# Working with the BDB Hebrew Lexicon

## Part 1: Organization by Root

1. The organizational principle of the BDB lexicon is the system of a three-letter root. Since this is a basic way in which vocabulary is formed in Hebrew, this system has the advantage of grouping together vocabulary that is etymologically related. For example, the root יָשַׁב has the following entries in BDB:

   יָשַׁב 1090 **vb.** sit, remain, dwell [1090 = number of occurrences in the Bible]

   שֶׁבֶת **n.f.** seat, dwelling, place (properly Inf. Qal from יָשַׁב)

   [שִׁיבָה] **n.f.** sojourn [square brackets mean the base form has been reconstructed]

   יֶשֶׁבְאָב **n.pr.m.** Levite of the 14th course 1Ch 24:13 [masculine proper noun]

   יֹשֵׁב בַּשֶּׁבֶת **n.pr.m.** one of David's heroes 2S 23:8

   ישבו בנב Kt, יִשְׁבִּי בְנֹב Qr, **n.pr.m.** a gigantic Philistine 2S 21:16 [Kt = *ketiv* = "written"; Qr = *qere* = "read." That is, where the written tradition has an u-class vowel, represented by the *vav*, the oral tradition has an i-class vowel, shown by the *chireq-yod*.]

   יָשָׁבְקָשָׁה **n.pr.m.** a son of Heman 1Ch 25:4, 24

   יוֹשִׁבְיָה **n.pr.m.** a Simeonite 1Ch 4:35

   מוֹשָׁב **n.m.** seat, assembly, dwelling-place, dwelling, dwellers

   תּוֹשָׁב **n.m.** sojourner, only P (H) and late [P & H are hypothetical documents believed by some to be sources for the Pentateuch]

   In this example note that there is alphabetical arrangement within the root principle, ranging from forms with the *yod* elided to forms with prefix *mem* and *tav*.

2. Sometimes more than one non-related root will share the same root letters. In this case, each root with its related forms will be listed separately, and the first entry of each set will have a successive Roman numeral. For example,

   I. עָנָה **vb.** answer, respond [p. 772, #6030 = Strong's number]

   II. [עָנָה] **vb.** be occupied, busied with [p. 775, #6031]

   III. [עָנָה] **vb.** be bowed down, afflicted [p. 776, #6031]

   IV. עָנָה **vb.** sing [p. 777, #6030; historical etymology shows a different *ayin* than "answer, respond"]

**3.** Exceptions to the triliteral root system do occur.

   A. Primary nouns: בֵּן, "son"; שֶׂה, "sheep"

   B. Grammatical function words: לֹא, "not"; לְ, "to," "for"; מִי, "who?"
     But even many of these are put into a triliteral system by BDB on the basis of a presumed
     etymological connection: עַל, "upon," "concerning," etc., related to עָלָה, "to go up."
     The preposition לִפְנֵי ("before") is composed of לְ + the construct state of פָּנִים ("face").
     The latter noun is listed under a presumed root פנה, and לִפְנֵי itself is discussed on p.
     816, section II.4.

   C. Loanwords: הֵיכָל, "temple," "palace," related to Sumerian *egal* ("great house"); כַּרְפַּס,
     "cotton," from Sanskrit; פַּרְדֵּס, "park" (Persian); בַּרְזֶל, "iron" (source unknown);
     קִנָּמוֹן, "cinnamon" (unknown eastern source).

## Part 2: Use of Cross-References

Often it will not be obvious what the root is. For verbs, the reader will always be expected to be
able to determine a root. For other words, there often will be a cross-reference. For example,

     עַתָּה ("now"): It is listed alphabetically on p. 800, along with עַתִּי, עִתִּי, and עֵת,
     followed by — sub I. ענה. p. 773f. This means: Look under the first set of words for the
     root consonants ענה on p. 773 and the following page. Cross-references do not always
     include page numbers.

     מוֹצָא, [מוֹצָאָה] v. יצא, p. 425f. This means: For מוֹצָא or a form which appears to
     come from מוֹצָאָה, see the root יצא on p. 425 and the following page.

## Part 3: Organization of the Information within an Entry

**1.** Etymological information appears first, in original script for Arabic, Syriac, Ethiopic, etc.
   This information will not ordinarily be very useful for someone who has not had specialized
   study in comparative Semitic languages.

