

Biblical Hebrew Poetry and Word Play

Reconstructing the Original Oral, Aural and Visual Experience

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V Problems in Reconstruction of EBHP

1. Problem 1- Where Was the Stress Placed in Biblical Hebrew Words in EBHP?

2. Problem 2 - Problems Caused by the Contrast Between the Phonemic Structure of EBHP, Tiberian and Israeli Hebrew

Phonemes that Were Distinct and Phonemic in EBHP that Have Merged in Modern Pronunciation¹

	<u>EBHP</u> */EBHP/ * <u>[EBHP]</u> ² (c. 850-550 BCE)	<u>TH</u> /TH/* <u>[TH]</u> (c. 850 CE)	<u>PMT pronounced as IH</u> /IH/ <u>[IH]</u> (present)
Vowel Length	<u>Phonemic</u>	Vowel length existed but not phonemic	<u>No distinction of vowel length</u>
Dagesh Forte/hazaq	<u>Gemination ie doubling phonemic</u> ³	<u>Gemination may</u> be <u>phonemic</u> but if so it has very light phonemic load ⁴	none
א	/ʔ/ [ʔ]	/ʔ/ [ʔ]	/ʔ/ [∅] i.e. silent
ב	a <u>polyphonic</u> ⁵ letter in Biblical Hebrew pronounced /c/ [ʃ] or /g/ [x] ⁶ depending on its proto-Semitic origin	/c/ [ʃ]	/c/ [∅]
ה	/h/ [h]	/h/ [h]	/h/ Rarely [h] frequently [∅] or glottal stop [ʔ]
ה	Consonantal /h/ [h] at end of word	Consonantal /h/ [h] at end of word	/h/ [∅]
ח	a <u>polyphonic</u> letter in Biblical Hebrew pronounced /h/ [h] or /hʔ/ [x] depending on its PS origin.	/h/ [h]	/h/ [x]
פ	/p/ [p]	/p/	פ = p [p] ⁸

	<u>EBHP</u> */EBHP/ * <u>[EBHP]</u> ² (c. 850-550 BCE)	<u>TH</u> /TH/ * <u>[TH]</u> (c. 850 CE)	<u>PMT pronounced as IH</u> /IH/ <u>[IH]</u> (present)
פ		Two <u>allophones</u> in <u>complementary distribution</u> פ = p [p] and פ = p [f]	פ = p [f]
ב	/b/ [b]	/b/ Two <u>allophones</u> in <u>complementary distribution</u> ב = [b] and ב = <u>b</u> [v] (labio-dental, fricative, voiced)	ב = b [b] ⁹
			ב = <u>b</u> [v]
ו	/w/ [w]	/w/ [w] (possibly [v] ¹⁰)	/w/ [v]
ט	/t/ [tʰ]	/t/ [tʰ]	/t/ [t]
ת	/t/ [t]	/t/ Two <u>allophones</u> in <u>complementary distribution</u> ת = t [t] and ת = <u>t</u> [θ]	/t/ [t]
כ	/k/ [k]	/k/ Two <u>allophones</u> in <u>complementary distribution</u> כ = k [k] or [kʰ] and כ = <u>k</u> [x]	כ = k [k] ¹¹
			כ = <u>k</u> [x]
ק	/q/ ¹² [kʰ]	/q/ [kʰ]	/q/ [k]
ס	/s/ [s]	/s/ [s]	/s/ [s]
ש	/ś/ [ʃ]	/ś/ [s]	/ś/ [s]

b. *Table 33 - Original Typical Semitic 3 Way Opposition in EBHP Reduced to 2 Way in Israeli Hebrew with Loss of Emphatics*

(This could “deafen” the reader to word play founded on the three way consonantal opposition which is not “heard” using modern pronunciation)

c. *Changes in Pronunciation Between EBHP, Tiberian Biblical Vocalization and Modern Hebrew most of which Alter the Syllabic Structure*

N.b. This is absolutely vital for scanning biblical verse. See also *Some Impacts of Phonemic Change Between EBHP and Israeli Hebrew.*

