

Lesson 1: Consonants

The consonants of Aramaic are given here, together with their transliterated form, name, and approximate (and conventional) pronunciation:

א	ʾ	'aleph	pronounced like the pause between syllables in the Cockney pronunciation of “sweater” or “better”: /swe'er/, /be'er/ Conventionally it is not pronounced by English speakers.
ב	b	beth	/b/ (or /v/, see Lesson 3)
ג	g	gimmel	/g/ (or /gh/, but the two sounds are not conventionally distinguished)
ד	d	daleth	/d/ (or /dh/, the sound of <i>th</i> in the pronunciation of the English word “that”)
ה	h	he	/h/
ו	w	waw	/w/ or /v/ Some people pronounce this letter like /w/, others like /v/. A student should decide which pronunciation she or he is comfortable with and pronounce every <i>waw</i> in the same way.
ז	z	zayin	/z/
ח	ḥ	het	/ch/, as in the German pronunciation of “Bach” or as in the pronunciation of the Yiddish word “Chutzpah” (or, “Hutzpah”).
ט	ṭ	tet	emphatic t, though conventionally no distinction is made in pronunciation between this t and the <i>taw</i> , listed below.
י	y	yodh	/y/
כ	k	kaph	/k/ (or /ch/, see Lesson 3)
ל	l	lamed	/l/
מ	m	mem	/m/
נ	n	nun	/n/
ס	s	samekh	/s/
ע	ʿ	'ayin	no approximate sound in English, some say like the sound just before vomiting, some say like the sound of a camel getting up, both of which seem to reflect a bias against this phoneme. Conventionally, it is not pronounced.
פ	p	peh	/p/ (or /ph/ as in phone, see Lesson 3)

ז	s	<i>sadeh</i>	emphatic s: pronounced conventionally like /tz/
ק	q	<i>qoph</i>	emphatic k: pronounced conventionally like <i>kaph</i>
ר	r	<i>resh</i>	/r/
ש	ś	<i>sin</i>	/s/, pronounced conventionally like <i>samekh</i>
שׁ	š	<i>shin</i>	/sh/ as in the English word shine
ת	t	<i>taw</i>	/t/ (or /th/, the sound of <i>th</i> in “these” [compare to the pronunciation of <i>daleth</i> as /dh/ listed above]; see Lesson 3)

Some of these letters, like *beth*, have two different pronunciations, as will be explained in Lesson 3. Despite this, they are always transliterated with the same Roman letter. Thus, even in cases where ב is pronounced like /v/, ב is still transliterated with the Roman letter b.

In addition to these letter forms, five letters have forms that occur only at the end of a word:

ך	k	<i>kaph</i> (Note the two dots that are always written with the final <i>kaph</i> .)
ם	m	<i>mem</i>
ן	n	<i>nun</i>
ף	p	<i>peh</i>
ץ	s	<i>sadeh</i>

Note the similarities between certain forms. The *beth* (ב) and *kaph* (כ) letters look similar. The *sin* (שׁ) and *shin* (שׁ) letters are distinguished by a single dot above them. And, the final *mem* (ם) looks like *samekh* (ס).

Exercise: 1a.

Practice transliterating the following words. For example, מלך → mlk. (Note that the transliterated word in the Roman alphabet is written and read from left to right [m→l→k], although the Aramaic script is written and read from right to left [ך ← ל ← מ].)

מלכא
("the king")

תקיף
תקיפין
("strong" in the singular and in the plural)

בית
ביתא
בתין
בתיא
("house," "the house," "houses," and "the houses")

כתב
כתבת
("he wrote" and "she wrote")

אמר
אמרו
("he said" and "they said")

יכתב
יכתבון
("he writes" and "they write")

Exercise: 1b.

Now try putting these transliterated words into Aramaic script. Remember that you must reverse the order of the letters. Thus, rb' is rendered in Aramaic script רבא.

ktb
ktbt
("he wrote" and "she wrote")

k'n
("now")

'l
("over," "above")

ʾdyn
 (“then”)

ptgmʾ
 (“message”)

mdh
 (“tribute”)

šlm
 (“peace,” “well-being”)

ʾrʿ
 ʾrʾʾ
 (“land” and “the land”)

Exercise: 1c.

Try transliterating this full Aramaic sentence from the book of Ezra (4:20):

מלכין תקיפין הוו על ירושלם

ושליטין בכל עבר נהרא

ומדה בלו והלך מתיהב להון

“Strong kings were over Jerusalem
and (they had) authority in all Abar-Nahara’
and tribute, tax, and toll was given to them.”

Exercise: 1d.

Now try transliterating this sentence from Ezra 5:4 (slightly altered for the sake of consistency and coherency):

אדין כנמא אמרו להון

מן אנון שמהת גבריא די דנה בנינא בנין

“Then, accordingly, they said to them,
‘What are the names of the men who are building this structure (literally: who, this structure, are building)?’”

Exercise: 1e.

Now, write in Aramaic script the following transliterated passage from Ezra 5:5 (again slightly altered for consistency):

w‘yn ’lhn hwt ‘l šby yhwdy’

wl’ btlw hmw

“The eye of their God was over the elders of the Judaeans and they (i.e., the elders) did not stop them (i.e., the builders).”

Exercise: 1f.

N.B. (*Nota Bene* = Note well):

The doubling of a consonant is indicated through a dot placed in the center of the letter. Thus, ב = b, but בּ = bb; כתב = ktb, but כּתב = kttb.

Transliterate below the following passage from Ezra 5:6 and 5:17, noting where the doubled consonants are:

פרשגן אגרתא די - שלח תתני . . . על דריוש מלכא

“A copy of the letter that Tattenai sent . . . to Darius the king.”

יתבקר בבית גנזיא די מלכא תמה די בבבל

“Let a search be made in the house of records of the king there in Babylon.”