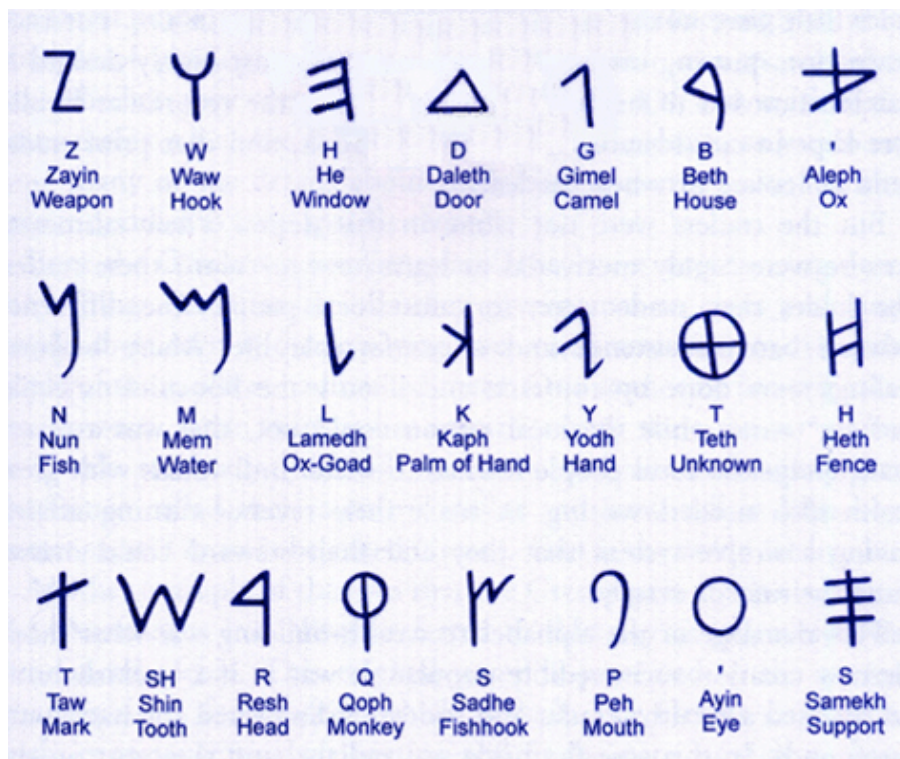


# THE ALPHABET OF BIBLICAL HEBREW

This page is an introduction to the alphabet of Hebrew Scripture.

Hebrew is a Semitic language. The word Semitic comes from the name Shem, named in Genesis as the son of Noah, whose descendants now live in the Middle East. Phoenician, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic are examples of Semitic languages, which have several characteristics, such as a consonantal system with three-letter word roots to connote meaning.

The Aramaic and Hebrew alphabets, as Greek, were derived from the Phoenician alphabet. Phoenicia (now Lebanon) was a peaceful sea-faring nation expert in navigation and trade that developed their alphabet around 1400 BC in an effort to communicate with their diverse trading partners that encircled the Mediterranean Sea. The Phoenician alphabet was widely received, as it was only 22 letters based on sound, as opposed to the myriad of symbols in cuneiform and hieroglyphics prevalent at the time.



The Phoenician Alphabet ~ 1400 BC

Biblical Hebrew contains **22** letters, as noted in Psalm 119, all of which are **consonants**. The

alphabet and language remained pure until the Babylonian exile in 587 BC, when spoken Hebrew came under the influence of other languages, particularly Aramaic. Aramaic became the prevailing language, or "lingua franca" of the entire Middle East from about 800 BC to 400 AD. Jesus and his Apostles spoke Aramaic. Because of the Dispersion of the people of Israel to Babylon and Egypt, knowledge of pre-exilic texts was dependent on oral tradition. This occasionally gave rise to an ambiguity of interpretation for a text written purely in consonants.

*The Hebrew language adopted the Imperial Aramaic alphabet.*

As the Aramaic alphabet became the Hebrew alphabet, Hebrew papyri and parchments of the second and first centuries BC were written in the Aramaic alphabet. The original Hebrew alphabet persisted solely with the Samaritans. The Biblical Hebrew text available to us today is thus written in the Hebrew language with the adopted Aramaic alphabet.

