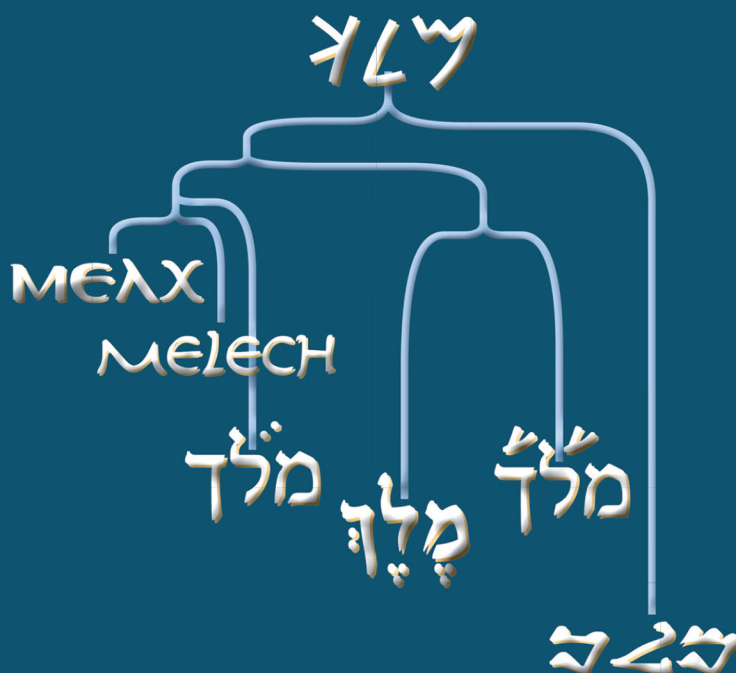


The Linguistic Classification of the Reading Traditions of Biblical Hebrew A Phyla-and-Waves Model

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2. METHODOLOGY

1.0. Lambdin's 'Philippi's Law Reconsidered'

The idea that the various reading traditions of Biblical Hebrew could be treated as different 'dialects' of Hebrew goes back at least to Lambdin (1985, 136), who first addressed the topic in the context of Philippi's Law:

Methodologically, [Babylonian Hebrew] and [Hexaplaric Hebrew] will be viewed as 'dialects' developing parallel to [Tiberian Hebrew] and not simply as degenerate mappings of the latter onto less precise grids. This approach entails the conceptualisation of a Proto-Biblical Hebrew Tradition from which the various traditions, including [Tiberian Hebrew], evolved by a set of explicit, unambiguous rules.

Regarding the different Biblical Hebrew reading traditions as 'dialects' is an important step towards a historical-comparative approach for analysing and classifying the various reading traditions of Biblical Hebrew. Even though the various traditions are recitation traditions of the Bible, they do tend to reflect characteristics of the spoken vernacular of their tradents (Morag 1958).

Another point to be made regarding Lambdin's approach concerns his pushback against giving preferential treatment to Tiberian Hebrew, which is the tradition reflected in the text of *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS) and familiar to most students and scholars. Even though Tiberian Hebrew was regarded as the most prestigious and authoritative reading tradition in the Middle Ages, it is but one of many. The trend to see Biblical Hebrew

not as a monolithic entity but as a conglomerate of different dialects and traditions attested throughout history is also present in the forthcoming *Oxford Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Khan et al. 2025).

2.0. Semitic Language Classification

There is perhaps no better place to find a model for analysing the relationship between language traditions than the field of Comparative Semitics and the work that has been done on language classification. Although not precisely parallel to our present goals—we are analysing ‘dialects’ rather than ‘languages’ and the differences between Hebrew traditions are much more minute—the same general principles may apply. Moreover, one of the benefits of drawing on work on language classification in the field of Comparative Semitics is that it has more than a century of development and evolution of ideas.

In the earliest stages, scholars like Nöldeke (1899; 1911) and Brockelmann (1908) suggested that the various Semitic languages could be grouped according to shared linguistic features and proximal geographical locations. This method led to only vaguely accurate classifications and left significant room for improvement. Perhaps the biggest problem with this approach concerns the nature of shared linguistic features. It is not enough to show that two languages share a particular feature to group them together, since this commonality could be inherited from the ancestor language.

