

E-BOOK

Biblical Hebrew Poetry and Word Play

Reconstructing the Original Oral¹, Aural² and Visual Experience

By David Steinberg

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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

Companion [E-book](#) - [History of the Ancient and Modern Hebrew Language](#)

[To print use PDF file here](#)

[TERMS, ABBREVIATIONS AND LINGUISTIC SYMBOLS](#)

[Bibliography](#)

[A Few Introductory Words](#)

I [The Purpose of this Web Page](#)

[Box 1 - Sense and Nonsense from Robert Alter](#)

[Box 2 - Wordplay in the Hebrew Bible](#)

[Box 3 - The Functions of Puns](#)

Box 4 - The Three Orthographic Elements in the Masoretic Text

II The Pronunciation of Hebrew Changed Substantially Between EBHP and the Time of the 8th-11th CE Masoretes Who Vocalized the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible

1. Biblical Skeleton, Changing Script and Orthography, Medieval Vowel Signs, Modern Pronunciation
2. The Problem of Music
3. Phases of Biblical Hebrew and its Antecedents (BHA) and the Development of the Biblical Hebrew Reading Tradition of the Tiberian Masoretes

Table 1 - Changes in the Noun from PH to TH - General Case

Table 2 - Changes in the Noun from PH to TH - Possible Special Cases

Table 3 - Change in Case Ending Vowel (ms. noun) with Attached Pronominal Suffix

Table 4 - Phase 3 *EBHP (*[EBHP/+ *[EBHP]) Imperfect, Jussive and Preterite

Table 5 - Phase 4 *LBHP (*[LBHP/ *[LBHP]) Imperfect, Jussive and Preterite

Table 6 - End of Phase 6 TH (/TH/+ *[TH]) Imperfect, Jussive and Preterite

III The Issue – The Oral-Aural Nature of Biblical Hebrew Poetry, and Some Kinds of Wordplay, Require the Closest Approximation to their Original Pronunciation for the Fullest Possible Appreciation and there are Practical Criteria for Reestablishing a Good Approximation of the Pre-Exilic Pronunciation

1. The Importance of Reconstructed EBHP

Box 5 - The Importance of Using Reconstructed EBHP/LBHP for the Appreciation of BH Poetry

2. The Basis for the Reconstruction of an Approximation to EBHP

Box 6 - Indirect Sources of Information Regarding the Pronunciation of BH

IV The Impact –Wordplay and Reconstructed EBHP

Box 7 - A Word on Homonymy

V Problems in Reconstruction of EBHP

Problem 1 – Where was the Stress Placed in Biblical Hebrew Words in EBHP?

Problem 2 – Problems Caused by the Contrast Between the Sound Structure of EBHP, Tiberian and Israeli Hebrew

Table 7 - Phonemes that were Orally Distinct in EBHP that have Merged in IH and Most Other Modern Pronunciations

EBHP and Tiberian Three Way Consonantal Opposition Reduced to Modern Two Way Opposition

[Table 8 - Changes in Pronunciation Between EBHP, TH and BH_{IH} most of which Alter the Syllabic Structure of Nouns](#)

[Problem 3 – Ancient Hebrew Orthography Provides Some, But Not Much, Guidance Regarding the Placement, and Nature of Vowels in EBHP](#)

[Table 9 - Ambiguity of Pre-exilic \(JEH\) Orthography](#)

[Table - Matres Lectionis in JEH](#)

[Problem 4 - What Letters Were Prone to Be Miscopied in the Course of Transmission of Hebrew Biblical Texts?](#)

[Box 8 - Scripts and Scripture](#)

[Table A - Potential for the Confusion of Letters In Hebrew Bible Text Transmission](#)

[Table B – Confusion of Letters in Paleo-Hebrew and Aramaic-Jewish Scripts](#)

[תִּיקוֹן - Questions that Cannot be resolved at Present](#)

[A Note on Epigraphic Hebrew](#)

[Pronunciation of Numerals in EBHP](#)

VI [Reconstruction of EBHP](#)

1. [Aims in Reconstructing EBHP](#)

[Box 9 - Can Biblical Texts be Linguistically Dated?](#)

2. [Changes in the Pronunciation Tradition of Biblical Hebrew Between EBHP and that Recorded in the Tiberian Masoretic Tradition \(early 10th century CE\)](#)

[Box 10 - Justification of Proposals for EBHP](#)

3. [Guidelines I Have Used in Reconstructing EBHP](#)

[Table 10 - Mono-syllabic Prepositions and Conjunctions Usually Linked to the Following Word in the MT by a *maqeph/makef* \(מקף\)](#)

[Table 11 - Vowels of EBHP](#)

4. [Examples of the Reconstructed EBHP Vocalization of Biblical Hebrew Texts](#)

