

Diachronic Analysis and the Features of Late Biblical Hebrew

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The purpose of this paper is to provide evidence for the existence of a later linguistic strand within the Hebrew Bible known as late biblical Hebrew. After surveying the history and methodology of the diachronic study of the Hebrew language, I examine orthographic, morphological, and syntactical evidence, which demonstrates a linguistic shift from the preexilic to the postexilic period. I demonstrate how these same late biblical features of the postexilic period became commonplace in Rabbinic Hebrew and in the Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls. I discuss the different views regarding the reasons biblical Hebrew experienced linguistic change and argue that the events of the Babylonian exile contain all the components linguists regard as necessary to account for language change. An appendix is provided which contrasts the fourteen accepted features of late biblical Hebrew with their early biblical Hebrew counterparts.

Key words: Linguistics; Hebrew; Hebrew/Late Biblical; Hebrew/Postbiblical

INTRODUCTION

Historical linguistics and the comparative method of language analysis were developed by European scholars who observed the resemblance between European languages and Sanskrit early in the nineteenth century.¹ The historical analysis of Hebrew and Semitic languages was delayed for another one hundred years since it was commonplace for Hebrew, the Semitic language which naturally received the most attention, to be considered a sacred language. This notion, ipso facto, precluded any linguistic alteration.²

An earlier form of this paper was presented to the Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew Section of the Society of Biblical Literature, November 23, 1992.

1. Winfred Lehmann, *Historical Linguistics: An Introduction* (New York: Holt, 1962) 7.

2. Mark F. Rooker, *Biblical Hebrew in Transition: The Language of the Book of Ezekiel* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990) 24.

DIACHRONIC STUDY OF BIBLICAL HEBREW³

The catalyst for the historical or diachronic study of the Hebrew language was Arno Kropat's *Syntax des Autors Chronik*, which appeared in 1909.⁴ Kropat's landmark study was devoted to analyzing the linguistic features of Chronicles. His modus operandi was contrasting the language of Chronicles with the parallel passages in Samuel-Kings. Presupposing that the Chronicler had as his source a masoretic prototype of Samuel-Kings, Kropat was able to differentiate the language of the Chronicler through the Chronicler's linguistic adjustments. This work was an extremely important contribution to the diachronic study of biblical Hebrew, since it provided a systematic presentation of the features of the postexilic book of Chronicles in contrast to the earlier language of Samuel-Kings.

In subsequent years the great Hebrew grammarians like Bauer and Leander and Joüon were aware of the differences between pre-exilic and postexilic Hebrew but gave little attention to the specific features that distinguish these two phases of the language.⁵

This disregard changed abruptly with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947. These findings caused Kropat's earlier work to receive renewed attention. Abba Bendavid's two-volume **לשון מקרא ו לשון חכמים** (*Biblical Hebrew and Mishnaic Hebrew*) was published in 1967 and made full use of the linguistic finds of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the discussion of the typologies of biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew. E. Y. Kutscher also made full use of the finds from Qumran, and his vast contribution to this field can be seen in this *Language and Linguistic Background of the Isaiah Scroll (IQIsa')*⁶ and in his *History of the Hebrew Language*.⁷

The individual who has unquestionably contributed the most to the diachronic study of biblical Hebrew, certainly in the last quarter of the twentieth century, is Avi Hurvitz, a student of Kutscher's and currently Professor of Hebrew Language at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Since the publication of his **בין לשון ל לשון** (*Biblical Hebrew in Transition—A Study in Post-Exilic Hebrew and its Implications for the Dating of Psalms*) in 1972, a work which exhibits late biblical

3. For detailed discussion see Mark F. Rooker, "The Diachronic Study of Biblical Hebrew," *JNSL* 14 (1988) 199-214.

4. Arno Kropat, *Syntax des Autors Chronik verglichen mit der seiner Quellen: Ein Beitrag zur historischen Syntax des Hebräischen* (BZAW 16; Giessen: Töpelmann, 1909).