3. Problem 3 - [Ancient Hebrew Orthography¹³ Provides Some, But Not Much, Guidance Regarding the Placement, and Nature of Vowels in EBHP](#)

Ambiguity of Pre-exilic (JEH) Orthography

Word	Possible Range of <u>EBHP</u> Vocalizations and Hence Meanings (<u>TH</u> and <u>TH</u> within brackets for comparison)
דבר	<p>*/da'ba:r/ (MT /dâ'bār/ *[dɔ:'vɔ:r] "word" (noun)</p> <p>*/dabr/ (MT /'dɛ.bɛr/ *['dɛ:'vɛr]) "plague" (noun)</p> <p>*/da'bar/ (MT /dâ'bar/ *[dɔ:'vɛ:r]) "he spoke" (<i>qal SC.</i>)</p> <p>*/dō'be:r/ (MT /dō'bēr/ *[dɔ:'vɛ:r]) "is speaking/spokesman" (<i>qal active participle</i>)</p> <p>*/da'būr/ (MT /dâ'bur/ *[dɔ:'vu:r]) "is spoken" (<i>qal p.p.</i>)</p> <p>*/du'bar/ (MT /dub'bar/ *[dub'be:r]) "was spoken" (<i>passive qal SC.</i>)</p> <p>*/du'bur/ > */də'bo:r/ *['dɛ'bo:r] (MT /d'bor/ *['dɛ'vɔ:r]) "speaking" (<i>qal inf. constr.</i>)</p> <p>*/da'bōr/ (MT /dâ'bor/ *[dɔ:'vɔ:r]) (<i>qal inf. abs.</i>)</p> <p>*/dib'bīr/ (MT /dib'bēr/ *[dib'be:r]) "he spoke" (<i>piel SC.</i>)</p> <p>*/dub'bar/ (MT /dub'bar/ *[dub'be:r]) "it was said" (<i>pual SC.</i>)</p> <p>*/dab'bīr/ (MT /dab'bēr/ *[deb'be:r]) "speak!" (<i>piel ms. sing. imp.</i>)</p>
ישבר	<p>*/yaš'bur/ > */yiš'bur/ (MT /yiš'bor/ *['yij'bo:r]) "he is breaking/will break" (<i>qal PC</i>)</p> <p>*/yašbur > */yišbur/ (MT /yiš'bor/ *['yij'bo:r]) "let him break" (<i>qal jussive</i>)</p> <p>*/yuš'bar/ (<i>qal passive imperfect</i>)</p> <p>*/yišša'bir/ (MT /yiššā'bēr/ *['yijʃɔ:'vɛ:r]) "it is being broken/will be broken" (<i>niphal PC</i>)</p> <p>*/yiš'šabir/ (MT /yiššā'bēr/ *['yijʃɔ:'vɛ:r]) "let it be broken" (<i>niphal jussive</i>)</p> <p>*/yašab'bir/ (MT /yəšab'bēr/ *['yɛʃɛb'be:r]) "he is shattering/will shatter" (<i>piel imperfect</i>)</p> <p>*/ya'šabbir/ (MT /yəšab'bēr/ *['yɛʃɛb'be:r]) "let him shatter" (<i>piel jussive</i>)</p>