Rather, as Hetzron (1974; 1975; 1976) would point out later in the twentieth century, we must make a distinction between ‘shared retentions’ and ‘linguistic innovations’; only the latter are relevant for linguistic subgrouping. In addition to this foundational principle, Hetzron also developed the concept of ‘archaic heterogeneity’, which basically states that older forms of the language should exhibit more irregularity and diversity and less consistency and systematisation.

A nice example of the relevance of archaic heterogeneity concerns the first- and second-person endings of the verbal adjective, which would become the suffix conjugation, the perfect, or the *qaṭal* form in West Semitic. In languages like Hebrew and Arabic, both the 1CS and 2MS/2FS forms have an initial **t* in these forms. In Ge‘ez, there is an initial **k*. In Akkadian, on the other hand, the 1CS has **k* but the 2MS/2FS forms have **t*:

Table 2: First- and second-person endings of the verbal adjective

| | Hebrew | Arabic | Ge‘ez | Akkadian | Proto-Semitic |
|-----|--------|--------|-------|----------|---------------|
| 1CS | *-tī | *-tu | *-ku | *-ku | *-ku |
| 2MS | *-tā | *-ta | *-ka | *-ta | *-ta |
| 2FS | *-t(ī) | *-ti | *-ki | *-ti | *-ti |

While Hebrew, Arabic, and Ge‘ez generalise either **t* or **k* throughout the paradigm, Akkadian exhibits diversity of forms. According to the principle of archaic heterogeneity, then, the Akkadian paradigm probably represents the more archaic Proto-Semitic situation. While this principle is applicable here, it ought not to be used indiscriminately. In other cases, the principle of archaic heterogeneity can actually lead to incorrect conclusions.

Methodologically, such a principle should only be applied when the heterogeneity cannot be explained in other ways.

Faber (1997, 4) further developed the idea of linguistic innovation as being *the* foundational criterion for classification, stating that “the establishment of a linguistic subgroup requires the identification of innovations that are shared among all and only the members of that subgroup.” It should be noted, however, that while this marked an innovation in scholarship on the classification of Semitic languages, these methodological criteria had long been established in general linguistics.²

More recently, Huehnergard and Rubin (2011) have called attention to the relevance of language contact for a comprehensive picture of the classification of the Semitic languages.³ While scholarship on the classification of the Semitic languages had tended to produce a genetic (or family) tree as its ultimate product, Huehnergard and Rubin pointed out that this is only part of the picture. In addition to the genetic relationship of the Semitic languages expressed in a tree diagram, we must also consider the frequent and close linguistic contact between various Semitic languages. Even after various language communities ‘break off’ from the rest, there is often continued contact. In that sense, a proper conception of the subgroupings of the Semitic languages must involve both a tree showing the genetic relationships and a map showing the languages in contact. Only then do we have a full

² For a review of some of the literature, see François (2014, 164–65).

³ But for the most recent treatment of the various Semitic languages, their history, and their relation to one another, see Huehnergard and Pat-El (2019).

picture. It is for this reason that they titled their article ‘Phyla and Waves’, accounting for both genealogy and contact.⁴

3.0. Classifying Hebrew Traditions by Linguistic Innovations and Language Contact

Following the model afforded us by Comparative Semitists, and in particular Huehnergard and Rubin, we may propose a similar model for the classification of the Biblical Hebrew reading traditions. Methodologically, then, our genetic subgroupings should be determined on the basis of shared linguistic innovations and elements of language contact should be factored in to provide a comprehensive picture.

As far as shared innovations go, it should be reiterated that not all shared linguistic features are relevant for genetic subgrouping. When we find two distinct traditions of Biblical Hebrew sharing a particular linguistic feature, it is not necessarily relevant for linguistic subgrouping. In many (or most) cases, shared features are archaic and simply reflect retentions from Proto-Biblical Hebrew. In other cases, shared features may be the result of parallel development. In still other cases, shared features could be the result of linguistic diffusion and/or language contact. While this is interesting and relevant for our purposes, it does not indicate any kind of genetic subgrouping. It is only when

⁴ I have thus included in the title of my book the same moniker, both due to its applicability for the relationship of the Biblical Hebrew reading traditions and as an homage to my PhD supervisor, John Huehnergard. The training I received from him has undoubtedly been a large part of equipping me to write this book.

shared features reflect linguistic innovation that we can demarcate divisions among the genetic subgrouping of the various Biblical Hebrew reading traditions.