5. H. Bauer and P. Leander, *Historische Grammatik der hebräischen Sprache des Alten Testaments* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1922) 26 §2q; E Joüon, *Grammaire de l'Hébreu Biblique* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1923) 4-6 §3 a, b.

6. Leiden: Brill, 1974.

7. Jerusalem: Magnes, 1982.

Hebrew in selected Psalms, Hurvitz has exclusively directed his efforts to the study of this field.⁸

In addition to the contribution made by these Israeli scholars, Robert Polzin published an important work on the diachronic study of biblical Hebrew in 1976. In this work, *Late Biblical Hebrew: Toward An Historical Typology of Biblical Hebrew Prose*, Polzin analyzed samplings from the Pentateuch and Former Prophets and compared these grammatical features with the language of late biblical Hebrew of Chronicles.⁹

In the last fifteen years several dissertations emphasizing the diachronic study of Hebrew have been completed under Hurvitz's or Polzin's supervision.¹⁰

METHODOLOGY OF DIACHRONIC ANALYSIS

The methodology used in diachronic (or historical) analysis involves the execution of two basic linguistic principles: linguistic opposition and linguistic distribution.¹¹ Linguistic opposition or contrast demonstrates the substitution or replacement of an earlier linguistic phenomenon by a later but corresponding one. Linguistic distribution considers the diffusion of the linguistic feature in literature considered to be early or late respectively. The simultaneous employment of these two principles is a control by which we can determine when linguistic change takes place. The observations may be reinforced when extrabiblical parallels from the Dead Sea Scrolls or rabbinic material are considered.

The remainder of this article will be devoted to looking at some representative features of late biblical Hebrew using the methodology just described. Illustrations from orthography, morphology, and

8. For reference to Hurvitz's publications in this field the reader is directed to the list of Hurvitz's works in Rooker, *Biblical Hebrew in Transition*, 193.

9. Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976.

10. A. R. Guenther, "A Diachronic Study of Biblical Hebrew Prose Syntax: An Analysis of the Verbal Clause in Jeremiah 37-45 and Esther 1-10," (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 1977); Ronald L. Bergey, "The Book of Esther—Its Place in the Linguistic Milieu of Post-Exilic Biblical Hebrew Prose: A Study in Late Biblical Hebrew," (Ph.D. diss., Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning, 1983); and Andrew E. Hill, "The Book of Malachi: Its Place in Post-Exilic Chronology Linguistically Reconsidered," (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1981). Also note comments regarding Hurvitz's introducing Polzin and Rooker to this discipline in the preface to Polzin, *Late Biblical Hebrew: Toward an Historical Typology of Biblical Hebrew Prose*, and Rooker, *Biblical Hebrew in Transition*, vii.

11. For the most detailed treatment of the methodology for diachronic research, see Hurvitz, "Linguistic Criteria for Dating Problematic Biblical Texts," *Hebrew Abstracts* 14 (1973) 74-79; "The Chronological Significance of 'Aramaisms' in Biblical Hebrew," *IEJ* 18 (1968) 234-40; and Rooker, *Biblical Hebrew in Transition*, 55-59.

2 Sam 3:1

דָּוִד

4QSam^a 3:1

דָּוִיד

Reflecting on the distribution of the plene and defective spelling, David Freedman concluded that the spelling of David with the three or four letters reflects whether a composition was composed in the first or second temple period.¹⁶ One would expect the three letter spelling to come from an author of the preexilic period, and a document containing the four letter plene spelling would have been composed in the postexilic period.

