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

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DIACHRONIC STUDY OF BIBLICAL HEBREW

The catalyst for the historical or diachronic study of the Hebrew language was Arno Kropat's *Syntax des Autors Chronik*, which appeared in 1909. 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 preexilic and postexilic Hebrew but gave little attention to the specific features that distinguish these two phases of the language.

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 *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 (1QIsa)* and in his *History of the Hebrew Language*.

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 *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

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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.

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

**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. 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
syntax will be considered. Proposed suggestions concerning the question of how these features arose will then be surveyed.

EVIDENCE FROM ORTHOGRAPHY

It has long been recognized that one characteristic feature of the orthography of the Chronicler, in contrast to the orthography of Samuel-Kings, is the Chronicler's insistence in writing דִּיוֹדִי with the plene spelling.\(^{12}\) The plene spelling is completely absent from Samuel, and occurs in Kings only on 3 occasions (1 Kgs 3:14; 11:4, 36).\(^{13}\) Thus of the 671 occurrences of the name "David" in Samuel-Kings, only 3 are written plene and the remainder are defective. By contrast, in Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles, the name "David" occurs 271 times, all of which have the plene spelling. Just a few illustrations are sufficient to indicate the diachronic nature of this orthographic shift:\(^{14}\)

2 Sam 7:26 דִּיוֹדִי נֵכְרֵי יָדֹתֵי הָעֵדִי דִּיוֹדִי
1 Chr 17:24 דִּיוֹדִי נֵכְרֵי יָדֹתֵי הָעֵדִי
1 Kgs 7:51 נֵכְרֵי שֵׁלְמַת הָעֵדִי דִּיוֹדִי
2 Chr 5:1 נֵכְרֵי שֵׁלְמַת הָעֵדִי דִּיוֹדִי

The same trend of late biblical Hebrew toward the plene spelling of the personal name דִּיוֹדִי is evident in the biblical manuscripts from Qumran. This tendency can best be demonstrated by looking at occurrences of דִּיוֹדִי in 1QIsa\(^a\), 4QSam\(^a\), which are always plene, against the corresponding passages in Isaiah and Samuel from the MT, which are always defective:\(^{15}\)

Isa 29:1 קִרְבֵי הַיָּהָה דִּיוֹדִי
1QIsa\(^a\) 29:1 קִרְבֵי הַיָּהָה דִּיוֹדִי

12. For the full discussion, see David N. Freedman, "The Spelling of the Name 'David' in the Hebrew Bible," HAR 7 (1983) 89-102; and Francis I. Andersen and A. Dean Forbes, Spelling in the Hebrew Bible (Biblica et Orientalia 41; Rome: Biblical Institute, 1986) 4-9.
13. Passages that Anderson and Forbes suggest were subject to editorial activity (Spelling in the Hebrew Bible, 5).
14. See also 2 Sam 6:16 = 1 Chr 15:29; 1 Kgs 12:19 = 2 Chr 10:19.
15. For these and other examples, see Kutscher, The Language and Linguistic Background of the Isaiah Scroll (1QIsa\(^a\)), 99. See also 2 Sam 5:13 = 4QSam\(^a\) 5:13; 2 Sam 8:17 = 4QSam\(^a\) 8:7; and 2 Sam 12:15 = 4QSam\(^a\) 12:15. Also see Emmanuel Tov, "Determining the Relationship between the Qumran Scrolls and the LXX: Some Methodological Problems," The Hebrew and Greek Texts of Samuel (ed. Emmanuel Toy; Jerusalem: Academon, 1980) 55; and Eugene Charles Ulrich, The Qumran Text of Samuel and Josephus (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978) 45, 83, 138, 143. For addition plene spelling of דִּיוֹדִי in 4QSam\(^a\), see Ulrich 45, 56, 82, 86, 88, 196, 197.
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. 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 מְלָכָה 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.