At the same time, the case of the Biblical Hebrew reading traditions may be special in this regard. Because we are not necessarily dealing with spoken languages, but rather linguistic systems that developed around the biblical text, language contact can in some cases be a more significant diagnostic feature. If some traditions were preserved in such a way that elements of the spoken language did not infiltrate their grammar, then the pervasive nature of vernacular features in other traditions may be relevant for classification. Though not strictly a ‘shared innovation’ in the purest sense of the term, the susceptibility of certain traditions to the influence of the vernacular can demarcate some traditions over against more conservative ones that were preserved with less influence of the spoken language. In fact, this may account for numerous differences between the ‘popular’ traditions and the ‘Masoretic’ traditions (see chapter 4, §2.0). Nevertheless, such demarcations should be buttressed by at least some shared innovations on the genetic level.

As far as language contact goes, the relevant contact languages change from period to period. In Hellenistic-Roman times, the Biblical Hebrew reading traditions of Palestine would have been primarily in contact with Aramaic, vernacular Hebrew, and Greek. The Byzantine period would have been characterised by contact with Aramaic and (even more) Greek. Towards the end of the Byzantine period and into the Middle Ages, Arabic would

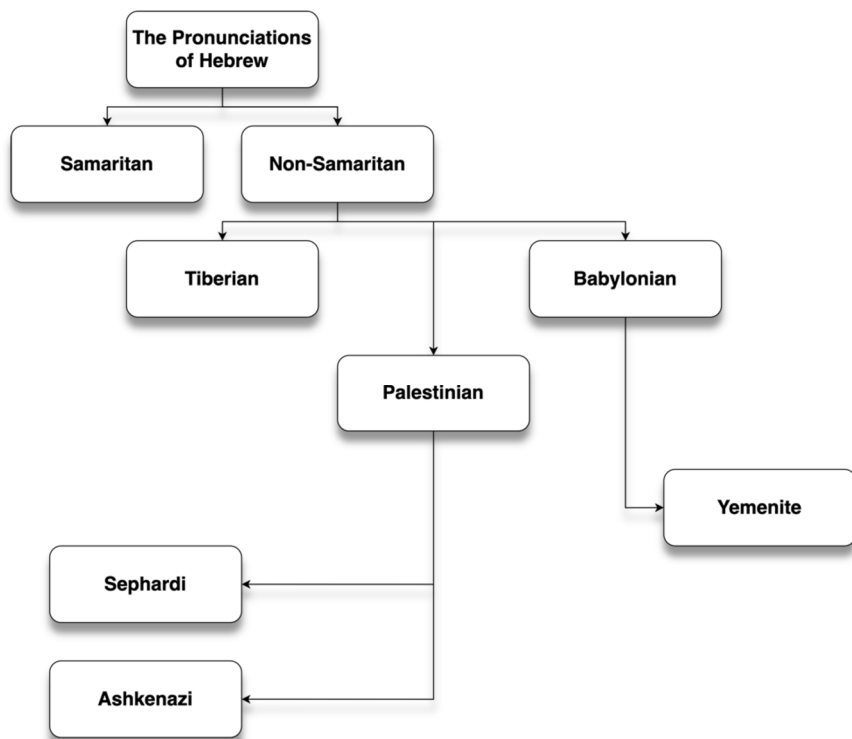
have become one of the main contact languages and vernaculars of the traditions of the Biblical Hebrew reading traditions.

4.0. Previous Scholarship on the Relationship of the Biblical Hebrew Traditions

Before we proceed to analyse the Biblical Hebrew reading traditions in light of our methodology, we should acknowledge some of the work that has already been done in this area.