Furthermore, this use of the plene spelling of דָּוִיד in late biblical Hebrew is but one example in the larger issue of the historical significance of the use of plene spelling in the Hebrew Bible. Although many maintain that the orthography of the Hebrew Bible as a whole reflects the spelling system of the postexilic period, it is still true that early biblical Hebrew (i.e., Genesis–Kings) reflects a more conservative (or defective) spelling, as scholars such as Kutscher, Blau, Anderson and Forbes have noted.¹⁷

EVIDENCE FROM NOUN MORPHOLOGY

מֶלֶךְ כּוֹת

Another illustration of a diachronic shift can be seen in the contrast of the occurrence of the terms מֶמְלַכָּה / מֶלֶךְ כּוֹת, with the meaning "kingdom." The first indication of any possible historical relationship between the terms may be observed from the Chronicler's preference for מֶלֶךְ כּוֹת in texts where the parallel text of Samuel employed the term מֶמְלַכָּה. Note the following examples:¹⁸

2 Sam 5:12

וְכִי נִשְׂא מֶמְלַכָּהּ

1 Chr 14:2

כִּי־נִשְׂאָתָה לְמַעַל הַ מֶלֶךְ כּוֹתָהּ

2 Sam 7:12

וְהָכִינוּתִי אֶת־מֶמְלַכָּהּ

1 Chr 17:11

וְהָכִינוּתִי אֶת־מֶלֶךְ כּוֹתָהּ

2 Sam 7:16

וּמֶמְלַכָּהּ עַד־עוֹלָם לְפָנַי

1 Chr 17:14

וּבְמֶלֶךְ כּוֹתִי עַד־הָעוֹלָם

16. Freedman, "Spelling of the Name 'David'," 99-100.

17. Kutscher, "Language and Linguistic Background of the Isaiah Scroll," 81; Joshua Blau, *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 16.1572; Andersen and Forbes, *Spelling in the Hebrew Bible*, 315, x, 312-14. Thus the study of orthography may provide results useful for diachronic analysis. We do not believe it justified, however, to limit the uncovering of linguistic strata to the study of orthography. The latter view is advocated by Mayer Lambert (*Traité de Grammaire Hébraïque* [Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1972] 4 §7).

18. For these illustrations, see Hurvitz, *Biblical Hebrew in Transition*, 81; and Bergey, "Book of Esther," 32.

Other late biblical writers also clearly preferred מַלְכוּת. Most notably in the book of Esther, in the nine references to "kingdom," only מַלְכוּת is used. This trend continues in postbiblical literature, especially demonstrated in the writings of Mishnaic Hebrew where only מַלְכוּת is used.¹⁹

EVIDENCE FROM VERB MORPHOLOGY

קִיִּים > הִקִּיִּים

A linguistic phenomenon that apparently began shortly after the destruction of the first temple was the increased use of the Piel stem.²⁰ This phenomenon was accompanied by an incremental tendency to consonantalize the middle radical of hollow verbs.²¹ This shift can be illustrated by the use of the root קוּם, which occurs in the Hiphil stem in early biblical Hebrew but began to be replaced by the Piel stem in later biblical texts:²²

2 Kgs 23:24 לְמַעַן הִקִּיִּים אֶת־דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַכְּתוּבִים עַל־הַסֵּפֶר
 Esth 9:32 וַיִּמְאָר אֶסְתֵּר קִיִּים דְּבָרֵי הַפְּרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַנִּכְתָּב בַּסֵּפֶר
 1 Kgs 2:4 לְמַעַן יִקִּים יְהוָה אֶת־דְּבָרֹו
 Ezek 13:6 וַיִּחַלּוּ לְקִיִּים דְּבָר

Postbiblical writers continue to favor the Piel. Note the following examples from the Dead Sea Scrolls and rabbinic literature:

CD 20:11-12²³ קִימוּ בְּאֶרֶץ דְּמִשְׁק
 m. Šebu. 3:6 לְקִיִּים אֶת הַמְצוּהָ וְלֹא קִיִּים פְּטוּר
 Num. Rab. 36b²⁴ יְכוּפוּ אוֹתוֹ כְּדֵי לְקִיִּים דְּבָרֹו

19. Gary Rendsburg maintains that מַלְכוּת is characteristic of Northern Hebrew at an earlier time, and only later did it penetrate to Southern Hebrew (*Linguistic Evidence for the Northern Origin of Selected Psalms* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990] 47).

