

## Lesson 4: The Noun

Each Aramaic word is associated with a three consonant root. Due to the fact that most Aramaic words have only three consonants, identifying the root consonants is often rather easy. Thus, e.g., the word מַלְךָ has the root מִלְך. Being able to recognize the root of a word is important because it (usually) allows you to understand the basic semantic field of the word and allows you to predict how the word's pronunciation will change when suffixes are added to it. Additionally it allows you to look the word up in a dictionary, since some dictionaries are organized according to root.

For our purposes we will consider the four most basic types of roots:

1. strong – having three “solid” consonants (i.e., א, ב, ג, ד, ה, ו, ח, ט, כ, ל, מ, נ, ס, ע, פ, צ, ק, ר, ש, שׁ, שׂ, ת).
2. first weak – having a “weak” (א, א׳, א״, א״) consonant as the first consonant.
3. middle weak – having a “weak” (א, א׳) consonant as the second consonant.
4. final weak – having a “weak” (א, א׳, א״) consonant as the third consonant.

Notice that *'aleph* is relatively stable in the middle of a root, and that, similarly, *nun* is stable in the middle and at the end of a root.

Identifying strong roots will not be difficult. Identifying the weak ones will sometimes prove tricky.

Typically, the weak consonants will disappear and verbs derived from these roots will have slightly different forms than those of the strong roots. Therefore, when we describe the verbs, we will need to describe the morphology of these roots separately.

### Part 1: Simpler Nouns and Adjectives

In many Semitic languages, Aramaic among them, nouns and adjectives are very similar, sometimes overlapping in form and function. So, e.g., adjectives often can be used like nouns and have the same morphological patterns as nouns.

Nouns and adjectives have two genders: male and female.

They have two numbers: singular and plural.

They have three states: absolute (the basic form of the noun/adj.), the construct state (a shortened form, common to the Semitic languages), and the emphatic or determined state. These are best explained through example:

absolute:	סִפְרָא = book
construct:	סִפְרָא = book of
emphatic/determined:	סִפְרָא = the book

The absolute form marks the basic form of the word, the one listed in dictionaries. The construct state marks a connection to a following word. So, e.g., סִפְרָא in the construct state might be followed by the word מְלִיכָא “king” to give the expression סִפְרָא מְלִיכָא = “a book of a king”, or “a king’s book”. Such a connection between words can be called a genitive relationship (based on analogous constructions from Indo-European languages). The emphatic/determined state marks a noun with a degree of specificity, like the English word “the”.

When a word in the construct state precedes another word in the absolute state, both words lack specificity and can be translated with the English “a” or “an”. When a word in the construct state precedes another word in the emphatic/determined state, both words carry this nuance of specificity and both can be translated with the English word “the”. Thus,

סִפְרָא מְלִיכָא = “a book of a king”, or “a king’s book”
סִפְרָא מְלִיכָא = “the book of the king”, or “the king’s book”.

You will note that in the above list the forms of the absolute and construct state are identical for this word, but this is not always the case. E.g., consider the word מְלִיכָא (queen, a feminine noun):

absolute:	מְלִיכָא = queen
construct:	מְלִיכָא = queen of
emphatic/determined:	מְלִיכָא = the queen

Nouns and adjectives are inflected according to the following paradigm, illustrated here by the adjective עֵתִיד (“ready”, “destined”):

singular	masc.	fem.
abs.:	עֵתִיד	עֵתִידָה
const.:	עֵתִיד	עֵתִידָת
emph./det.:	עֵתִידָא	עֵתִידָתָא (‘ā-tī <sup>y</sup> d-tā’) (Note the long vowel /ī/ in a closed, unaccented syllable.)
plural	masc.	fem.
abs.:	עֵתִידִין	עֵתִידִין
const.:	עֵתִידִי	עֵתִידִת
emph./det.:	עֵתִידִיא	עֵתִידִתָא

The distinctive features of each of these forms are indicated in the following chart:

singular	masc.	fem.
abs.:	--	עֵתִידָה
const.:	--	עֵתִידָת
emph./det.:	עֵתִידָא	עֵתִידָתָא
plural	masc.	fem.
abs.:	עֵתִידִין	עֵתִידִין
const.:	עֵתִידִי	עֵתִידִת
emph./det.:	עֵתִידִיא	עֵתִידִתָא

**Exercise 4a:** Fill in the following chart for masculine nouns/adjectives:

Noun/adj. abs./cstr. sing.	emph./det. sing.	plural abs.	pl. cstr.	pl. emph./det.
עתיק ("old")	עתיקא			
טב ("good", root: ט ו ב) The <sub>τ</sub> = ā.				
זעיר zə'ē'r ("little")				
דין ("judgment", root: ד י ן)				
טור ("mountain.")				
חכים ("wise")				
לשן ("tongue") The <sub>τ</sub> = ā.				
קל ("voice"; root: ק ו ל) The <sub>τ</sub> = ā.				
שאר ("remnant") The <sub>τ</sub> = ā.				

