

Chapter Two

The Aramaic Alphabet

The Aramaic and Hebrew alphabets are the same.

| Letter | Final form | Name | Transliteration ¹ | Pronunciation |
|--------|------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| א | | אלף 'alēf | ' | silent |
| ב | | בֵּת bêt | b | <u>b</u> all |
| ב | | bêt | v (<u>b</u>) | <u>v</u> ine |
| ג | | גִּמְלֵל gimēl | g | <u>g</u> ift |
| ג | | gimēl | gh (<u>g</u>) | <u>gh</u> ost |
| ד | | דַּלֶּת dalēt | d | <u>d</u> ebt |
| ד | | dalēt | th (<u>d</u>) | <u>th</u> e |
| ה | | הֵא hē' | h | <u>h</u> is |
| | | | | |
| ו | | וֵו vāv (or wāv) ² | v or w | <u>v</u> ine or <u>w</u> ay |
| ז | | זַיִן zāyīn | z | <u>Z</u> ion |
| ח | | חֵת hêt | ch (<u>h</u>) | <u>Bach</u> |
| ט | | טֵת têt | t (<u>t</u>) | <u>t</u> all |
| י | | יֹד yôd | y | <u>y</u> es |
| | | | | |
| כ | ך | כַּף kâf | k | <u>k</u> ing |
| כ | ך | kâf | ch (<u>k</u>) | <u>peach</u> |
| ל | | לַמֵּד lāmēd | l | <u>l</u> ion |
| מ | ם | מֵם mēm | m | <u>m</u> an |
| נ | ן | נֹון nûn | n | <u>n</u> o |
| | | | | |
| ס | | סַמֶּךְ sāmēk | s | <u>s</u> in |
| ע | | עַיִן 'āyīn | ' | silent |
| פ | ף | פֵּא pē' | p | <u>p</u> et |
| פ | ף | pē' | ph (or f) | <u>f</u> at |
| צ | ץ | צַדֵּי tsādê | ts (<u>s</u>) | <u>net</u> s |
| ק | | קֹוף qôf | q | <u>k</u> ing |
| | | | | |
| ר | | רֵשׁ rēš | r | <u>r</u> un |
| ש | | שֵׁן sîn | s | <u>s</u> in |
| ש | | שִׁין shîn | sh (š) | <u>sh</u> ine |
| ת | | תַּו tāv (tāw) | t | <u>t</u> oy |
| ת | | tāv (tāw) | th (t) | <u>th</u> rone |

¹ Transliteration is the process of assigning an English equivalent to the Hebrew letter.

² I prefer vav over waw. That is how I learned it so I will continue with that heritage.

Notice the five groupings. These are organized in four or five letters per group in order to help in the memorization process. It is far easier to memorize a group of four or five letters, then, once the group is memorized, move on to the next group. Memorize the letter, saying the name and writing the letter many times. Do this until the whole alphabet can be written without hesitation.

BeGaD KeFaT

Notice there are some letters that are repeated and contain a dot (·) within it (e.g., פּ, תּ). This dot is called a Daghesh Lene and indicates a hard pronunciation. These letters are called begadkephat (a composite built on the names of the six letters בגדכפת) as a way to remember them. These letters are כּ, גּ, דּ, פּ, בּ, תּ. As you can see, Aramaic, like Hebrew is written from right to left.

Final Form

There are five letters that contain a final form. A final form letter should be used when that letter is in the last position of the word.

| letter | final form |
|--------|------------|
| כ | ך |
| מ | ם |
| נ | ן |
| פ | ף |
| צ | ץ |

Final kaf ך has two special forms that come up a lot. Final kaf ך is written with a silent sheva (ְ) when it lacks a vowel and looks like ךְ. Likewise final kaf has the final qamets (ֹ) placed inside it and looks like ךֹ.

Certain letters sound alike

As you can tell some of the letter sound alike.

- ס, ש - S, as in See
- כ, ק - K, as in keep
- ט, ת - T, as in Tom
- ב, ו - V, as in Vine
- ח, כ - CH, as in Bach
- א, ע - Silent

The Vowels

Our ancient Hebrew and Aramaic text had no written vowels. The written vowels were added around AD 500 by the Masoretes who added them in order to preserve the language. It is not that the language did not use vowels; it is just that there was no written form until later. The speaker would add the vowel as necessary. For example, all verbs (with exception) use the “a” sound in

the first syllable while its noun equivalent will use the “e” sound in the first vowel position. The system they developed is called the pointing system whose intention is not to alter the established written form. The pointing added small *dots* and *symbols* below and above the character.

Aramaic has the “a,” “e,” “i,” “o,” and “u” vowel sounds as shown below.