20. William James Adams, Jr. and L. La Mar Adams, "Language Drift and the Dating of Biblical Passages," *Hebrew Studies* 18 (1977) 162. For this tendency in Mishnaic Hebrew and in the Samaritan tradition, see Z. Ben-Hayyim, "The Samaritan Tradition and its Relation to the Tradition of the Language of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Rabbinic Literature," *Leshonenu* 22 (1958) 236-37 [in Hebrew].

21. GKC 197 §72m; cf. Bendavid, *Biblical Hebrew and Mishnaic Hebrew*, 2.481, 485 and Hurvitz, *Biblical Hebrew in Transition*, 139.

22. Hurvitz, *Biblical Hebrew in Transition*, 142; and Bergey, "Book of Esther," 4].

23. For a reading, see Chaim Rabin, *The Zadokite Documents* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1958) 39. Another possible illustration of the Mel use may occur in CD 15.5-6 (Rabin, 73, n. 62).

24. Observe how this late Midrash uses the Piel of קִיִּים in this phrase identically to Ezek 13:6, and thus in contrast to the Hiphil stem of the earlier 1 Kgs 2:4. The late phrase is also found in the Mishnah in m. Hag. 2:4; m. Yebam. 4:13; 8:4; m. Neg. 9:3; 11:17. For the voluminous number of passages in the Mishnah and the Midrashim which use the Piel of קוּם, see E. Ben Yehuda, *Thesaurus Totius Hebraicitati*, (8 vols.; Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv: Yoseloff, 1947-59) 8.5910-15 [in Hebrew].

This increased tendency to use the Piel stem of קוּם and to consonantalize the middle radical root of hollow verbs is the result of Aramaic influence, according to Bauer-Leander, Wagner, and Zimmerli.²⁵ The increased preference for the Piel seems also to be consistent with Ben-Hayyim's observation that both Mishnaic Hebrew and the Samaritan tradition consistently substitute the Piel conjugation for the Qal of biblical Hebrew.²⁶

EVIDENCE FROM SYNTAX

בִּין . . . ל > בִּין . . . וּבִין

The formula בִּין . . . וּבִין is widespread in biblical Hebrew but occurs with greater frequency in preexilic times than the corresponding formula ל . . . בִּין.²⁷ The formula בִּין . . . וּבִין is used to the exclusion of the formula ל . . . בִּין in Exodus, Joshua, Judges, and Jeremiah; and it is unquestionably preferred in Genesis (by a ratio of 11:1), Kings (11:1), Samuel (7:1), Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy (all 2:1). The formula ל . . . בִּין first begins to occur on a par with the more ancient וּבִין . . . בִּין formula in the book of Ezekiel.²⁸ This trend toward

25. Thus Bauer and Leander, *Historische Grammatik*, 394-95 §56 1'; M. Wagner, *Die Lexikalischen und grammatikalischen Aramäismen im alttestamentischen Hebräisch* (BZAW 96; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1966) 138; and W. Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979, 1983) 1.293. For illustrations of the Piel of קוּם in Nabataean, see G. A. Cooke, *A Text-Book of North-Semitic Inscriptions* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1903) 217, 235.

26. Ben-klayyim, "Samaritan Tradition," 236-37. In the Mishnah the occurrence of קוּם was all but restricted to the Piel stem. See Bendavid, *Biblical Hebrew and Mishnaic Hebrew*, 2.481 §115; and Bergey, "Book of Esther," 41. The same could be said for the Dead Sea Scrolls. See Elisha Qimron, *The Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986) 4 n. Ezekiel constitutes the earliest attestation of the consonantalization of hollow roots in Hebrew. Wagner, *Lexikalischen und grammatikalischen Aramäismen*, 138; and F. Selle, *De Aramaisms libri Ezechielis* (doct. diss., Universitate Fridericiana Halensi, 1390) 28-29. See G. A. Cooke, *The Book of Ezekiel* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936) 143; A. B. Ehrlich, *Ezekiel Mikra ki-Peschuto* (New York: Ktav, 1968) 307 [in Hebrew]; Paul Joüon, "Notes Philologiques sur le Texte Hébreu d'Ezéchiel," *Biblica* 10 (1929)304; and Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1983) 236.

