

Hebrew Vowels Intro Handout (Ross Lesson 2)  
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1 Original Hebrew writing system (and therefore transmission of Hebrew biblical texts) was *consonantal*. That is, no vowel signs were represented orthographically.

1.1 No writing system perfectly represents all the sounds and words of any language.

1.2 Purpose of orthography: to signal *sufficient* information to a language user/native speaker to know the words and forms of words intended by the communicator.

1.2.1 Can we understand English without vowels? Try it!

FRGDSLVDTHWRLDTHTHGVHSNLYBGTTNSN

That's pretty difficult? What if we add some spaces?

FR GD S LVD TH WRLD THT H GV HS NLY BGTTN SN

1.2.2 Here's how the first words of Gen 1:1 look in Hebrew without vowels, then with.

בראשית ברא אלהים

בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים

2 The use of the *mater* to mark vowels.

2.1 Due to potential ambiguities in the Hebrew consonantal text, Jewish scribes, by the 6<sup>th</sup> C, BC, were inserting certain consonants symbols into the text to mark vowels. This was not always done consistently.

*mater*  
*matres lectionis*

*matres*

2.2 Most common *mater* letters indicating vowel sound:

ה  
ו  
י

2.3 Exx. of ambiguities where using a *mater* would have been helpful:

	בת ( <i>bat</i> daughter)		על ( <i>‘al</i> over, upon)
בת		על	
	בית ( <i>bêt</i> house of)		עלה ( <i>‘olâ</i> offering)

### 3 Masoretic vowel pointing

3.1 During the Exile and Diaspora (6<sup>th</sup> C, BC, and beyond), Hebrew was spoken less and less, as Jews began interacting with their neighbors in Greek and Aramaic.

3.2 Starting around AD 600 and throughout the medieval period, Jewish scribes (collectively termed Masoretes) began to adopt a system of written vowel pointing in order to preserve the vocalization of the consonantal text that they had received.

Pointed text:

Unpointed text:

3.3 Location of vowel points: most are immediately below, and a few are to the left of or above the consonant. (See Gen 1:1 above.)

3.4 Masoretic vowel points were superimposed upon the received consonantal text with the system of *matres lectionis*, creating a situation where sometimes a syllable was doubly marked for the vowel. So, where no *mater* existed, a Masoretic vowel point was inserted. And where a *mater* already existed, the Masoretes still placed their vowel point, but left the *mater* where it was. They were preservers of the reading tradition and in no way sought to add a *mater* where one hadn't been placed, or to remove one already there.

בין 'between' (without *mater yod*, rare)    בין 'between' (with *mater yod*, common)