Word	Possible Range of / <u>EBHP</u> / Vocalizations and Hence Meanings (/TH/ and [TH] within brackets for comparison)
	<p>*/yašub'bar/ (MT /yəšub'bar/ *[yɛʃub'bɛ:r]) "it will be shattered" (<i>pual</i> imperfect)</p> <p>*/yaš'bir/ (MT /yaš'bir/ *[yɛʃ'bi:r]) "he is breaking open/ he will break open" (<i>hiphil</i> imperfect)</p> <p>*/yašbir/ (MT /yaš'bɛr/ *[yaf'bɛ:r]) "let him break open" (<i>hiphil</i> jussive)</p> <p>*/yuš'bar/ (MT /yuš'bar/ *[yuf'bɛ:r] or /yâš'bar/ *[yɔʃ'bɛ:r]) "it will be broken open" (<i>hophal</i> imperfect)</p>
השבר	<p>*/hišša'bir/ (MT /hiššâ'bɛr/ *[hiššɔ:'vɛ:r]) (<i>niphal</i> infinitive or masc. sing. imp.)</p> <p>*/haš'bir/ (MT /haš'bɛr/ *[haš'bɛ:r]) (<i>hiphil</i> infinitive absolute or masc. sing. <i>imp.</i>)</p> <p>*/huš'bar/ (MT /huš'bar/ *[huš'ba:r] or /hâš'bar/ *[hɔš'ba:r]) (<i>hophal</i> SC)</p>
משבר	<p>*/miš'ba:r/ (MT /miš'bâr/ *[mij'bo:r]) "surf" (noun)</p> <p>*/mušab'bir/ (MT /məšab'bɛr/ *[mɛʃab'bɛ:r]) (<i>piel</i> participle)</p> <p>*/mušub'bar/ (MT /məšub'bâr/ *[mɛʃub'bo:r]) (<i>pual</i> participle)</p> <p>*/muš'ba:r/ (MT /muš'bâr/ *[muf'bo:r] or /mâš'bâr/ *[mɔʃ'bo:r]) "broken open" (<i>hophal</i> participle)</p>
נשבר	<p>*/naš'bur/ > */niš'bur/ (MT niš'bor *[nij'bo:r]) "we will break" (<i>qal</i> imperfect first person plural)</p> <p>*/niš'bôr/ (MT /niš'bor/ *[nij'bo:r]) (<i>niphal</i> inf. abs.)</p> <p>*/niš'bar/ / (MT /niš'bar/ *[nij'bɛ:r]) "was broken" (<i>niphal</i> <i>SC</i>)</p> <p>*/niš'ba:r/ (MT /niš'bâr/ *[nij'bo:r]) "being broken" (<i>niphal</i> participle)</p>

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

Scripts and Scripture

All texts, later incorporated in the Hebrew Bible, which were brought into exile in Babylonia in the early 6th century BCE, would have been written in [Paleo-Hebrew scripts](#) resembling those of the [Mesha](#), [Siloam](#) and/or [Lachish](#) and with the orthography of Epigraphic Hebrew (see [Gogel](#)).

A significant part of [the authoring, and most of the redacting of the Pentateuch](#), the Deuteronomistic History, the major prophetic books etc. took place in Babylonia from c. 590 BCE to c. 450 BCE. The language of that area was Aramaic. Presumably during that exile span of time the redaction of scriptures probably went hand with:

1. Aramaic displacing Hebrew as the spoken language of the exiles;
2. The rapid acceptance of the [Imperial Aramaic](#) script for writing both Hebrew and Aramaic; and,
3. An increased and more uniform use of vowel letters in Hebrew writing, partly under the influence of Aramaic spelling conventions and partly to distinguish Hebrew from Aramaic pronunciation of cognate words and forms. It is of course possible that this orthographic change took place without the acceptance of Aramaic script.

It is probable that the Torah, as a whole, the [Deuteronomistic History](#), the major prophetic books etc. were "published" initially in the Aramaic script in Babylonia. Of course the [redactors](#) would have drawn on documents written in the [Paleo-Hebrew scripts](#) and the orthography of Epigraphic Hebrew. Thus it may be that all surviving Paleo-Hebrew biblical texts (e.g. the Qumran Paleo-Hebrew Leviticus scroll, the Samaritan Torah) at one stage passed through a form in Aramaic letters. It is likely that some of the later books of the Bible, such as Esther, Proverbs, Qohelet, Jonah, Daniel etc. were composed in Aramaic script.