Table of Full-Vowels

| Group | Name | Sign | Position | Sound | Example |
|----------|---------------------|------|----------|-----------------|----------------|
| a | Qamets ³ | ◌ֹ | אָ | a, as in car | אָב father |
| | Pathach | ◌ַ | אֲ | a, as in bat | בַּת daughter |
| e | Tsere | ◌ֵ | אֵ | e, as in they | אֵל God |
| | Tsere-Yod | ◌ֵי | אֵי | e, as in they | בֵּית house |
| | S [°] ghol | ◌ֵי | אֵי | e, as in met | שֶׁקֶל shekel |
| i | Hireq-Yod | ◌ִי | אִי | i, as in marine | הִיא she |
| | Hireq | ◌ִ | אִ | i, as in sit | עִם with |
| o | Holem | ◌ֹ | אֹ | o, as in row | לֹא not |
| | Holem-Vav | ◌ֹו | אֹו | o, as in row | אוֹר light |
| | Qamets-Hatuf | ◌ֹ | אֹ | o, as in cost | כֹּל all |
| u | Shureq | ◌ֻ | אֻ | u, as in rule | הוּא he |
| | Qibbutz | ◌ֻ | אֻ | u, as in rule | שֻׁלְחָן table |

Long Vowels. The following table lists the Aramaic/Hebrew long vowels.

| Sign | Name | | Transliteration | Example | | |
|------|--------|-------|-----------------|---------|-----|--------|
| ◌ֹ | qamets | קָמֶץ | ā | אָב | 'av | father |
| ◌ֵ | sere | סֵרֵי | ē | אֵל | 'el | God |
| ◌ֹ | holem | חֹלֶם | ō | לֹא | lo' | not |

Naturally long vowels. The following table lists the Aramaic/Hebrew naturally long vowels. Naturally long vowels are formed using either a *vav* (ו) or a *yod* (י).

| Sign | Name | | Transliteration | Example | | |
|------|-----------|-------------|-----------------|---------|-------|----------|
| ◌ֵי | sere yod | סֵרֵי יוֹד | ê | בֵּית | beyth | house of |
| ◌ִי | hireq yod | חִירֶק יוֹד | î | הִיא | hiy' | she |
| ◌ֹו | holem vav | חֹלֶם וָו | ô | אוֹר | 'or | light |
| ◌ֻ | šureq | שֻׁרֶק | û | הוּא | hu' | he |

Short Vowels. The following table lists the Aramaic/Hebrew short vowels.

³ The older authors use qāmēs, pātāh, etc. The spelling is often different depending on the author. One thing the beginning student of Aramaic needs to know is that nothing is consistent between different authors.

| Sign | Name | Transliteration | Sound | Example | | |
|------|--------------------|-----------------|-------|---------------|------|----------|
| - | paṭah | פתח | ă | a, as in bat | בת | daughter |
| - | s [°] gol | סגול | ě | e, as in met | שקל | shekel |
| - | hireq | חירק | ĩ | i, as in sit | עם | with |
| - | qameṣ hâtuṫ | קמץ חטוף | ö | o, as in cost | כל | all |
| - | qibbuṣ | קבוץ | ũ | u, as in rule | שלחן | table |

The Half-Vowels

In addition to vowels, Aramaic, like Hebrew, makes use of semi-vowels or half-vowels. These half vowels make use of the *sheva* or *shewa* (שׁוּאָ). There are two classes of *sheva*, the first is the vocal *sheva* which stands alone and is pronounced like an “e” as in בְּרִית (b[°]rit) pronounced “breet.” It is transliterated as a superscript e as in b^erit. The other class is a silent *sheva* which is a *sheva* placed beneath a consonant that ends a syllable and sometimes placed in the final kaf (ךְ).

The other *sheva* is used as a compound with other vowels and makes a hurried vowel sound. The compound *shevas* are as follows:

| First | Second | Compound | Name | Sounds like | Example |
|-------|--------|----------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| - | . | ְ | hatef - pathah | hurried Pathach | אֲנִי ’a ^e niy “I” |
| .. | . | ֿ | hatef- s ^e ghol | hurried S ^e ghol | אֲנוֹשׁ ’e ^e noš “man” |
| ַ | . | ֿ | hatef- qamets | hurried Qamets | חֲלִי holi “sickness” |

Consonants Used as Vowels

The consonants אהווי may be used as vowel letters. א and ה are used for final ā or ē, ו for ō or ū, and ם for ī and ē. Final ē, which occurs very rarely, is indicated by ם.⁴

Daghesh Forte

The *Daghesh forte* is a dot in the letter which indicated one is to double the consonant in which it occurs. It is the same mark as the *daghesh lene* placed in the six consonants. For example in, חַבְבֵּן (habben) the *bet* is doubled.

