

# **Biblical Hebrew Grammar for Beginners**

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## **Reading Biblical Hebrew**

At the most basic level, "reading" is used here in the sense of looking at the written Hebrew text, identifying its symbols in the way they combine into words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs, and creating a mental image of the text.

While introducing the visual elements of Hebrew, that is, the symbols of its orthography, we also introduce approximations of the sounds associated with them. In doing that, we expand the concept of "reading" to the process of creating a sense of what the text would sound like were it to be read aloud. The "reading Biblical Hebrew" section, then, introduces the orthography and the approximate sounds it stands for, not attempting to address any "meaning" issues, and aiming to bring the learners to the stage at which they can read without understanding what they read, so to speak.

Reading aloud is a challenging task when it comes to Biblical Hebrew. Biblical Hebrew is a reconstructed language, or a language representing what medieval grammarians thought it had sounded like some two millennia before their time. In most of today's Biblical Hebrew classes, the practice is to use the sounds of Modern Israeli Hebrew, which has a significantly reduced phonological inventory compared to Biblical Hebrew. We will maintain this practice here in the occasional transliterations that we provide.

## **The Hebrew Script**

Epigraphic remains from the east Mediterranean region suggest that Biblical Hebrew was written first in the Proto-Canaanite script, and later in its derivative the Phoenician, or [Paleo-Hebrew](#), script. After the 6th century BCE, when the Judean exiles returned from Babylon where Aramaic was the dominant language, Hebrew was written in the square Aramaic script. Until about the 10th century B.C.E, the writing was consonantal, that is, only consonants were used in the orthography. Then, the orthography was expanded to indicate final vowels by consonants—*yod* י for final "i", *vav* ו for final "u", and *heh* ה for all the rest. *alef* א was also occasionally used to indicate a vowel sound, primarily "a". These "vowel" consonants are referred to as *maters lectionis*, Latin for "mothers of reading". Eventually, *vav* ו came to also represent the sound "o", and *yod* י the sound "e" in diphthongs like "ay" or "ey".

Systems of diacritics indicating vowels were developed in Palestine and Babylon between the seventh and the 11th centuries C.E. These were developed by scholars called Masoretes (also spelled Massoretes, Hebrew for *transmitters of tradition*), and the system historically preserved is the one developed by the Tiberian school of Masoretes. The manuscript prepared by Aaron ben Asher of that school around 1000 C.E. was kept in the synagogue in Aleppo, Syria, and is known as the Aleppo Codex. The Aleppo Codex, now in Jerusalem, and the Leningrad codex, now in London, are the bases of most printed editions of today's Hebrew Bible.

### **Deciphering the Orthography**

Hebrew is read from right to left. The visual focus is on the consonants, with vowel diacritics placed above or below the consonant line. The general progression in reading Hebrew is consonant-vowel-consonant-vowel, etc., with the eyes moving from the center of the line up or down as necessary, shifting to the left in the process. Advanced readers are likely to recognize words as whole units, without deciphering individual consonants or vowels.

[Hebrew Consonants](#)

[Hebrew Vowels](#)

[Accents and Punctuation](#)