Perhaps the most helpful research on the classification of the Biblical Hebrew reading traditions is that of Morag. In his article on the pronunciation traditions of Biblical Hebrew, he devotes a couple of pages to outlining the ‘Classification of the Pronunciations of Hebrew’ (Morag 2007, 553). As part of this, he outlines several basic divisions. First, he makes a distinction between ‘Samaritan’ and ‘non-Samaritan’ traditions of Hebrew. Within the ‘non-Samaritan’ group, he identifies three main traditions of the Middle Ages: (i) Tiberian, (ii) Palestinian, and (iii) Babylonian. While the Tiberian tradition did not have any further descendants, Palestinian is continued by the Sephardi and Ashkenazi traditions, whereas Babylonian is continued by the Yemenite tradition. These relationships may be displayed in the following chart (Morag 2007, 553):

Figure 1: Relationships between Hebrew pronunciation traditions according to Morag



These linguistic divisions are consistent with the findings of the present work (see chapter 6). There are, however, several points where we can add to Morag's work. First, Morag focuses mostly on phonology and not necessarily on all aspects of the grammar. Second, Morag does not necessarily implement the same sort of methodology developed for dealing with the classification of Semitic languages, namely the emphasis on shared innovations for subgrouping, which is balanced by taking language contact into account. Third, and finally, Morag does not include some of the more ancient attestations of Biblical Hebrew reading traditions, such as the *Secunda* and transcriptions of Jerome.

In fact, the relationship of the ancient transcription traditions to other traditions of Hebrew is where the main *desideratum* in the field still lies. After all, it is easy to differentiate traditions that are attested contemporaneously, like Palestinian, Tiberian, and Babylonian. It is much more difficult to discern how these medieval traditions are related to those traditions attested in the Roman and Byzantine periods, namely the Secunda and Jerome.

In recent years, however, Maurizio (2021; 2022) has been researching the relationship between the Secunda and other Biblical Hebrew reading traditions.⁵ Though her work is still ongoing, she explores the relationship of the Secunda tradition to other traditions of the Second Temple Period, on one hand, and its relative conservatism in relation to the medieval traditions on the other. She points out a number of shared conservative features between the Hebrew tradition of the Secunda and that reflected in the Dead Sea Scrolls, such as the **yeqtolū* pattern and the preservation of etymological vowels in the ‘*shewa* slot’. More innovative features are also acknowledged, such as the weakening of final nasals and the ‘Aramaising’ preference for the lexeme לבב ‘heart’ over לב ‘heart’. Shared nominal patterns between the Secunda and Qumran Hebrew are also addressed. Samaritan Hebrew is also explored in relation to the Secunda; Maurizio notes that both traditions often preserve etymological vowels in open

⁵ I would like to thank Isabella Maurizio for sharing her notes from her 2021 SBL presentation with me.

unstressed syllables. On the other hand, she notes that the unusual form ׳ל׳׃ (׳ל׳׃ ׳ל׳׃) may have a parallel in Samaritan $[\text{i:li}]$.⁶ An in-depth discussion of the **maqṭal* pattern across the various traditions is also part of her work.

After looking at many other points of comparison, she concludes that while the Secunda is an independent tradition, features where it correlates phonetically, phonologically, and morphologically with other traditions should be examined closely. She concludes that among ancient traditions, the Secunda shares some features with Qumran Hebrew and Samaritan Hebrew. Among the medieval traditions, it has many shared features with Babylonian, which speaks to the conservatism of these traditions. Overall, the Secunda is highly conservative and characterised by the preservation of historical or etymological patterns.

Maurizio's work is refreshing, especially considering the depth and coverage she affords a topic rarely touched by other scholars. There are, however, some points that could be explored further in the present work. For our purposes, more focus should be placed on shared innovations rather than shared retentions. As noted earlier in our discussion of the classification of Semitic languages, 'conservative' features are essentially irrelevant for establishing the relationship between dialects or traditions—unless

⁶ According to my analysis, however, this form reflects vowel alternation (and subsequent partial assimilation of the following diphthong) as an orthoepic strategy to maintain a clear contour at a word boundary of a word ending in a long $/\bar{e}/$ vowel and a word beginning with $/\text{ʔ}\bar{e}/$: i.e., $\text{׳ל׳׃ ׳ל׳׃} / \text{hett̩} \text{ʔ}\bar{e} \text{ləj} / \rightarrow [\text{hett̩} \text{ʔi:l̩} \text{əj}]$ (Kantor forthcoming b, §3.4.5).