Notice that the two words with *waw* as a middle consonant of their root (טב and קל), have similar forms.

**Exercise 4b:**

Fill in the following chart for feminine nouns/adjectives:

Noun/adj. abs. sing.	cstr. sing.	emph./det. sing.	plural abs.	pl. cstr.	pl. emph./det.
עתיקה ("old")		עתיקהא			
טבה ("good", root: ט ו ב)		טבהא			
זעירה zə'ē'rā <sup>h</sup> ("little")		זעירהא			
חבולה ("crime")		חבולהא			

חַיָּוָה ("animal"; root: ח' י' א')		חַיָּוָה			
חַכְיָמָה ("wise")					
צְדָקָה ("charity")		צְדָקָה (ṣīdḡəṭā')			
תְּקִיפָה ("strong")					
צִפּוּר ṣippar ("bird")		צִפּוּר			

It should be apparent that there are certain consistencies between these words. E.g., the words עֲתִיקָה , חַכְיָמָה , and תְּקִיפָה all have the same vocalic pattern.

Similarly, the words עֲתִידָה , זְעִירָה and חַבּוּלָה have similar forms, though the long middle vowel of each is different. Recognizing these patterns helps to make the acquisition of new words easier.

The exception to these consistencies is that in the emphatic forms when the adjective has a long-ē then the following *taw* has no dot and is pronounced soft, whereas if the vowel is a long-ū, long-ā, or long-ī vowel then the *taw* is pronounced hard.

Note that some feminine words do not bear the characteristic חַ ending, words like צִפּוּר (ṣippar). Their inflection is identical to that of masculine nouns.

Note also that the pronunciation of the feminine adjective in the absolute state is identical to that of the masculine adjective in the emphatic/determined state. The only difference in these forms above are the endings, חַ – on the feminine adjective (the typical marker of femininity) and אַ – on the emphatic/determined masculine noun. Because the pronunciation of these two morphemes is so similar, they were often confused; it is common to find feminine nouns with the ending אַ – and masculine emphatic/determined nouns with the ending חַ – . For the purposes of pedagogy, I will consistently render the feminine absolute ending with *heh*, and the masculine emphatic/determined form with an *'aleph*.

## Part 2: More Complex Nouns and Adjectives

Many nouns and adjectives in Aramaic witness more complex changes in their inflection. A good, basic example of these changes is seen with the masculine word for money or silver, כְּסָפִי, and the feminine word for a letter or missive, אֲנָרָה.

singular	masc.	fem.
abs.:	כֶּסֶף	אֶגְרָה
const.:	כֶּסֶף	אֶגְרָת
emph./det.:	כֶּסְפָּא (kaspā)	אֶגְרָתָא
plural	masc.	fem.
abs.:	כֶּסְפִּין	אֶגְרִין
const.:	כֶּסְפִּי	אֶגְרִת
emph./det.:	כֶּסְפַּיָּא (kaspayya)	אֶגְרִתָּא

According to the rules of Aramaic pronunciation, the accent of a word is typically on the last syllable. The vowel of a syllable immediately preceding the accented syllable reduces if it is a short vowel (/a/ , /e/ , /i/ , /o/ , /u/ ) in an open syllable. Thus, although the absolute form for “silver” is כֶּסֶף, we would never expect the absolute form to be \*כֶּסְפָּא, since this would leave a short vowel in an open, unaccented syllable (\*kə-sa-pā). Such a vowel would always reduce. However, a form like \*כֶּסְפָּא in Aramaic is also intolerable; so, the result of these tendencies is that the first syllable sees the emergence of a full vowel. In this case, the /a/ vowel that emerges under the first syllable in the emphatic/determined singular state produces a form that is much closer to the word’s etymological origin: *kaspu*.

