronunciation)
דּ	d
דְּ	<u>d</u> (pronounced like the <i>th</i> in “that,” or no distinction is made)
כּ	k
כְּ	<u>k</u> (pronounced like the <i>ch</i> in “Chutzpah,” identical to כּ)
פּ	p
פְּ	<u>p</u> (pronounced like <i>ph</i> in “phone”)
תּ	t
תְּ	<u>t</u> (pronounced like the <i>th</i> 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 בַּר. 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: אַבְרָם (“and-a-son”). Although אַבְרָם is pronounced like /ūvar/ it is transliterated by convention ū^wbar. 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 אֲסַפֵּה 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 אֲנִירָא ; 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 אֲבִירָא ; 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 (א, ה, ח, ע) and r (ר), is doubled. For example, אֲבִירָא 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 אֲבִירָא as *katteḥ*.

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:

פִּרְשָׁגִן אֲנִירָא דִּי - שְׁלַח תַּתְּנִי ... עַל דְּרִיּוֹשׁ מְלָכָא

יִתְבַּקֵּר בְּבֵית גְּנוּזֵיא דִּי מְלָכָא תַּמָּה דִּי בְּכַבְּל

Part 3.

The pronouns in Aramaic have the following forms:

Singular		Plural	
1cs "I"	אֲנִי	1cp "we"	אֲנַחְנָה
2ms "you"	אַתָּה	2mp "you"	אַתְרוּן / אַתְתָּם
2fs "you"	אַתְּי	2fp "you"	אַתְתִּין
3ms "he"	הוּא	3mp "they"	אַתְרוּן + (E.: הַמֹּר / D.: הַמֹּרִין)
3fs "she"	הִיא	3fp "they"	אַתְיִין

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:

Singular	Plural
1cs "I"	1cp "we"
2ms "you" 'ant (Both shewas in this form represent the absence of a vowel.)	2mp "you"
2fs "you"	2fp "you"
3ms "he"	3mp "they"
3fs "she"	3fp "they"

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 (מֶלֶךְ) with the adjective (טָב), sometimes with the adjective (a predicate adjective, to be precise) coming before the noun:

טָב מֶלֶךְ

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 ־ ending). In the phrase “the good king” the adjective always follows the noun and agrees with the noun in its gender, number *and state*:

מֶלֶךְ טָב

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).

אֲנִי מֶלֶךְ = I am the king.

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.

לֵיִל מֶלֶךְ = A lion is a king or A king is a lion.

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

אֲנִי עִם מֶלֶךְ = I am with the king.

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:

ܒ (or ܕ) = “in” or “by”

ܕ (or ܕ) = “as” or “like”

ܩܕܡܐ = before (referring to place)

ܩܕܡܐ / ܩܕܡܐܢ = before (referring to time)

Adverbs:

ܕܝܢܐ, ܕܝܢܐܢܐ “thus” or “accordingly”

ܕܝܢܐܢܐ = “there”

Conjunction:

ܘ, ܘܘ, ܘܘܘ = “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 ܒ/ܕ, ܦ/ܦ, and ܕ it becomes ܘ ;

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

when it is followed by ܝ the *yodh* loses its shewa and the letters together are written: ܘܝ ;

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

Nouns:

ܬܘܪܐ = “letter” (ܬܘܪܐܢܐ = “the letter”) f.

ܒܝܬܐ = “house” (ܒܝܬܐܢܐ = “the house”; two syllables bay-tā) m.

כָּל = “all” (kōl) (also spelled כָּל, kol)
מֶלֶךְ = “king” (מֶלֶךְ = “the king”) m.
פְּרָשָׁן = “copy” m.

N.B.

The Aramaic expression “the house,” בֵּיתָא, 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.