one would argue for direct influence. Determining the relative conservatism of a particular tradition is not our primary goal. After all, even a form like **yeqtolēni*, common in the Secunda, Qumran, and Babylonian, has vestiges in Tiberian: e.g., יִהְדְּפֻם ‘will push them back’ (Josh. 23.5). On the other hand, certain shared features between the Secunda and Qumran Hebrew, such as the weakening of final nasals, may be the result of linguistic diffusion affecting all languages in the region, including Greek (Kantor 2023, §§7.5.1–2).

While Maurizio covers a wealth of helpful data and brings it all together nicely, it may be more instructive for our purposes to limit the discussion to those features for which we can make a relatively strong case that they arose as or due to one of two phenomena: (i) shared innovations or (ii) linguistic diffusion due to language contact. We will attempt to do so in the remainder of this book.

5.0. A ‘Proto-’ Biblical Hebrew Reading Tradition in the Second Temple Period

Before we proceed to enumerate the various shared innovations among different groups of Biblical Hebrew reading traditions, we must first address the concept of a ‘Proto-’ Biblical Hebrew reading tradition in the Second Temple Period. Although we did not mention it earlier in our discussion of the classification of the Semitic languages, essential to the methodology is the assumption that the various Semitic languages are all derived from a common ‘Proto-’ ancestor, namely Proto-Semitic.

The same can probably be hypothesised regarding a ‘Proto-’ Biblical Hebrew *reading tradition* in the early Second Temple Period. This is distinct from the concept of a Proto-Hebrew language, which would take us back to the second millennium BCE. Rather, the idea of a ‘Proto-’ Biblical Hebrew reading tradition entails that already by the Second Temple Period, there were at least some somewhat fixed and traditional ways of reading the consonantal text of the Bible. This probably developed gradually, both with respect to different communities and with respect to different portions of the Hebrew Bible. A reading tradition—or traditions—for the Torah probably developed before the rest of the Bible.⁷

There is, in fact, evidence for such a reading tradition when we compare some of the parallel passages that occur both in First-Temple-Period books of the Bible, like Joshua, and Second-Temple-Period books of the Bible, like Chronicles (Barr 1984). Indeed, as Barr points out, there are instances where the consonantal text of Chronicles corresponds with the *qere* of Joshua. This occurs with respect to the geographical term מְגֵרָשׁ ‘pastureland’ when a possessive suffix (i.e., ‘its’ or ‘hers’) is attached to it. Joshua 21 recounts how the cities and pasturelands from among the tribes of Israel are apportioned to the Levites. The chapter oft repeats phrases like אֵת־הָעָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְאֶת־מְגֵרָשֵׁיהֶן ‘these cities and their pasturelands’ (Josh. 21.8) or אֵת־הַבְּרֹן וְאֶת־מְגֵרָשָׁהּ ‘Hebron and its pasturelands’ (Josh. 21.13). In each instance, the noun

⁷ Note that there is some evidence for this based on the layering of archaic features within the Tiberian tradition itself. This theme is picked up repeatedly in the work of Hornkohl (2023).

מִגְרֶשׁ ‘pastureland’ has a third person feminine possessive suffix, whether singular (‘her; its’) or plural (‘their’), referring to the city or cities.

What is of particular note here, though, is that the noun מִגְרֶשׁ is often vocalised as plural, even though the consonantal text would seem to indicate a singular form: e.g., *את חברון ואת* (ק’ מִגְרֶשָּׁה) ‘Hebron and its pastureland(s)’ (Josh. 21.13); *את גבעון ואת* מִגְרֶשָּׁה (ק’ מִגְרֶשָּׁה) ‘Gibeon and its pastureland(s)’ (Josh. 21.17). But where it is written as *מִגְרֶשָּׁה*, it refers to the pastureland of a single city.⁸ In those cases where the pasturelands refer to those of multiple cities, however, the form is written with a *yod*: e.g., *ערים לשבת ומגרשיהן לבהמתנו* ‘cities to dwell in and their pasturelands for our livestock’ (Josh. 21.2); *את הערים האלה ואת מגרשיהן* ‘these cities and their pasturelands’ (Josh. 21.3); *שלש עשרה ערים ומגרשיהן* ‘thirteen cities and their pasturelands’ (Josh. 21.19).⁹