[a. Archaic or Archaizing Poetic Texts](#)

- i) [Blessing of Jacob \(Genesis 49:1-27\)](#)
- ii) [Song of the Sea \(Exodus 15:1b-18\)](#)
- iii) [The Oracles of Balaam \(poetic portions of Numbers 23:7-24:24\)](#)
- iv) [Ha'azinu \(Deuteronomy 32:1-43\)](#)

v) [Blessing of Moses \(Deuteronomy 33\)](#)

vi) [Song of Deborah \(Judges 5\)](#)

b. [Various Short Poems](#)

c. [Psalmic Poetry](#)

i) [II Samuel](#) Chapt. 22 (Second version Psalm 18)

ii) [Psalm 23](#)

iii) [Psalm 114](#)

iv) [Psalm 121](#)

v) [Psalm 122](#)

vi) [Psalm 130](#)

d. [Lamentations](#)

i) [Lament of David](#) (II Samuel 1:19-27)

ii) [Lamentations 3:1-15](#) ("Qinah meter")

e. *Poetry of Song of Songs* - [Song 2:1-17](#) (as generally in the Song, mainly in "Qinah meter")

f. *Poetry of Job* - [Job 3:3-10](#)

g. [Prophetic Poetry](#)

i) [Jer. 1: 11-12; Jer. 1: 18-19; Jer. 19:14-15; Zeph. 3:1-2; Deut 15:1,4](#)

ii) [Amos 3:3-6; 3:8; 5:5-7; 5:10-12; 5:16b-17; 6:12; 8:7-10; 9:5-6; 9:13](#)

h. [Prose Texts](#)

i) [Genesis 2:18-24](#)

ii) [Genesis 4:1-3; Genesis 13:4-14; Joshua 7:1-3](#)

iii) [Siloam Inscription](#)

To print this e-book use the files below -

File Name	Title	Pages
http://www.houseofdauid.ca/anc_heb.pdf	Table of Contents and Bibliography	43
http://www.houseofdauid.ca/anc_heb_abb_dia.pdf	TERMS, ABBREVIATIONS AND LINGUISTIC SYMBOLS	19

File Name	Title	Pages
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_1.pdf	Tables and Excurses	5
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_12.pdf	Introduction and Phases of Biblical Hebrew and its Antecedents and the Development of the Biblical Hebrew Reading Tradition of the Tiberian Masoretes	44
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_34.pdf	The Basis for the Reconstruction of the Pronunciation of BH and its relevance to Wordplay	24
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_5.pdf	Problems in Reconstruction of EBHP	10
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_6.pdf	Reconstruction of EBHP	31
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_Problem 5.pdf	Changes in Pronunciation Between EBHP, TH and the Biblical Text Pronounced as IH - most of which Alter the Syllabic Structure of Nouns	6
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_conf_let_pot.pdf	Table A - Potential for the Confusion of Letters In Hebrew Bible Text Transmission	8
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_conf_let.pdf	Table B – Confusion of Letters in Paleo-Hebrew and Aramaic-Jewish Scripts	7
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_bib_heb_EH.htm	Note on Epigraphic Hebrew	4
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_bib_heb_history.pdf	Linguistic Changes Affecting the Pronunciation of Biblical Hebrew 2000 B.C.E. - 850 C.E. According to Various Scholars	20
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_fingem.pdf	Words Ending in Doubled Consonants with the Loss of Case Endings	5
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_forms.pdf	Words Significantly Different in Pronunciation in EBHP	28
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_forms_hist.pdf	History of Some Word Forms in Hebrew	4
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_numerals.pdf	Pronunciation of Numerals in EBHP	5
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_tegu.pdf	Tegu - Questions that Cannot be Resolved at Present	164
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_anc_heb_biy_t1.pdf	Table 1 - Reconstructed Late First Temple Orthography and Vocalization (EBHP) with Sound Files and Transposition into Tiberian Graphemes	13