The process of vowel reduction might further be illustrated by examining the history of the plural form for “kings”: מַלְכִּין. In early Aramaic (in, e.g., the 800s-500s BCE) vowels did not reduce, nor was there spirantization of *begadkephat* consonants. (Both phenomena began later, presumably spirantization taking effect before vowels started reducing.) This means that the plural for “king” was pronounced *malakīn*, with the accent on the final syllable. But, after several hundred years, the word had a much different form: the *kaph* was spirantized and the syllable immediately before the accent reduced. Although there was perhaps a period of transition where the vowel was pronounced as a murmured vowel, eventually it was lost altogether. This hypothetical transformation might be illustrated below:

1. \*malakīn → 2. \*malakīn → 3. \*malakīn → 4. malakīn

One should note that because the *kaph* (כ) no longer is preceded by a vowel, one would expect it to be pronounced “hard”; however, a memory of the original vowel has been preserved in the “soft” pronunciation of the *kaph*. (See also ܕܗܘܒܝܢ “gold” below). Unexpectedly, the pronunciation of the plural of “silver” (ܦܫܦܝܢ) reflects no such memory of a vowel beneath the second root consonant.

A vowel does NOT reduce if it is a long vowel, or if it is in a closed syllable. Thus, the vowel of the adjective ܡܘܒܐ does not reduce because ܘ here represents a long vowel, and similarly the long /i/ vowel in ܘܬܝܕ does not reduce. If the syllable preceding an accented syllable is closed, the vowel also does not reduce. This is seen in words like ܪܒ “great”, which has the emphatic form ܪܒܐ (rabbā’).

This rule of pronunciation can also be used to explain the absolute form of ܘܬܝܩ (‘attīq; “old”). The second syllable of the word is accented, and one might expect for the short vowel in the preceding syllable to reduce. However, this does not happen since the first syllable of ܘܬܝܩ is closed. The same is true for the first syllable in ܐܢܪܐ; the short /i/ vowel does not reduce.

### Exercise 4c.

Many Aramaic nouns follow the pattern of ܦܫܦܝܢ above. Complete the following chart for these words that follow the pattern of ܦܫܦܝܢ.

sing. abs./cstr.	sing. emph./det.	pl. abs.	pl. cstr.	pl. emph./det.
ܘܘܠܐ (“image”)				
ܒܥܠ (“master”)				
ܚܡܪ (“wine”)				
ܘܘܒܕ (“slave”)				
ܘܘܪܥ (“gate”)				

In all of the above examples, the vowel of the first syllable is /a/, as in the example of ܦܫܦܝܢ. Many nouns, however, have a short /i/ or /e/ (or sometimes a short /u/ or

short /o/) in this position. E.g., סִפְרָ (‘‘book’’) has a short /i/ and גְּבָרָ (‘‘man’’) has a short /u/ in the plural forms:

singular	masc.	masc.
abs.:	סִפְרָ	גְּבָרָ
const.:	סִפְרָ	גְּבָרָ
emph./det.:	סִפְרָא	גְּבָרָא (?)
plural		
abs.:	סִפְרִין	גְּבָרִין
const.:	סִפְרִי	גְּבָרִי
emph./det.:	סִפְרִיא	גְּבָרִיא

As with כְּסָף, the singular emphatic/determined state of סִפְרָ reveals a form very close to the word’s original pronunciation, *sipru*. The etymological base of words is not always important to know, but it sometimes does help explain certain inconsistencies in the printed texts. E.g., the word for gold, דְּהָבָ, would seem to be identical in its form to the word for silver, כְּסָף. And, in its vocalic pattern, it is, in fact similar. However, because the original form of the word in the singular was *dahabu* (NOT \**dahbu*), the *beth* is always ‘‘soft’’ (that is, a fricative, or spirantized), and the second consonant is always followed by a murmured vowel: thus, דְּהָבָא for the emph./det. state, and דְּהָבִין for the plural absolute. (Compare with the corresponding form of כְּסָף: כְּסָפָא where the shewa represents the absence of a vowel and the פ is ‘‘hard’’).

Other nouns exhibit slightly different morphological patterns, but the basic principle of vowel reduction outlined above applies to all of them, making the forms of nouns rather predictable.

Vocabulary:

אִגְרָה = ‘‘letter’’ f.

בָּעֵל = ‘‘master’’ m.

דִּין = ‘‘judgment’’ m.



חַבּוּלָה = “crime” f.  
חַיָּוָה = “animal” f.  
חַכְמַיִם = “wise”  
חַמֵּר = “wine” m.  
טָב = “good”  
טוֹר = “mountain” m.  
לְשׁוֹן = “tongue” m.  
סִפְרָא = “book” m.  
עֲבִיד = “slave” m.  
עֵתִיק = “old”  
צְדָקָה = “charity” f.  
צִפְפָּר sippar = “bird” f.  
צִלָּם = “image” m.  
קָל = “voice” m.  
שְׂאָר = “remnant” m.