A simple transcription system for Biblical Hebrew

The purpose of transcribing languages written in other scripts into the Roman alphabet is to enable those who normally read this alphabet to read language-examples conveniently and fluently. However, the pointed Masoretic script used for Biblical Hebrew is phonetically very "narrow", making many distinctions which are barely or not at all contrastive, and it even makes graphic distinctions which never corresponded to any phonetic difference (e.g the long mid vowels /e o/ might be spelled with or without jod or waw as *matres lectionis*). As a result, a scholarly transcription that faithfully reflects every detail of Masoretic orthography has to be burdened with a very large number of diacritics and special symbols, which detract from legibility in practice. For many purposes this level of detail is not relevant, particularly since examples are all quoted from the same widely-available source, making it easy to check doubtful points with the original.

Accordingly I use a "broad" transcription system which minimizes these complications.

The Hebrew consonant letters are represented as follows (in the standard Hebrew alphabetic order):

' b g d h w z ch th j k l m n x gh p c q r s/sh t

However, jod, waw, and he are ignored when they function solely as *matres lectionis* (a word-final *h* represents he with dagesh). The ending of construct-state masculine plurals is written *-ej*, to distinguish them from word-final short *e*. Apostrophe, for aleph, is omitted wherever its presence can be inferred from the fact that every syllable begins with a consonant: aleph is written when preceded by shwa (*m'od* 'very') or when not followed by a vowel (*lo'* 'not', *ro'sh* 'head'), but it is not written at the beginning of a word or between vowels other than shwa (*adom* 'red', *mea* 'hundred'). Note that the transcription ignores the question whether a particular aleph was actually pronounced; by the Masoretic period many alephs had become "silent letters", but these are shown as apostrophe in the transcription if the stated conditions are met.

The fricative ("spirant") allophones of the stop phonemes /b d g p t k/ are determined

automatically by a preceding vowel, so they are not given separate transcriptions. However, where dagesh indicates a geminate consonant, this is written by doubling the Roman letter (the first letter of a digraph, e.g. *ssh*).

The various points for vowels other than shwa are written as *a e i o u*, with length distinctions ignored, and the diphthongal allophones which are automatically determined before "guttural" consonants in stressed syllables ("furtive pattah") are written as the corresponding pure vowels: the name Noah is spelled *Noch*. "Composite shwas" are written as the vowel represented by the non-shwa half of the symbol. On the other hand, the alternative values of qamats are distinguished, as (long) *a* versus (short) *o*. The (simple) shwa is written as an apostrophe, but only where its presence is revealed by spirantization of a following stop, or where the preceding and following letters could otherwise be taken together as a single geminate or digraph consonant, e.g. *hin'ni* 'here I am', *t'hilla* 'praise'. (These rules for omitting apostrophes mean that an apostrophe will represent shwa when it occurs between two consonant letters, but will represent glottal stop in all other situations.) Non-word-final stressed syllables are marked by acute accent.

As an example, the opening verses of Genesis will read:

> Bre'shit bara' Elohim et hasshmájim w'et haárec. Whaárec haj'ta tóhu wabóhu wchóshek ghal-pnej t'hom wruch Elohim mrachépet ghal-pnej hammájim.

The many vowel alternations in the language make it difficult to be sure that this system provides distinct spellings for every possible phonemic contrast. In my book *Writing Systems* (p. 81 of the 2015 edition) I stated that long and short *a* could contrast in monosyllables, giving examples *dar* 'mother-of-pearl', with short *a*, and *dar* 'dwell', with long *a* – my transcription could not distinguish these. But this form for 'dwell', from the root *d-w-r*, seems to be post-Biblical, and I believe my transcription system comes very close, at least, to the ideal of providing distinct spellings for every sound-contrast in the Biblical language as reflected in the Masoretic orthography.

Heb trans