The rules for a *daghesh forte* are as follows:

1. A dot in any letter other than a BaGaD KeFaT letter is a *daghesh forte*.
2. A *daghesh forte* is always found immediately after a vowel, whereas a *daghesh lene* is never found after a vowel.

Gutturals

⁴ Franz Rosenthal, *A Grammar of Biblical Aramaic* (Wiesbaden: Die Deutsche, 2002), p. 12

The gutturals are: א, ע, ה, ח, and sometimes ר. They are gutturals because they are pronounced from the back of the throat.

Sibilants

The sibilants are: ס, צ, ש, and שׁ. They are classified as sibilants because of their “s” sounds.

Labials

The labials are: ב, מ, and פ.

Furtive Pathach

When a word ends with one of the gutturals or and a Pathach is beneath the final guttural it is called a Furtive Pathach and the Pathach is pronounced before the final guttural. An example is רוּחַ (ruach), “spirit, wind.”

Syllables

The word syllable comes to the English from the Greek *syllabē* meaning, “that which holds together,” and applies to how a word is pronounced. A word or part of a word pronounced with a single, uninterrupted sound of the voice is a syllable. Aramaic words have as many syllables as they have separate consonants. In general, words are broken up into syllables using the following rules:

- All syllables in a word must begin with a consonant.
- A syllable must include one full vowel or a half vowel.
- There are as many syllables as there are full vowels.
- A syllable will split the doubled letter of a *daghesh forte*.

Aramaic syllables are either open or closed. An open syllable is one that ends in a vowel and is normally a long vowel. A closed syllable is one that ends in a consonant and the vowel will normally be short.

Aramaic Differences

There are a few things to point out concerning the differences between Aramaic and Hebrew. These differences are summarized as follows:

1. Hebrew words with zayin (ז) may be changed to dalet (ד) in Aramaic.

| Hebrew | Aramaic | Translation |
|--------|---------|--------------|
| זָהָב | דָּהָב | gold |
| זָבַח | דָּבַח | to sacrifice |

2. Hebrew words with tsade (צ) may be changed to tet (ט) in Aramaic.

| Hebrew | Aramaic | Translation |
|--------|---------|-------------|
| צוּר | טוּר | mountain |

3. Hebrew words with tsade (צ) may be changed to ayin (ע) in Aramaic.

| Hebrew | Aramaic | Translation |
|--------|---------|-------------|
| אֶרֶץ | אַרְעָה | land, earth |
| עֵץ | אַע | tree |

4. Hebrew words with shin (ש) may be changed to tav (ת) in Aramaic.

| Hebrew | Aramaic | Translation |
|--------|---------|-------------|
| שׁוֹר | תּוֹר | bull |
| יָשַׁב | יָתַב | to dwell |

5. The Aramaic consonants are interchangeable⁵.

| | | | Aramaic option | Aramaic option | Translation |
|---|-----|---|---------------------|--------------------|-------------|
| א | and | ה | לְא | לְה | not |
| | | | נְחָרָא | נְחָרְה | river |
| ש | and | ס | אַרְתַּחְשַׁשְׁתָּא | אַרְתַּחְשִׁסְתָּא | Artaxerxes |
| | | | שְׁבָכָא | סְבָכָא | harp |

6. Hebrew words normally spelled with the long o-class vowel, Holem Vav, may be spelled with the long a-class vowel, Qamets, in Aramaic. This is referred to as the Canaanite shift.⁶

| Hebrew | Aramaic | Trnanslation |
|---------|---------|--------------|
| שָׁלוֹם | שְׁלָם | peace |
| אָנוּשׁ | אַנְשׁ | man |
| דּוֹר | דְּר | generation |
| טוֹב | טְב | good |

7. The determinate state. The definite article is moved to the end of the word and changes to Qamets with alef (א,).

| Hebrew | Aramaic | Trnanslation |
|--------|---------|--------------|
| מֶלֶךְ | מְלָכָא | the king |

8. Fewer uses of the vav conjunction (ו) in Aramaic than in Hebrew.

⁵ Miles Van Pelt, *Basics of Biblical Aramaic* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), p. 4

⁶ Miles Van Pelt, *Basics of Biblical Aramaic* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), p. 10

9. Greater use of the word ׀. The word may be used as a subordinate conjunction (“that, so that, when, after”), a genitive (“that of, which belongs to”), and a relative pronoun (“who, which, that”).

10. Common words. Some common words are noticeably different.

| Common word | Aramaic | Hebrew |
|-------------|---------|--------------|
| to come | אתה | בוא |
| to fear | דחל | יָרָא |
| to see | חזה | רָאָה |
| to speak | מלל | דָּבַר אָמַר |
| to go down | נחת | יָרַד |

Practice

- Memorize the consonants.
- Memorize the vowels.
- Memorize the half-vowels.
- Memorize the 9 major differences between Hebrew and Aramaic.