File Name	Title	Pages
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_anc_heb_biy_t2.pdf	Blessing of Jacob Table 2 - Reconstructed Pre-Exilic Orthographies	6
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_anc_heb_biy_t3.pdf	Blessing of Jacob Table 3 - Proto-Masoretic Orthography	7
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_shiryim_t1.pdf	Song of the Sea Table 1 - Reconstructed Late First Temple Orthography and Vocalization (EBHP) with Sound Files and Transposition into Tiberian Graphemes	8
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_shiryim_t2.pdf	Song of the Sea Table 2 - Reconstructed Pre-Exilic Orthographies	6
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_shiryim_t3.pdf	Song of the Sea Table 3 - Proto-Masoretic Orthography	5
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_balaam_t1.pdf	Oracles of Balaam Table 1 - Reconstructed Late First Temple Orthography and Vocalization (EBHP) with Sound files and Transposition into Tiberian Graphemes	13
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_balaam_t2.pdf	Oracles of Balaam Table 2 - Reconstructed Pre-Exilic Orthographies	10
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_balaam_t3.pdf	Oracles of Balaam Table 3 - Proto-Masoretic Orthography	9
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_haazinu_t1.pdf	<i>Ha'azinu</i> Table 1 - Reconstructed Late First Temple Orthography and Vocalization (EBHP) with Sound Files	12
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_haazinu_t2.pdf	<i>Ha'azinu</i> Table 2 - Reconstructed Pre-Exilic Orthographies	10
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_haazinu_t3.pdf	<i>Ha'azinu</i> Table 3 - Proto-Masoretic Orthography	9
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_bim_t1.pdf	Blessing of Moses Table 1 - Reconstructed Late First Temple Orthography and Vocalization (EBHP) with Sound files and Transposition into Tiberian Graphemes	12
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_bim_t2.pdf	Blessing of Moses Table 2 - Reconstructed Pre-Exilic Orthographies	10
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_bim_t3.pdf	Blessing of Moses Table 3 - Proto-Masoretic Orthography	10
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_shirdb_t1.pdf	Song of Deborah Table 1 - Reconstructed Late First Temple Orthography and Vocalization (EBHP) with Sound Files and Transposition into Tiberian Graphemes	14

File Name	Title	Pages
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_shirdb_t2.pdf	Song of Deborah Table 2 - Reconstructed Pre-Exilic Orthographies	10
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_shirdb_t3.pdf	Song of Deborah Table 3 - Proto-Masoretic Orthography	9
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_shirdb_t4.pdf	Song of Deborah Table 4 - Metrics	3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_Short_Poems_t1.pdf	Short Poems Table 1 - Reconstructed Late First Temple Orthography and Vocalization (EBHP) with Sound files and Transposition into Tiberian Graphemes	37
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_Short_Poems_t2.pdf	Short Poems Table 2 - Reconstructed Pre-Exilic Orthographies	42
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_Short_Poems_t3.pdf	Short Poems Table 3 - Proto-Masoretic Orthography	40
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_2sam22_tab.pdf	II Samuel Chapt. 22 (= Psalm 18) - Reconstructed Late First Temple Orthography and Vocalization (EBHP) with SoundFiles	11
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_Ps_18_tab.pdf	Psalm 18 vss. 26b-48 in Reconstructed Preexilic, Secunda and Tiberian Hebrew	13
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_2sam22_par_ps18.pdf	Masoretic Text of II Samuel Chapt. 22 and Psalm 18 in Parallel Columns	5
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_ps23_tab.pdf	Psalm 23 - Reconstructed Late First Temple Orthography and Vocalization (EBHP) with Sound Files	3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_ps114_tab.pdf	Psalm 114 - Reconstructed Late First Temple Orthography and Vocalization (EBHP) with Sound Files	4
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_ps121_tab.pdf	Psalm 121 - Reconstructed Late First Temple Orthography and Vocalization (EBHP) with Sound Files	3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_ps122_tab.pdf	Psalm 122 - Reconstructed Late First Temple Orthography and Vocalization (EBHP) with Sound Files	3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_ps130_tab.pdf	Psalm 130 - Reconstructed Late First Temple Orthography and Vocalization (EBHP) with Sound Files	3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_qin_da_tab.pdf	Lament of David (II Samuel 1:19-27) - Reconstructed Late First Temple Orthography and Vocalization (EBHP) with Sound Files	4

File Name	Title	Pages
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_eicha_tab.pdf	Lamentations 3:1-15 - Reconstructed Late First Temple Orthography and Vocalization (EBHP) with Sound Files	4
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_song_tab.pdf	<i>Poetry of Song of Songs</i> - Song 2:1-17 - Reconstructed LBHP Vocalization with Sound Files	6
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_job_tab.pdf	<i>Poetry of Job</i> - Job 3:3-10 - Reconstructed LBHP Vocalization with Sound Files	4
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_har.pdf	Various Prophets - Reconstructed First Temple Vocalization and Transposition into Tiberian Graphemes Based on Harris	4
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_har_ds.pdf	Various Prophets - Reconstructed Late First Temple Orthography and Vocalization (EBHP) with Sound Files and Transposition into Tiberian Graphemes by David Steinberg	5
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_amos_stuart.pdf	Amos - Reconstructed First Temple Vocalization and Transposition into Tiberian Graphemes Based on Stuart	6
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_amos_ds.pdf	Amos - Reconstructed Late First Temple Orthography and Vocalization (EBHP) with Sound Files and Transposition into Tiberian Graphemes by David Steinberg	9
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_gen2_beyer.pdf	Genesis 2:18-24 - Reconstructed First Temple Vocalization and Transposition into Tiberian Graphemes Based on Beyer	3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_gen2_ds.pdf	Genesis 2:18-24 - Reconstructed Late First Temple Orthography and Vocalization (EBHP) with Sound Files and Transposition into Tiberian Graphemes by David Steinberg	5
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_gen_josh.pdf	Vocalization of: Genesis 4:1-3; Genesis 13:4-14; Joshua 7:1-3 - Reconstructed First Temple Vocalization (EBHP) with Sound Files and Transposition into Tiberian Graphemes	7
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_siloam_text.pdf	Text of the Siloam Inscription	1
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_siloam_beyer.pdf	Vocalization of the Siloam Inscription Based on Beyer	3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_siloam_ds.pdf	Vocalization of the Siloam Inscription by David Steinberg with Sound Files	4

