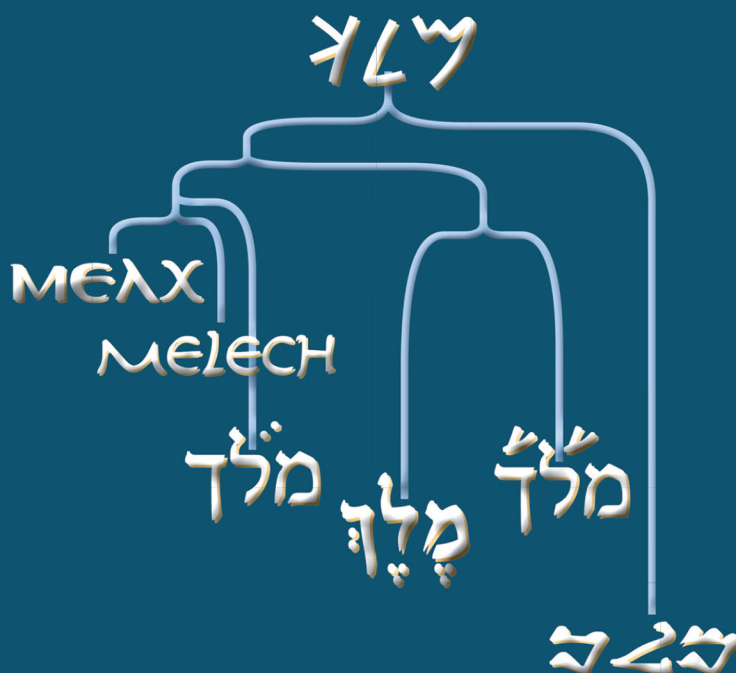


The Linguistic Classification of the Reading Traditions of Biblical Hebrew A Phyla-and-Waves Model

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Benjamin Paul Kantor, *The Linguistic Classification of the Reading Traditions of Biblical Hebrew: A Phyla-and-Waves Model*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0210>

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Semitic Languages and Cultures 19.

ISSN (print): 2632-6906

ISSN (digital): 2632-6914

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-78374-953-9

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-78374-954-6

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-78374-955-3

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0210

Cover image designed by Benjamin Kantor with help of Draw.io and Adobe graphic tools. The Biblical Uncial font (used for the Secunda) and Coptic Uncial font (used for Jerome) on the cover were developed by Juan-José Marcos.

Cover design by Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

The main fonts used in this volume are SIL Charis, Scheherazde New, SBL Hebrew, SBL Greek, Kahle, SBL Hebrew, Hebrew Samaritan, Hebrew Paleo Gezer and Keter Aram Sova.

1. INTRODUCTION

Although many students and scholars of Biblical Hebrew have grown accustomed to see Biblical Hebrew as a monolithic entity with a particular pronunciation—usually similar to Modern Hebrew—there are actually scores of different pronunciation traditions attested from ancient times to the modern day. The six primary historical attestations of the Biblical Hebrew reading traditions are as follows:¹

- I. **Origen's Secunda (2nd/3rd century CE):** The second column of Origen's Hexapla contains Greek transcriptions of the Hebrew Bible. It is likely that Origen encountered this text and/or practice among the Jewish community of Caesarea. As such, the Secunda likely reflects a late Roman Biblical Hebrew reading tradition of the Caesarean Jews.
- II. **Jerome's Transcriptions (4th/5th century CE):** St Jerome, who moved to Bethlehem and learned Hebrew as an adult, often peppers his commentaries with Latin transcription of Biblical Hebrew. This likely reflects the reading tradition current among his Jewish interlocutors of Byzantine Bethlehem.
- III. **Tiberian Vocalisation (Middle Ages):** The Tiberian vocalisation tradition was the most prestigious and

¹ For a detailed explanation of the background of these various traditions and why these should be regarded as the six primary historical attestations of the Biblical Hebrew reading traditions, see chapter 3.

authoritative of the medieval vocalisation systems. It was associated with a group of Hebrew scholars (i.e., Masoretes) from Tiberias in the Galilee. The vowel pointing in texts like *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS) and *Biblia Hebraica Quinta* (BHQ) reflects Tiberian pointing.