27. G. Haneman, "On the Preposition בִּין in the Mishna and in the Bible," *Le-shonenu* 40 (1975-76) 33-53 [in Hebrew]. But see also Bendavid, *Biblical Hebrew and Mishnaic Hebrew*, 1.334.

28. The formula בִּין . . . וּבִין occurs eight times in Ezek (4:3; 8:3, 16; 20:12, 20; 34:20; 47:16; 48:22). The formula ל . . . בִּין occurs seven times in Ezek (18:8; 22:26; 34:17, 22; 41:18; 42:20; 44:23). Doubtless, however, the occurrences of the early biblical Hebrew formula in Ezek 20:12, 20 are allusions to an earlier text (Exod 31:13). See Michael Fishbane, "The 'Sign' in the Hebrew Bible," *Annual for the Study of the Bible and the Ancient Near East* 1 (1975) 234 [in Hebrew]. It is also probable that the reference to אֶרֶץ in Ezek 4:3 likewise evokes the more ancient formula בִּין . . . וּבִין from the Exod 31:17 passage. See D. S. Shapira, "The Literary Sources of the Book of Ezekiel," *Sinai* 66 (1969-70) 7 [in Hebrew].

increased preference for the formula **בֵּין . . . ל** in continued, as the **ל . . . בֵּין** formula is preferred in Chronicles (2:1) and is used to the exclusion of the **בֵּין . . . וּבֵּין** formula in Jonah, Malachi, Daniel, and Nehemiah.²⁹ The diachronic shift is beautifully demonstrated in parallel texts from Leviticus and Ezekiel:³⁰

Lev 10:10 **בֵּין הַקֹּדֶשׁ וּבֵּין הַחֹל וּבֵּין הַטָּמֵא וּבֵּין הַטָּהוֹר**
 Ezek 22:26 **בֵּין-קֹדֶשׁ לְחֹל לֹא הִבְדִּילוּ וּבֵּין-הַטָּמֵא**

The late construction favored by the writers of late biblical Hebrew was preferred in postbiblical Hebrew as well. The inclination for the writers of the postbiblical period to prefer the late biblical Hebrew formula is perhaps best demonstrated by the following phrase from the *Manual of Discipline* in contrast to a common biblical Hebrew expression:³¹

Exod 18:16; Jer 7:5 **בֵּין אִישׁ וּבֵּין רֵעֵהוּ**
 1QS 5:20-21 **בֵּין אִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ**

Note other representative examples from postbiblical Hebrew as well:

4QMMT B:51-52³² **בֵּין הַטָּמֵא לְטָהוֹר**
 1QH 14:12 **בֵּין טוֹב לְרָשָׁע**
 CD 12:19-20 **לְהַבְדִּיל בֵּין הַטָּמֵא לְטָהוֹר וּלְהוֹדִיעַ בֵּין הַקֹּדֶשׁ לְחֹל**
m. Mid. 3:1 **בֵּין דָּמִים מֵעַל יוֹנִים לְדָמִים הַתַּחְתּוֹנִים לְהַבְדִּיל**

CONCLUSION

These few illustrations provide evidence for the thesis that the language of biblical books written in the Persian period is measurably different from the language of the books written in preexilic times.³³ This difference is best illustrated by the author of Chronicles, who in using either the books of Samuel or Kings as his sources, frequently changed the language of these works without any change in meaning. This change of language suggests that the author was conscious that his time required a different form of expression, and he introduced the changes into an ancient text.³⁴ But how do we account for these

29. For discussion and chart, see Haneman, "The Preposition **בֵּין**," 43-44.

30. Hurvitz, *A Linguistic Study of the Relationship of the Priestly Source and the Book of Ezekiel*, *Cahiers de la Revue Biblique* (Paris: Gabalda, 1982) 113.

31. See Haneman, "The Preposition **בֵּין**," 40-41. The formula **ל . . . בֵּין** is what occurs in the Temple Scroll. Elisha Qimron, "Language of the Temple Scroll," *Leshonenu* 42 (1978) 97 [in Hebrew]. In Mishnaic Hebrew the formula **ל . . . בֵּין**, which had become the preferred mode of expression in late biblical times, was the dominant formula; it occurs almost one hundred times.