In examining likely errors, it is necessary to consider –

1. **Word Division** - Paleo-Hebrew texts usually used clear dots to separate words thus minimizing the likelihood of an error in word division¹⁴. Biblical texts in the Aramaic-Square Hebrew script seem to have used blank spaces between words.
2. **Confusion of Letters** (see tables of scripts in [The Book of Hebrew Script: History, Palaeography, Script Styles, Calligraphy & Design](#) by Ada Yardeni)
 - a) *Paleo-Hebrew Script* – In [Mesha](#) and [Siloam](#) scripts confusion of letters is very unlikely. [Lachish](#) script, being squat and somewhat cursive, errors are more possible if the document were written in a very small hand it might perhaps be possible to confuse $\text{ך} = \text{כ}$ (n) and

Scripts and Scripture

𐤀 = א (p).

- b) *Aramaic-Square Hebrew Script*¹⁵ – In Babylonia, the Jewish exiles would have adopted one or more versions of the [Imperial Aramaic Script](#). The later Judean Jewish developments of the script are known as Square Hebrew or Jewish Script. The rapid evolution of this script as the script changed, so changed the letters that could be easily confused.

The problem is that **in copying texts might go from Mesha script to Lachish script to Imperial Aramaic script, to 3rd century BCE Jewish script to Herodian script potentially exposed to changing sets of possible letter confusions at each stage**. A less likely line of development might be from Mesha script to Lachish script to early Second Temple Paleo-Hebrew script¹⁶, to 3rd century BCE Jewish script to Herodian script.

The following tables outline what letters were very similar to other letters in the scripts in uses of the centuries of Hebrew text transmission leading up to the earliest Masoretic manuscripts of the tenth century CE. It can be clearly seen that there was much room for confusion. However, the most important guarantees of the integrity of the text have always been the competence and integrity of copyists and the fact that the text must make sense in Hebrew. I will illustrate the last point. The letters כב (= *b, k*) have been very similar for about 2,000 years. It is clearly possible that some in some cases כ may have been miscopied as ב and visa-versa. However, for such an error to take root it would be necessary not only that the word undergoing the change still make sense in Hebrew but that it be appropriate to its context in the text.

[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](#)

¹ This is of Key Importance in Identifying Word Play see Encyclopedia Judaica article PROSODY, HEBREW, [Jewish Encyclopedia article ALLITERATION AND KINDRED FIGURES](#), [Wikipedia article Biblical poetry](#)

For the impact of the merging of phonemes on the vocabulary of Israeli Hebrew see Encyclopedia Judaica vol. 16 para. 1645-1646.

² Note [non-spirantization of the *bgdkpt* consonants](#)

³ For germination in Semitic languages see [Lipinski 1997](#) pp. 179-184

⁴ [Blau 1976/93](#) p. 16 and See [Hoffman](#) pp. 99-101

⁵ [Polyphonic letters n and y](#) (see [Blau 1982](#) and [Wevers 1970](#)). Since the Tiberian massorites did not recognize the polyphonic nature of these letters it goes unmarked in their pointing. The easiest way for the student to determine the correct phoneme in an actual word is to look the root up in [HALOT](#) and check the nature of the consonant in the Arabic or Ugaritic cognate. In all these cases the biblical Hebrew consonant will be the same as that in Ugaritic and Arabic.

⁶ also transcribed *gh* (=ġ)

⁷ other transcriptions x, kh, k.

⁸ In ordinary speech the treatment of the spiratization /b/ [b]/[v]; /k/ [k]/[x] and /p/ [p]/[f] in IH is complicated (See [Bolzky 1997](#) sect. 17.5.4.). In reading the biblical text these allophonic distinctions are maintained as marked in the MT.

⁹ In ordinary speech the treatment of the spiratization /b/ [b]/[v]; /k/ [k]/[x] and /p/ [p]/[f] in IH is complicated (See [Bolzky 1997](#) sect. 17.5.4.). In reading the biblical text these allophonic distinctions are maintained as marked in the MT.

¹⁰ See [Khan 1997a](#).

¹¹ In ordinary speech the treatment of the spiratization /b/ [b]/[v]; /k/ [k]/[x] and /p/ [p]/[f] in IH is complicated (See [Bolzky 1997](#) sect. 17.5.4.). In reading the biblical text these allophonic distinctions are maintained as marked in the MT.