- IV. **Palestinian Vocalisation (Middle Ages):** The Palestinian vocalisation tradition of Hebrew constitutes one of the first traditions that marked vowel signs in manuscripts. Though it originated in Palestine, it did not enjoy the same prestige as Tiberian. If Tiberian was the possession of scholars, Palestinian belonged to the masses.
- V. **Babylonian Vocalisation (Middle Ages):** Unlike Tiberian and Palestinian, the Babylonian vocalisation tradition of Biblical Hebrew was associated with Babylonia and the Diaspora community in the east. Although it enjoyed some prestige and authority in the Middle Ages, it was not as highly regarded as Tiberian.
- VI. **Samaritan Oral Tradition (Modern):** The Samaritans broke off from the wider Jewish community between the fourth and second centuries BCE, from which time they have continued to preserve and pass down their biblical and linguistic tradition to the present day. Though their oral reading is modern, it has roots in Second Temple times.

Although there are scores more of Biblical Hebrew reading traditions, we will see in the rest of this book that almost all of them

can be regarded as closely related to and/or derived from one of these six main attestations. The diversity between these traditions, though significant, has often gone overlooked.

We may exemplify such diversity by sampling how just four of the various Hebrew pronunciation traditions would realise the beginning of the *shema* in the following chart:

Table 1: Pronunciation of the *shema* in four traditions

MT	Modern	Tiberian	Secunda	Samaritan
שמע	¹ ʃma	ʃa ¹ ma:aʃ	¹ ʃmaʃ	¹ ʃe:ma
ישראל	(j)isra ¹ (ʔ)el	jisr ¹ ʔe:el	(j)isra: ¹ e:l	jiʃ ¹ ra:ʔəl
יהוה	(ʔ)ado ¹ naj	ʔaðo: ¹ na:j	ʔaðo: ¹ naj	¹ ʃe:ma
אלהינו	(ʔ)elo ¹ (h)enu	ʔelo: ¹ he:nu:	ʔelo: ¹ he:nu:	e:luw ¹ wi:nu
יהוה	(ʔ)ado ¹ naj	ʔaðo: ¹ na:j	ʔaðo: ¹ naj	¹ ʃe:ma
אחד	(ʔ)e ¹ χad	ʔe: ¹ ħa:ð	ʔa ¹ ħa:ð	¹ ʕa:d
ואהבת	ve(ʔ)a(h)av ¹ ta	vʔa: ¹ hav ¹ ta:	(w)uʔa: ¹ heβt	wa: ¹ ibta
את	ʔet	¹ ʔe:eθ	ʔeθ	it
יהוה	(ʔ)ado ¹ naj	ʔaðo: ¹ na:j	ʔaðo: ¹ naj	¹ ʃe:ma
אלהיך	(ʔ)elo ¹ (h)eχa	ʔelo: ¹ he:χa:	ʔelo: ¹ ha:χ	e: ¹ luwwak
בכל	be ¹ χol	ba ¹ χʔl	b ¹ χol	¹ afkal
לבבך	levav ¹ χa	lavv ¹ χa:	leβa: ¹ βa:χ	le: ¹ ba:bak
ובכל	uv ¹ χol	wuv ¹ χʔl	waβ ¹ χol	¹ wafkal
נפשך	nafʃe ¹ χa	nafʃa ¹ χa:	neʃʃa: ¹ χ	¹ nafjak
ובכל	uv ¹ χol	wuv ¹ χʔl	waβ ¹ χol	¹ wafkal
מאדך	me(ʔ)o ¹ deχa	moʔo: ¹ ðe:χa:	mo: ¹ ða:χ	me: ¹ ʔu:dak

A brief window into these four traditions reveals just how varied the different oral pronunciation traditions of Hebrew can be. It should also be noted that the differences between the traditions are not merely phonological, but also include many elements of morphology. In some cases, the differences between the traditions can even entail difference in syntax and interpretation. And here we have looked at only four of the multiplicity of Biblical

Hebrew reading traditions attested throughout history and in modern times.

Given the importance of the various oral reading traditions of Biblical Hebrew for the transmission of the Hebrew Bible, it remains a *desideratum* in the field to address the linguistic relationship between them. While such work has been carried out extensively on other Semitic languages and the family of Semitic languages as a whole, relatively little has been done for the various traditions of Hebrew. This short book addresses this *desideratum*.

The rest of the book is organised into five main sections. We begin with an overview of our methodology and some preliminaries for classifying the Biblical Hebrew reading traditions (chapter 2). Following this, we present a brief overview of the six primary historical attestations of the Biblical Hebrew reading traditions throughout history (chapter 3). We then proceed to delineate the various subgroupings of the Biblical Hebrew reading traditions based on shared innovations (chapter 4). These classifications are complemented and further informed by considering factors of language contact and influence of the various reading traditions (chapter 5). We conclude by presenting an overview of the relationship of the various Biblical Hebrew reading traditions throughout history (chapter 6).