This would seem to indicate that, when first composed, the forms written as *מִגְרֶשָּׁה* were intended as singular forms. Only the forms with a *yod* written were intended as plural forms. And yet, the Tiberian oral reading tradition, perhaps due to later changes in the language which made a plural reading more appropriate, vocalised *מִגְרֶשָּׁה* as plural against the consonantal orthography. Familiarity with an oral reading tradition passed down from gen-

⁸ See also Josh. 21.11, 13–18, 21–25, 27–32, 34–39, 42.

⁹ See also Josh. 21.8, 26, 33, 41, 42. Regarding Josh. 21.42, note Barr’s comments on the distributive nature of the singular suffix, despite the reference to plural cities (Barr 1984, 19–20).

eration to generation would seem to be the most likely explanation for how the consonantal text *מגרשה* would be read as plural rather than singular.¹⁰

The allotment material from Joshua 21 is mostly repeated in 1 Chronicles 6, even if with some minor differences. What is of particular note, however, is the fact that each case of consonantal *מגרשה* in Joshua corresponds to consonantal *מגרשיה* in 1 Chronicles 6: e.g., *וְאֶת־מִנְרָשָׁה* ‘Shechem and its **pasturelands**’ (Josh 21.21) vs *אֶת שְׁכֶם וְאֶת מִנְרָשִׁיהָ* (1 Chron. 6.52).¹¹ In light of the correlation between the *consonantal text* of 1 Chronicles 6 and the Tiberian *vocalisation* of Joshua 21, several scholars have concluded that a certain oral reading tradition of the Hebrew Bible—Joshua in this case—had already come to be reflected in the textual tradition of Chronicles (Barr 1984; Khan 2020b, 57). This would seem to indicate that already by the early-to-mid Second Temple Period, various communities were memorising and transmitting oral reading traditions of the Hebrew Bible.

As such, it is appropriate to speak of an ancestor ‘Proto-’ Biblical Hebrew reading tradition.¹² And yet, just as one might

¹⁰ That it was not merely a case of the noun *מגרש* occurring in the plural by default in later stages of the language is proven by instances of this noun in the singular in the Mishnah (Maaser Sheni 5.14; Sota 5.3; Arakhin 9.8).

¹¹ See also 1 Chron. 6.40, 42–45, 49, 52–66.

¹² One possible objection to this claim may be that this phenomenon only reflects a stream of tradition that would eventually become Tiberian Hebrew. Other traditions could have developed independently and thus there would not have been a single ‘Proto-’ Biblical Hebrew reading

posit internal diversity in Proto-Semitic, it is unlikely that this early stage of the Biblical Hebrew reading tradition was monolithic. It is probably better to speak of ‘Proto-’ Biblical Hebrew reading traditions plural. Nevertheless, as we will see in the following sections, there are enough shared features among the variety of attested traditions to posit at least something of a common ancestor from the early Second Temple Period.¹³

tradition. There are two responses to such an objection. First, as demonstrated by the work of Lambdin (1985) and the present book, operating from the assumption of a proto-tradition generally leads to consistent and historico-linguistically coherent conclusions. Second, it is probably true that even our hypothesised ‘Proto-’ Biblical Hebrew was actually a constellation of various features associated with the reading tradition with its own internal diversity. After all, even Comparative Semitists sometimes have to posit internal diversity in Proto-Semitic to explain some features in the daughter languages. As such, given that the assumption of a ‘Proto-’ Biblical Hebrew reading tradition (with some internal diversity) yields coherent results and has precedent in the field of Comparative Semitics, we will proceed with this methodological pre-supposition.

¹³ But for some nuance regarding the relationship of Samaritan to this hypothesised ancestor reading tradition, see chapter 4, §1.4.