While the Hebrew language is thriving today, the Aramaic language was replaced by Arabic with the rise of Islam, and has nearly disappeared. Aramaic is present today only among the Assyrians in Syria, the Chaldees in northern Iraq, and as part of the Mass of the Eastern Catholic Maronite Church of Lebanon.

The oldest surviving translation of Hebrew Scripture is the Greek Septuagint, which was undertaken in Alexandria in the third century before Christ (BC). Jesus and his Apostles read from the Greek Septuagint in their discourses on Scripture. It was not until nearly 100 AD in Jamnia that a final authoritative form of the written consonantal text was achieved in Hebrew.

Hebrew is written from right to left. There are no capital letters in Hebrew. Letters stand alone in printing or writing. The first ten letters of the Hebrew alphabet also signify numbers one through ten, as the [Ten Commandments](#) given to Moses on two tablets of stone.



Two characteristics of ancient Hebrew were the pure use of consonants, and the use of an epicene personal pronoun (a personal pronoun that does not distinguish for male and female - the same word is used for both "he" and "she", as in Genesis 3:15).

Beginning in the pre-Exilic period, from the ninth to the sixth centuries BC, the following three consonants,

**ה heh, ם vav, ך yod**

were used at the end of a word to indicate final vowels. Beginning in the post-Exilic period, vav and yod were also used as vowel indicators within a word.

The recently discovered Dead Sea Scrolls were written purely in consonants.

During the ninth and tenth centuries AD, the Masoretes, Jewish scholars in Tiberias, Galilee, perfected a system of **points** or **nikkud** for vowel notation and added it to the received consonantal text. The vowel points were added to ensure proper interpretation and reading of Hebrew Scripture, and are known as the Masoretic or Tiberian vowel points. This point system was added without altering the spacing of the text. It is the Masoretic Hebrew text that is available to us today.

All of these considerations help biblical scholars to date a particular Hebrew text. For instance, the presence of "pointed text" allows biblical scholars to date manuscripts to at least the second millennium AD.

What follows is the Biblical Hebrew alphabet. Note that five letters, Kaf, Mem, Nun, Peh, and Tsade, have a final form when the letter occurs at the end of a word. For example, Peh at the beginning or middle of the word has the form of פ, but at the end of a word appears as ף.

## THE ARAMAIC AND HEBREW ALPHABET

name

letter

pronunciation

**Aleph**

א

silent

**Bet**

ב

b

**Gimel**

ג

g

**Dalet**

ד

d

Heh	ה	h
Vav	ו	w
Zayin	ז	z
Het	ח	ch
Tet	ט	t
Yod	י	y
Kaf	כ	k
Lamed	ל	l
Mem	מ	m
Nun	נ	n
Samekh	ס	s
Ayin	ע	silent
Peh	פ	p
Tsade	צ	ts
Qof	ק	q
Resh	ר	r
Shin	ש	s
Tav	ת	t

Four letters, Bet ב, Kaf כ, Peh פ, and Shin ש, vary in pronunciation depending on the presence or position of a dot. For example, Peh without the dot is pronounced as ph (or f) as in phone , whereas the Peh with the dot is hard p, as in peace. The point or dot within a letter, as seen in the above three letters Bet, Kaf, and Peh, is known as a **dagesh**. Note the pronunciations in the

following chart:

<b>Bet</b>	ב	<b>v</b>	have
	בֿ	<b>b</b>	ball
<b>Kaf</b>	כ	<b>ch</b>	Bach
	כֿ	<b>k</b>	take
<b>Peh</b>	פ	<b>ph</b>	phone
	פֿ	<b>p</b>	peace
<b>Shin</b>	ש	<b>s</b>	sin
	שׁ	<b>sh</b>	short

## VOWELS

Vowels in Masoretic Hebrew Scripture are a combination of the historically long vowels, Heh, Vav, and Yod, and the Masoretic or Tiberian Vowel Points. Vowels are long or short both in quality and quantity. Heh ה, Vav ו, and Yod י became known as "matres lectiones," or "mothers of reading," as they assisted in reading Scripture. The individual letter used as a vowel was known as a **mater**. Yod as a vowel was pronounced as long e or i, whereas vav was pronounced as long o or u. Heh served as a final long a.

Notice in the following chart that the majority of vowel points appear under the letter, except for long o when it occurs over and to the left of the letter. When the vowel points are combined with the matres lectiones, they occur underneath the *prior* letter with Heh and Yod. The **Shewa** sign may be vocal or silent; with the guttural letters aleph א, heh ה, het ח, and ayin ע, vocal shewa is combined with three vowel signs to produce three hurried vowels known as the hatep vowels.

