

Biblical Hebrew Poetry and Word Play

Reconstructing the Original Oral¹, Aural² and Visual Experience

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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 piece - [History of the Ancient and Modern Hebrew Language](#)

TERMS, ABBREVIATIONS AND LINGUISTIC SYMBOLS

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. Phases of Biblical Hebrew and its Antecedents (BHA) and the Development of the Biblical Hebrew Reading Tradition of the Tiberian Masoretes

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

IV The Impact – Wordplay and Reconstructed EBHP

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 Phonemic Structure of EBHP, Tiberian and Israeli Hebrew

- a. Phonemes that were Distinct and Phonemic in EBHP that have Merged in Modern Pronunciation
- b. Consonants that Exist in Modern Pronunciation but were Absent in EBHP
- c. EBHP and Tiberian Three Way Consonantal Opposition Reduced to Modern Two Way Opposition
- d. Changes in Pronunciation between EBHP, Tiberian Biblical Vocalization and Modern Hebrew most of which alter the Syllabic Structure

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

Problem 4 - What Letters Were Prone to Be Miscopied in the Course of Transmission of Hebrew Biblical Texts?

תִּיקוֹן - Questions that Cannot be resolved at Present

A Note on Epigraphic Hebrew

VI Reconstruction of EBHP

1. Aims in Reconstructing EBHP

Box - Identifying Pre-Exilic Biblical Texts

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

3. Guidelines I Have Used in Reconstructing 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)
- vii) Lament of David (II Samuel 1:19-27)

b. Psalmic Poetry

- i) II Samuel Chapt. 22 (Second version Psalm 18)

c. 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

d. Various Short Poems. Genesis 2:23; Genesis 3:14-19; Genesis 4:6-7; Genesis 4:23-24; Genesis 8:22; Genesis 9:6; Genesis 9:25-27; Genesis 12:2-3; Genesis 14:19-20; Genesis 16:11-12; Genesis 24:60; Genesis 25:23; Genesis 27:28-29; Genesis 27:39-40; Genesis 35:10-12; Genesis 48:15-16; Genesis 48:20; Exodus 32:18; Numbers 6:24-26; Numbers 10:35-36; Numbers 21:14,15,17-18; Numbers 21:27-30; Joshua 10:12-13; Judges 9:8-15; Judges 14:14, 18; Judges 15:16; Judges 16:23-24; 1 Samuel 15:22-23; 1 Samuel 18:7; 2 Samuel 3:33-34; 2 Samuel 20:1; 1 Kings 8:12-13; 1 Kings 12:16; 2 Kings 19:21-34.

e. Prose Texts

- i) Genesis 2:18-24
- ii) Genesis 4:1-3; Genesis 13:4-14; Joshua 7:1-3
- iii) Siloam Inscription

Page List

File Name	Title	Pages
http://www.houseof david.ca/anc_heb.pdf	Table of Contents and Bibliography	36
http://www.houseof david.ca/anc_heb_abb_dia.pdf	<u>TERMS, ABBREVIATIONS AND LINGUISTIC SYMBOLS</u>	16
http://www.houseof david.ca/anc_heb_12.pdf	<u>Introduction and Phases of Biblical Hebrew and its Antecedents and the Development of the Biblical Hebrew Reading Tradition of the Tiberian Masoretes</u>	43
http://www.houseof david.ca/anc_heb_34.pdf	<u>The Basis for the Reconstruction of the Pronunciation of BH and its relevance to Wordplay</u>	22
http://www.houseof david.ca/anc_heb_5.pdf	<u>Problems in Reconstruction of EBHP</u>	10
http://www.houseof david.ca/anc_heb_6.pdf	<u>Reconstruction of EBHP</u>	31
http://www.houseof david.ca/anc_heb_Problem 5.pdf	<u>Changes in Pronunciation Between EBHP, TH and the Biblical Text Pronounced as IH - most of which Alter the Syllabic Structure of Nouns</u>	6
http://www.houseof david.ca/anc_heb_bib_heb_EH.htm	<u>Note on Epigraphic Hebrew</u>	2
http://www.houseof david.ca/anc_heb_bib_heb_history.pdf	<u>Linguistic Changes Affecting the Pronunciation of Biblical Hebrew 2000 B.C.E. - 850 C.E. According to Various Scholars</u>	20
http://www.houseof david.ca/anc_heb_diglossia.htm	<u>Background to Dialect, Koine and Diglossia in Ancient Hebrew Clarification from Colloquial Arabic</u>	48
http://www.houseof david.ca/anc_heb_fingem.pdf	<u>Words Ending in Doubled Consonants with the Loss of Case Endings</u>	5
anc_heb_forms.pdf	<u>Words Significantly Different in Pronunciation in EBHP</u>	26
http://www.houseof david.ca/anc_heb_forms_hist.pdf	<u>History of Some Word Forms in Hebrew</u>	4