**2.** For verbs:

   A. The individual stems or patterns (בִּנְיָנִים) are listed separately.

   B. The first part of each entry (after the etymology) lists forms that are labeled for the
     conjugation (*Pf., Impf., Imv., Inf. abs., Inf. cstr., Pt.*)

**3.** The meanings are classified and sub classified. For example, דָּבָר :
   I. sg. *speech, discourse, saying, word*, as the sum of that which is spoken:
        1. *of men*
           a. *discreet in speech*, etc.
           b. *word of command*
           c. *message, report, tidings*
           d. *advice, counsel*

   e. *request*
   f. *promise*
   g. *charge, complaint*
   h. *decision, sentence*
   i. *theme, story*
  2. *word of God*, as a divine communication in the form of commandments, ….
   a. using the preposition אֶל, as in "then the word of Yahweh came to …."
   b. Yahweh often confirms his word of promise
II. *saying, utterance, sentence*, as a section of a discourse
  1. *of men* [with further sub classification]
  2. *of God*
III. *a word, words*
  1. *of men*
  2. *of God*
IV. *matter, affair,* thing about which one speaks
  1. *business, occupation*
  2. pl. *acts*
  3. *matter, affair*
  4. *events, things*
  5. *cause, case* for judicial investigation
  6. *something, anything* (indefinite)
  7. *way, manner*
  8. *reason, cause*

## Part 4: Concordance Information

1. Entries marked with † are supposed to have all the biblical references listed. This symbol may occur at the beginning of the entry (see דָּג on p. 185, #1709) or on various subdivisions within an entry (see for the *pual* and *hitpael* of the verb דבר on p. 181).

2. A plus (+) following a reference means the form occurs more times. Sometimes the number of additional instances will also be given: see the *piel* forms of דבר on p. 180, where most of them give one reference followed by the + sign.

## Part 5: Advantages and Disadvantages of the BDB Lexicon

1. Still the best reference lexicon in the English language for students, it has a wealth of information. The new HALOT lexicon may eventually replace the BDB, but for now it is still somewhat expensive for students.

2. The root system can lead to overemphasis on etymology, and it makes it very difficult to use.

3. It's Hebrew text is not based on the Leningrad Codex. This is not usually a problem, but occasionally you might see a form which is not exactly the same as what you see in the *BHS*.

4. It was done before the extremely important discovery of texts in the Ugaritic language, a rich source of cognates and lexical information dating to between 1400 and 1200 B.C.

5. Its language can at times be archaic.

## Part 6: Additional Lexicons/Dictionaries

1. "Short" lexicons/dictionaries

   A. Langenscheidt's Pocket Hebrew Dictionary Hebrew-English (To the Old Testament): small paperback, convenient carry, inexpensive.

   B. Holladay, William Lee. *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament: Based upon the Lexical Work of Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner* (based on as much of the 3rd edition of the KB lexicon as was available at the time)

2. Full-sized lexicons

   A. Koehler and Baumgartner Lexicon: the second edition is in two volumes. It takes advantage of Ugaritic cognates and is arranged alphabetically. It has the following disadvantages:

      1. It was originally done in German and supplied with English translations. The English translations are not always the best, sometimes reflecting a too literal approach to the underlying German.

      2. The quality of the work in the Hebrew section is considered on the whole inferior to BDB. The same is not necessarily true of the Aramaic section.

   B. New Koehler and Baumgartner in English (HALOT), 4 vols. for Hebrew, 1 vol. for Aramaic. This is an excellent work, based on the 3rd German edition but also improved from that. Unfortunately, it is too expensive to be a practical work for the average student. It is a good reference work, however, for exegetical work. There is now a two-volume edition that is much cheaper than the five-volume set, and it is available as an add-on for ™Bible Works for Windows and ™Logos.

   C. *Gesenius' Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament*: This is the lexicon which formed the basis of the BDB lexicon. I personally do not have experience with it.

3. Specialized lexical works

   A. David Clines, ed., *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*: a multi-volume work which is not yet complete. It includes the ancient inscriptions as well as the OT.

   B. Gleason Archer, Bruce Waltke, and R. Laird Harris, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*: highly recommended for students. 2 vols.

   C. G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*: somewhat the equivalent of Kittel's *TDNT*. It can be highly technical. Excellent for etymological information. It now has 10 volumes and still has many more to go.

   D. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, eds., *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (3 vols.; trans. Mark E. Biddle): helpful on the articles it discusses but often surprising in what is not discussed. The contributors have a liberal slant. A recommended purchase.

   E. Ernest Klein. *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English*. Out of print.

   F. W. Van Gemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis* (5 vols., Zondervan).