¹² also transliterated as ḳ

¹³ According to the Encarta Dictionary, orthography is defined as: 1. study of correct spelling: the study of established correct spelling; 2. study of how letters are arranged: the study of letters of an alphabet and how they occur sequentially in words; and, 3. relationship between sounds and letters: the way letters and diacritic symbols represent the sounds of a language in spelling

¹⁴ The positioning of these dots varied. Ancient Hebrew-writing scribes “hung” letters from a line, ruled or imaginary. I.e., the highest point of each letter, except lamed (ב) started from the line. The dot level is seen in: the [Mesha inscription](#) about the level of the bottom of most letters; the [Siloam inscription](#) and the [Lachish letters](#)

about mid-height of most letters; the Qumran Paleo-Leviticus scroll right on the line, i.e. at the top level of most letters. In most Phoenician texts the words were not divided (*scripto continua*).

¹⁵ 'The term "Early Jewish" is used here ... to designate the scripts developed in Judaea and used by Jews beginning in the Maccabaeen period and continuing to the time of the First Jewish Revolt. It stands in contrast to Palaeo-Hebrew ... and to the Aramaic cursive of the late Persian and early Greek periods from which Jewish, Nabataean, and Palmyrene, among others, were derived. The traditional designations, "Assyrian," "Aramaic," "Square" do not apply accurately to the several Early Jewish script types and cannot be used in scientific palaeographical discussion. The last-mentioned term, "Square," applies at best to the formal hand of the First Jewish Revolt (and later), or less happily to the Herodian book hands, and should be abandoned. We have chosen the designation "Early Jewish"; it could be argued plausibly that "Judaeen" would be even more precise. However, the broader term seems a happier alternative since the Early Jewish script was in use by Jews outside Judaea (cf. the Nash Papyrus), and it permits us to speak of the scripts of the late Roman and Byzantine eras from Palestine, Egypt, and Mesopotamia (e.g., from Dura), which are continuous with the early series, as "Late Jewish.'" Quoted from footnote 5 of *The Development of Jewish Scripts* by Frank Moore Cross (1961) reprinted in *Leaves from an Epigrapher's Notebook: Collected Papers in Hebrew and West Semitic Palaeography and Epigraphy* (Harvard Semitic Studies, No. 51) by Frank Moore Cross.

¹⁶ 'The Palaeo-Hebrew script of Qumran is properly described as an archaistic survival from the book hand of Israelite times. It shows little development in the interval between the epigraphs of the seventh–fifth centuries BCE and manuscripts of Maccabaeen or Hasmonaeen date. Evidently the script was taken up anew in the era of nationalistic revival of the second century BCE, to judge from its use as a monumental script by the Hasmonaeans on their coinage, as well as its resurgence as a biblical hand. It is in the late Hasmonaeen era also that the Samaritan Pentateuchal text separates from the main stream of Jewish tradition, preserving in its special hand the Palaeo-Hebrew tradition Moreover, in the second century BCE, Palaeo-Hebrew forms, dormant for some four centuries, begin afresh to evolve at a fairly steady pace. This new development is reflected in the series of MSS at Qumran, as well as in the coinage of the First and Second Jewish Revolts, and in the earliest Samaritan epigraphs. On the other hand, the earliest exemplars of the Palaeo-Hebrew hand at Qumran exhibit a remarkable fidelity of form and stance, when compared with archaic scripts, and were penned with fluid grace and speed. One can best explain these characteristics of the Qumran Palaeo-Hebrew hand by assuming that though relatively static, the old script was preserved alive in some narrow circle, presumably by a coterie of erudite scribes, as a biblical book hand. When the first of the Palaeo-Hebrew fragments were found in Cave I, an alternative explanation was proposed, that the fragments were in fact archaic, from the fourth or fifth century BCE. But later finds, including manuscripts in which there is extensive mixture of Palaeo-Hebrew and Jewish scripts (and in one instance a mixture of Palaeo-Hebrew, Jewish, and Greek scripts), have rendered this proposal inadmissible.' Quoted from footnote 4 of *The Development of Jewish Scripts* by Frank Moore Cross (1961) reprinted in [Cross 2003](#).