EVIDENCE FROM NOUN MORPHOLOGY

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

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 מָלֻּכֶּה. Most notably in the book of Esther, in the nine references to "kingdom," only מָלֻּכֶּה is used. This trend continues in postbiblical literature, especially demonstrated in the writings of Mishnaic Hebrew where only מָלֻּכֶּה is used.19

EVIDENCE FROM VERB MORPHOLOGY

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 consonantize the middle radical of hollow verbs.21 This shift can be illustrated by the use of the root מָלֻּכֶּה, which occurs in the Hiphil stem in early biblical Hebrew but began to be replaced by the Piel stem in later biblical texts:22

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>biblical text</th>
<th>Hebrew text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 Kgs 23:24</td>
<td>לָמָשׁ נָכוֹס מְלָכִים נָכוֹס הָלֶכִים וְלָכָה נָכָה</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esth 9:32</td>
<td>נָמַשׁ נָכוֹס מְלָכִים נָכוֹס הָלֶכִים וְלָכָה נָכָה</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Kgs 2:4</td>
<td>לָמָשׁ נָכוֹס מְלָכִים נָכוֹס הָלֶכִים וְלָכָה נָכָה</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezek 13:6</td>
<td>וְלָמָשׁ נָכוֹס מְלָכִים נָכוֹס הָלֶכִים וְלָכָה נָכָה</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

CD 20:11-12

Num. Rab. 36b24

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19. Gary Rendsburg maintains that מָלֻּכֶּה 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).


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 מָלֻּכֶּה 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 מָלֻּכֶּה, see E. Ben Yehuda, Thesaurus Totius Hebraitatai, (8 vols.; Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv: Yoseloff, 1947-59) 8.5910-15 [in Hebrew].
This increased tendency to use the Piel stem of מְמַלְמָלֵל and to consonantalize the middle radical root of hollow verbs is the result of Aramaic influence, according to Bauer-Leander, Wagner, and Zimmerli. 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.

**EVIDENCE FROM SYNTAX**

The formula מְמַלְמָל ... מָלֵל > ל ... מְלֵל is widespread in biblical Hebrew but occurs with greater frequency in preexilic times than the corresponding formula ל ... מְלֵל. The formula מְמַלְמָל ... מָלֵל is used to the exclusion of the formula ל ... מְלֵל 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 ... מְלֵל first begins to occur on a par with the more ancient מְמַלְמָל ... מָלֵל formula in the book of Ezekiel. This trend toward


28. The formula מְמַלְמָל ... מָלֵל occurs eight times in Ezek (4:3; 8:3, 16; 20:12, 20; 34:20; 47:16; 48:22). The formula מְמַלְמָל ... מָלֵל 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 מְמַלְמָל in Ezek 4:3 likewise evokes the more ancient formula מְמַלְמָל ... מָלֵל 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 \( \ldots \text{Nyb} \) in continued, as the \( \ldots \) \( \text{Nyb} \) formula is preferred in Chronicles (2:1) and is used to the exclusion of the \( \ldots \text{Nyb} \) \( \text{Nyb} \) in formula in Jonah, Malachi, Daniel, and Nehemiah. The diachronic shift is beautifully demonstrated in parallel texts from Leviticus and Ezekiel:

- Lev 10:10
  \( \text{Nyb} \) \( \text{Nyb} \) \( \text{Nyb} \)
- Ezek 22:26
  \( \text{Nyb} \) \( \text{Nyb} \) \( \text{Nyb} \)

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:

- Exod 18:16; Jer 7:5
  \( \text{Nyb} \) \( \text{Nyb} \) \( \text{Nyb} \)
- 1QS 5:20-21
  \( \text{Nyb} \) \( \text{Nyb} \) \( \text{Nyb} \) \( \text{Nyb} \)

Note other representative examples from postbiblical Hebrew as well:

- 4QMMT B:51-52
- 1QH 14:12
- CD 12:19-20
- m. Mid. 3:1

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. 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. But how do we account for these

29. For discussion and chart, see Haneman, "The Preposition \( \text{Nyb} \)," 43-44.
31. See Haneman, "The Preposition \( \text{Nyb} \)," 40-41. The formula \( \ldots \text{Nyb} \) 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 \( \ldots \text{Nyb} \), which had become the preferred mode of expression in late biblical times, was the dominant formula; it occurs almost one hundred times.
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. 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.

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. 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.

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

COMMONLY PROPOSED LATE BIBLICAL HEBREW FEATURES

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 נְפִּיָּה before noun in the nominative case.
4. Use of נְפִּיָּה for נְפִּיָּה.
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 נְפִּיָּה 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 נְפִּיָּה and נְפִּיָּה not preceded by נְפִּיָּה.
11. Avoidance of נְפִּיָּה consecutive.
12. Participle with נְפִּיָּה.
13. Frequent use of נְפִּיָּה as mark of the accusative.
14. Use of נְפִּיָּה for נְפִּיָּה.