File Name	Title	Pages
Total pages		832

Accompanying sound files -

	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/1s236_ebhp.mp3	
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/1s236_th.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/1s236_thcst.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/1sam12_ebhp.mp3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/1sam12_th.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/1sam12_thcst.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/1sam17_ebhp.mp3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/1sam17_th.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/1sam17_thcst.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/1sam67_ebhp.mp3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/1sam67_th.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/1sam67_thcst.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/2sam1_ebhp.mp3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/2sam1_th.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/2sam1_thcst.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/2sam22_2_ebhp.mp3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/2sam22_5_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/2sam22_7_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/2sam22_14_ebhp.mp3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/2sam22_17_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/2sam22_21_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/2sam22_26_ebhp.mp3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/2sam22_29_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/2sam22_32_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/2sam22_36_ebhp.mp3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/2sam22_40_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/2sam22_44_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/2sam22_47_ebhp.mp3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/2sam22_50_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/2sam2413_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/2sam2413_th.mp3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/2sam2413_thcst.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/2739_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/am33_ebhp.mp3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/am38_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/am55_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/am88_ebhp.mp3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/am95_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/am510_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/am516_ebhp.mp3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/am612_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/am913_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/deut_15_1_ebhp.mp3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/deut_15_4_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/deut_32_1_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/deut_32_4_ebhp.mp3

Accompanying sound files -

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http://www.houseofdavid.ca/deut_32_15_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/deut_32_19_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/deut_32_28_ebhp.mp3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/deut_32_32_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/deut_32_34_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/deut_32_36_ebhp.mp3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/deut_32_39_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/deut_32_43_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/deut_33_1_ebhp.mp3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/deut_33_2_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/deut_33_6_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/deut_33_7_ebhp.mp3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/deut_33_8_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/deut_33_12_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/deut_33_13_ebhp.mp3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/deut_33_18_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/deut_33_20_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/deut_33_22_ebhp.mp3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/deut_33_23_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/deut_33_24_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/deut_33_26_ebhp.mp3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/deut_33_28_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/ex15_1_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/ex15_4_ebhp.mp3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/ex15_11_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/ex15_13_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/ex3218_ebhp.mp3
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http://www.houseofdavid.ca/g1419_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/g1610_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/g2460_ebhp.mp3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/g2523_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/g2728_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/g2739_ebhp.mp3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/g3510_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/g4815_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/g4820_ebhp.mp3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/gen_2_18_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/gen_2_21_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/gen_2_23_ebhp.mp3

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		p3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/gen_2_24_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/gen_4_1_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/gen_13_4_ebhp.mp3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/gen_13_8_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/gen_13_14_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/gen_49_1_ebhp.mp3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/gen_49_3_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/gen_49_5_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/gen_49_8_ebhp.mp3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/gen_49_11_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/gen_49_13_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/gen_49_14_ebhp.mp3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/gen_49_16_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/gen_49_18_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/gen_49_19_ebhp.mp3
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http://www.houseofdavid.ca/gen_49_23_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/gen_49_27_ebhp.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/i295_ebhp.mp3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/i295_th.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/i295_thcst.mp3	http://www.houseofdavid.ca/i346_ebhp.mp3
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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-* ך;
 - (c) the relative *ša-* ך.
- (4) 3ms. pronominal suffix - AHT gives, in deference to MT orthography, *ō* while AIT usually gives *ahu* (eg. p. 6 Lak2:2 *ʿabd=hu* to be vocalized [ʿab'dahu]). In EBHP it [might have been](#) /ahu/, /ô:h/ or /ô/.
- (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/.

(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 *qa/ms. imp.* as *qtul* (eg. AIT *ktub* p. 13, Arad 1:2; *htum* p. 16, Arad 17:2). However (inconsistently?), in deference to the MT The *qa/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'ḥika] or [šulu'ḥaka]). Similarly, the ubiquitous opening for quotations TH רָאָה is vocalized *lē(')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:]'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?