32. Cited by Qimron, *The Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 83, n. 59.

33. See Appendix for additional examples.

changes that took place in the history of the Hebrew language? If Mishnaic Hebrew was a spoken language in the first century CE, we are entitled to assume that it had been spoken in some form or other for some centuries; we can thus make it, along with other spoken dialects, responsible for some of the nonclassical Hebrew features of late biblical Hebrew.³⁵ The notion that spoken dialects provided the catalyst for the changes in late biblical Hebrew is consistent with what has been previously stated about linguistic change. Saussure, for example, noted that language change always has its locus at the point of interaction of the speaker with his speech community.³⁶

The clearest impetus for the linguistic change of late biblical Hebrew is the backdrop of the Babylonian exile. During the exile, no doubt, the language changed more rapidly. Blount and Sanches have noted that external factors such as invasions, conquests, contact, migrations, institutional changes, restructuring, and social movements produce language change.³⁷ It is striking that the nation of Judah was subject to every one of these experiences in connection with the Babylonian exile.

Also with the return of the exiles from Babylonia, a new Aramaic-speaking element was introduced. Imperial Aramaic became an administrative language and was surely learned by the local upper classes. In historical terms, then, the borderline between these two successive stages of biblical Hebrew is clearly and conveniently demarcated by the Babylonian exile of the early sixth century BCE—the decisive turning point in the whole of Israelite history. It was then that late biblical Hebrew came into being. Thus in the fifth-sixth century BCE a deep wedge was inserted in the Hebrew language, which divided the language as it divided the history of the people of Israel—in two.³⁸

34. Chaim Rabin, "Hebrew and Aramaic in the First Century," *The Jewish People in the First Century* (2 vols.; ed. S. Safrai and M. Stern; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1976) 2.1014-15.

35. *Ibid.*, 1025.

36. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959) 98. Yet this should be qualified by David Talshir's recent study where he demonstrated that two-thirds of the innovations of late biblical Hebrew are not found in Tannaitic literature. He also observed that 52.7% of the vocabulary of late biblical Hebrew occurs neither in Aramaic nor Rabbinic Hebrew ("The Autonomic Status of Late Biblical Hebrew," *Abba Bendavid Jubilee Volume* [Jerusalem: The Institute for the Study of Judaism, 1987] 161-72 [in Hebrew]).

37. Ben G. Blount and Mary Sanches, *Sociocultural Dimensions of Language Change* (New York: Academic Press, 1977) 4. See also M. L. Samuels, *Linguistic Evolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972) 154.

38. Hurvitz, "The Language and Date of Psalm 151 from Qumran," *Eretz Israel* 8 (1967) 83 [in Hebrew].

APPENDIX

COMMONLY PROPOSED LATE BIBLICAL HEBREW FEATURES³⁹

1. Collectives construed as plurals.
2. Preference for plural forms of words and phrases that the earlier language used in the singular.
3. Increased use of אָנִי before noun in the nominative case.
4. Use of אָנִי for אָנִי.
5. Repetition of a singular word—Latin *quivis*.
6. Substantive occurring before the numeral and in the plural.
7. Order of material weighed or measured + its weight or measure.
8. Radically reduced use of אָנִי with pronominal suffix.
9. Less frequent use of the infinitive absolute in immediate connection with a finite verb of the same stem or as a command.
10. More frequent use of the infinitive construct with אָנִי and אָנִי not preceded by אָנִי.
11. Avoidance of *waw* consecutive.
12. Participle with אָנִי.
13. Frequent use of אָנִי as mark of the accusative.
14. Use of אָנִי for אָנִי.

39. Sources: Kropat, *Syntax des Autors Chronik*; Hurvitz, *Biblical Hebrew in Transition*; Polzin, *Late Biblical Hebrew*; Rooker, *Biblical Hebrew in Transition*; and Talshir, "Autonomous Status of Late Biblical Hebrew."