Metheg is a symbol written as a short perpendicular stroke placed under the consonant and to the left of the vowel sign (if any). An example of its use is the addition of Metheg to Qames, which renders that vowel point as long a rather than short o.

The following chart summarizes the Masoretic vowel points.

THE MASORETIC VOWEL POINTS		
VOWEL	POINT	NAME
<b>SHORT VOWEL POINTS</b>		
a	-	PATAH
e	∴	SEGOL
i	.	HIREQ
o	T	QAMES
u	∴	QIBBUS
<b>LONG VOWEL POINTS</b>		
a	T	QAMES
e	∴	SERE
o	ב	HOLEM
<b>MATER WITH POINT</b>		
a	Ɀ	QAMES-HE
e	י	SERE-YOD
i	י	HIREQ-YOD
o	ו	HOLEM-VAV
u	ו	SUREQ
<b>SHEWA</b>		
VOCAL OR SILENT	.	SHEWA

a		HATEP-PATAH
e		HATEP-SEGOL
o		HATEP-QAMES

This multiple form of vowel notation accounts for much of the variation in word formation in the Masoretic text. For example, Joshua, the son of Nun, in Judges 2:7, is spelled two different ways in the same sentence! The mater Sureq is utilized for the vowel **u** in the first spelling,

while the short vowel point Qibbus is incorporated for the second spelling.

## JOSHUA

### Variant Spellings in Hebrew

יהושוע

Deuteronomy 3:21, Judges 2:7

Yehoshua

יהושע

Exodus, Joshua, Judges 2:7

Yehoshua

ישוע

Nehemiah 8:17

Yeshua

## VOCABULARY

The following chart of 33 words are primarily from the Books of Genesis and Exodus. A careful study of the transliteration of the Hebrew words should give one an appreciation of the pronunciation of the Hebrew letters and vowels. Note that **Yeshua**, the true name of Jesus,

appears throughout the Old Testament, for it means *the Lord saves!*

## VOCABULARY

### HEBREW

אלהים  
יהוה אלהים  
ברא  
ברכה  
רוח  
אדם  
אדמה  
יארץ  
גן  
נפש  
צלע  
בשר  
אשה  
חווה  
נחש  
זרע  
הוא  
חטאת  
מוות  
תשובה  
טוב  
אמת

### TRANSLITERATION

Elohim  
Yahweh Elohim  
barah  
barakah  
ruah  
adam  
adamah  
yasar  
gan  
nephesh  
sela  
basar  
ishah  
hawwah  
nahash  
zera  
hu  
hattat  
mawet  
niham  
tob  
emet

### ENGLISH

God  
Lord God  
to create  
blessing  
wind, breath, spirit  
Adam, mankind  
earth, ground, soil  
to form, fashion  
Garden  
being, life, soul  
rib  
flesh  
woman  
Eve  
serpent  
offspring, seed  
he or she  
sin  
death  
to repent  
good  
truth

לב	leb	heart
תולדות	toledot	history, geneology
נח	Noah	Noah
ארון	aron	ark
ברית	berit	covenant
תורה	Torah	Law, Pentateuch
אהבה	ahabah	love
משה	Mosheh	Moses
מצוה	miswah	commandment
ישועה	yeshuah	salvation
ישוע	yeshua	Yeshua

## SCRIPTURE READING

The following passage is Genesis 3:15 presented in Masoretic "pointed text." Click [here](#) to see an example of Genesis 3:15 in original pure consonantal text. We have preserved the epicene personal pronoun **הוא** in original text, as one is not sure whether the pronoun refers to "woman" or "seed (offspring)." The Masoretic text renders this pronoun as masculine אִיִּם. Remember Hebrew is written from right to left, so the English translation is best understood when read in similar fashion.

וְאֵיבָה אָשִׁית בֵּינְךָ וּבֵין הָאִשָּׁה

the woman

and between

between you

I will put

And enmity

וּבֵין זַרְעֶךָ וּבֵין זַרְעָהּ

her seed

and between

your seed

and between

הוּא יִשׁוּפֶךָ רֹאשׁ

head

will crush your

s(he)

וְאִתָּה תִּשׁוּפְנוּ עֵקֶב

heel

will strike at the

while you

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## The Bible