File Name	Title	Pages
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_tegu.pdf	<u><i>Tequ - Questions that Cannot be Resolved at Present</i></u>	158
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_gen2_beyer.pdf	<u><i>Vocalization of Genesis 2:18-24 Reconstructed First Temple Vocalization and Transposition into Tiberian Graphemes Based on Beyer</i></u>	3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_gen2_ds	<u><i>Vocalization of Genesis 2:18-24 Reconstructed First Temple Vocalization and Transposition into Tiberian Graphemes by David Steinberg</i></u>	5
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/gen_josh.pdf	<u><i>Vocalization of: Genesis 4:1-3; Genesis 13:4-14; Joshua 7:1-3 - Reconstructed First Temple Vocalization and Transposition into Tiberian Graphemes</i></u>	0
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_anc_heb_biy_t1.pdf	<u><i>Blessing of Jacob Table 1 - Reconstructed First Temple Vocalization and Transposition into Tiberian Graphemes</i></u>	0
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_anc_heb_biy_t2.pdf	<u><i>Blessing of Jacob Table 2 - Reconstructed Pre-Exilic Orthographies</i></u>	0
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_anc_heb_biy_t3.pdf	<u><i>Blessing of Jacob Table 3 - Proto-Masoretic Orthography</i></u>	0
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_shiry_m_t1.pdf	<u><i>Song of the Sea Table 1 - Reconstructed First Temple Vocalization and Transposition into Tiberian Graphemes</i></u>	7
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_shiry_m_t2.pdf	<u><i>Song of the Sea Table 2 - Reconstructed Pre-Exilic Orthographies</i></u>	6
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_shiry_m_t3.pdf	<u><i>Song of the Sea Table 3 - Proto-Masoretic Orthography</i></u>	5
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_balaam_t1.pdf	<u><i>Oracles of Balaam Table 1 - Reconstructed First Temple Vocalization and Transposition into Tiberian</i></u>	13

File Name	Title	Pages
	Graphemes	
http://www.houseof david.ca/anc_heb_balaam_t2.pdf	Oracles of Balaam Table 2 - Reconstructed Pre-Exilic Orthographies	9
http://www.houseof david.ca/anc_heb_balaam_t3.pdf	Oracles of Balaam Table 3 - Proto-Masoretic Orthography	9
http://www.houseof david.ca/anc_heb_haazinu_t1.pdf	<i>Ha'azinu</i> Table 1 - Reconstructed First Temple Vocalization and Transposition into Tiberian Graphemes	0
http://www.houseof david.ca/anc_heb_haazinu_t2.pdf	<i>Ha'azinu</i> Table 2 - Reconstructed Pre-Exilic Orthographies	0
http://www.houseof david.ca/anc_heb_haazinu_t3.pdf	<i>Ha'azinu</i> Table 3 - Proto-Masoretic Orthography	0
http://www.houseof david.ca/anc_heb_bim_t1.pdf	Blessing of Moses Table 1 - Reconstructed First Temple Vocalization and Transposition into Tiberian Graphemes	11
http://www.houseof david.ca/anc_heb_bim_t2.pdf	Blessing of Moses Table 2 - Reconstructed Pre-Exilic Orthographies	10
http://www.houseof david.ca/anc_heb_bim_t3.pdf	Blessing of Moses Table 3 - Proto-Masoretic Orthography	9
http://www.houseof david.ca/anc_heb_shirdb_t1.pdf	Song of Deborah Table 1 - Reconstructed First Temple Vocalization and Transposition into Tiberian Graphemes	12
http://www.houseof david.ca/anc_heb_shirdb_t2.pdf	Song of Deborah Table 2 - Reconstructed Pre-Exilic Orthographies	10
http://www.houseof david.ca/anc_heb_shirdb_t3.pdf	Song of Deborah Table 3 - Proto-Masoretic Orthography	9
http://www.houseof david.ca/anc_heb_shirdb_t4.pdf	Song of Deborah Table 4 - Metrics	3

File Name	Title	Pages
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_amos_stuart.pdf	<u>Vocalization of Amos Texts Based on Stuart</u>	6
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_amos_ds.pdf	<u>Vocalization of the Same Amos Texts by David Steinberg</u>	9
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_gen2_beyer.pdf	<u>Vocalization of Genesis 2:18-24 Based on Beyer</u>	3
anc_heb_gen2_ds.pdf	<u>Vocalization of Genesis 2:18-24 by David Steinberg</u>	3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_siloam_beyer.pdf	<u>Vocalization of the Siloam Inscription Based on Beyer</u>	3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_siloam_ds.pdf	<u>Vocalization of the Siloam Inscription by David Steinberg</u>	3
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_har.pdf	<u>Vocalization of Assorted Texts based on Harris</u>	4
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_har_ds.pdf	<u>Vocalization of the Same Texts by David Steinberg</u>	4
	Lament of David (II Samuel 1:19-27)	0
	II Samuel Chapt. 22	0
	Psalms 23, 114, 121, 122, 130	0
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_amos_stuart.pdf	<u>Amos Reconstructed First Temple Vocalization and Transposition into Tiberian Graphemes Based on Stuart</u>	6
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_amos_ds.pdf	<u>Amos Reconstructed First Temple Vocalization and Transposition into Tiberian Graphemes by David Steinberg</u>	9
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/siloam.pdf	<u>Text of the Siloam Inscription</u>	1
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_siloam_beyer.pdf	<u>Vocalization of the Siloam Inscription Based on Beyer</u>	4
http://www.houseofdavid.ca/anc_heb_siloam_ds.pdf	<u>Vocalization of the Siloam Inscription by David</u>	4

File Name	Title	Pages
	Steinberg	
Total pages		607

Bibliography

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 "*orthographiebezogene 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 *ʿabd=hu* to be vocalized [ʿab'dahu]). In EBHP it might have been /ahu/, /ō:h/ or /ō/.

(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 *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 **לֵאמֹר** 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 C₁V_xC₂V_xC₃ > C₁C₂V_xC₃ or C₁V_xC₂C₃.*

(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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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?