

E-BOOK

Biblical Hebrew Poetry and Word Play

Reconstructing the Original Oral¹, Aural² and Visual Experience

By David Steinberg

David.Steinberg@houseofdavid.ca

Home page <http://www.houseofdavid.ca/>

רבי טרפון ... היה אומרת "לא עליך המלאכה לגמור ולא אתה בן חורין
להבטל ממנה."

Rabbi Tarfon ... used to say "You are not required to complete the work but you are not free to desist from it."

Avot 2:21

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Reconstructed Biblical Hebrew Vocalization of [Wolfgang Richter](#)

[Wolfgang Richter and his team have produced a remarkable series of publications](#) that, among other things, vocalized the entire Hebrew Bible³, [Ben Sira](#) and the corpus of [Epigraphic Hebrew](#). The vocalization system used is explained in [Richter 1983](#) and is briefly summarized in the introduction to the Genesis volume of *Biblia hebraica transcripta* (BHT). It should be noted that Richter's aim was to produce an "*othographiebezogene morphologische Transkription*" which perhaps might be translated as "morphological transcription within constraints imposed by the orthography of the MT". Although Richter did not intend to recreate EBHP, his transcriptions are, in practice, fairly close to what we would understand EBHP to have been. Where his transcriptions depart from the probable reality of EBHP, this is usually due to the constraints imposed on his method by the MT. This can be seen by comparing his transcriptions of the biblical texts in BHT with those of [JEH](#), with their earlier orthography, in *Althebräische Inschriften transkribiert* (AIT).

Those wishing to make use of Richter's transcriptions to develop a close approximation to EBHP should note the following:

- (1) The transcriptions do not indicate word stress;
- (2) The transcriptions do not indicate [tonic lengthening of originally short vowels in closed stressed syllables in nouns in the absolute case](#)
- (3) Because the gemination is due to a semantic redundancy rule (i.e. it is a necessary/regular part of a grammatical feature) the transcriptions systematically omit the automatic [gemination](#) following:
 - (a) the [waw consecutive](#) of the [prefix conjugation](#);
 - (b) the article *ha-* n;
 - (c) the relative *šā-* v.
- (4) 3ms. pronominal suffix - AHT gives, in deference to MT orthography, *ō* while AIT usually gives *ahu* (eg. p. 6 Lak2:2 *°abd=hu* to be vocalized [°ab'dahu]). In EBHP it [might have been](#) /ahu/, /ō:h/ or /ōl/.
- (5) The transliteration usually leaves out the short vowels ("*Bindervokal*")⁴ before [2ms.](#) and [2pl.](#) pronominal prefixes on nouns. Thus 'your return' (Gen. 4:19) is transcribed *šūb=ka* reflecting a pronunciation of /šū'bika/ or /šū'baka/.

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(6) The transcriptions ignore the certain [polyphonic nature in EBHP of the letters n and y](#) but not that of ψ .

(7) Both BHT and AIT transliterate the *qal*/ms. imp. as *qtul* (eg. AIT *ktub* p. 13, Arad 1:2; *ḥtum* p. 16, Arad 17:2). However (inconsistently?), in deference to the MT **The *qal* inf. constr. is vocalized *qtul* in BHT** (eg. Judges 5:2a) **but** (the earlier form) ***qutul* in AIT** (eg. p. 7 Lak3:2 *šuluḥ=ka* to be vocalized [šulu'hika] or [šulu'haka]). Similarly, the ubiquitous opening for quotations TH ר'אמ'ר is vocalized *lā(')mur* in BHT but *li'umur* in AIT (eg. p. 7 Lak3:6).

Cf. [Infinitive Construct and Masculine Singular Imperative of Qal \$C_1V_xC_2V_xC_3 > C_1C_2V_xC_3\$ or \$C_1V_xC_2C_3\$](#) .

(8) The transcriptions reflect two developments in pre-exilic Hebrew that most experts consider took place in the post exilic period:

(a) the [reduction of geminated final consonants](#) ; and,

(b) the [elision of syllable-or word-final alephs](#);

(9) The transcriptions assume unstressed [heterogeneous diphthong contraction](#) that many experts consider took place in the post-exilic period.

It should also be noted, that Richter's vowel transcriptions are exclusively phonemic giving no indication of [probable short vowel allophones](#) in [\[EBHP\]](#).

(Note the detailed bibliography at

<http://www.dailyhebrew.com/resources/bibliography/hebrew-ugaritic-bibliography/>)

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Note - This book is the only comprehensive diachronic study of Biblical Hebrew written since the *Bauer and Leander* of the early 1920s. The author is one of the best Hebraists of the 20th century. Though this book is not without its weaknesses (see http://www.houseofdauid.ca/anc_heb_Blau_rev.htm), **the full range of material covered in it is absolutely fundamental knowledge for anyone who wishes to make knowledgeable comments on Biblical Hebrew historical linguistics.** It is not a book to be "perused" but to be ingested and assimilated into one's fundamental knowledge and understanding. It is easily available to everyone either through purchase or through inter-library loan from your local library.

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¹ Oral = expressed in spoken form as distinct from written form.

² Aural = of hearing or sound; relating to the ear or hearing, or to receptiveness and response to speech.

³ [MT](#) on the right hand page; Richter's vocalized transcription opposite on the left hand page.

⁴ See [Richter 1983](#) p. 130.

⁵ I have found this book to be rather idiosyncratic see review in Jerusalem Post Oct. 24, 2004

⁶ This is an excellent article. However, I have found and verified the following typos -

1. P. 100 - the text has "... /i/ [i], [u:]". This is a misprint for "... /i/ [i], [i:]".

2. P. 92 and 93 - the text has "...[va:jhi:]". This is a misprint for "...[va:j'hi:]".

3. P. 96 - the text has "...[ɔ:mRi:m] 'guards'". This is a misprint for "... [ɔ:m'Ri:m] 'guards'".

⁷ From Zevit's introduction -

The present discussion has broad implications for historical linguistics, comparative Semitics, the history of Hebrew, Israelite history, and biblical studies. Because of this, the National Association of Professors of Hebrew arranged a panel at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in 2004. Scholars were invited to deal directly or tangentially with problems such as the following: Could Late Biblical Hebrew and Pre-exilic Biblical Hebrew coexist as living registers? And if so, for how long and under what conditions? Does Late Biblical Hebrew have a Babylonian origin? Is there evidence of Late Biblical Hebrew in Haggai and Zechariah? They were asked to consider theoretical issues such as the following that emerge from a consideration of Uriel Weinreich's well known and highly relevant *Languages In Contact*, The Hague, Paris: Mouton, 1970: What happens when languages change in general and how does this apply to Biblical Hebrew? How and under what conditions do languages shed and accumulate new features and how does this apply to Biblical Hebrew? How do languages accommodate themselves to new phonetic and cultural environments and how do they function? Under what sets of circumstances does dialectization occur and how do these apply to Biblical Hebrew?