The Historical Depth of the Tiberian Reading Tradition of Biblical Hebrew

Aaron D. Hornkohl

https://www.openbookpublishers.com

Cover image: T-S AS 8.129. A leaf from a Cairo Geniza biblical codex containing Gen. 30.17–20 and showcasing Moshe Moḥe's non-standard Tiberian pointing of the standard Tiberian pronunciation of *Issachar* (see within, ch. 4), courtesy of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

8. THE *QERE PERPETUUM* הוא

In the majority of sources that represent ancient Hebrew tradi-
tions, the 3FS independent subject pronoun is written with medial
yod, e.g., DSS היא(ה). Likewise, in extant pronunciation traditions,
it is realised with a corresponding *i*-vowel, e.g., standard Tiberian
(non-Pentateuchal) BH and RH הִיא, SH *ī*. The written component
of the Tiberian tradition of the Pentateuch, exhibiting the
spelling הוא, is an outlier. Whereas the combined Tiberian writ-
ten-reading tradition in the MT Prophets and Writings routinely
exhibits the unified consonantal-vocalic form הִיא (in 282 of 286
cases), in the Torah such unity is rare (just 18 of 212 cases).[1]
Instead of הִיא, the anomalous graphic spelling-vocalic combina-
tion הִוא is normative in the Tiberian Pentateuch.

1.0. The Tiberian Tradition

On four occasions in the Hebrew Bible, readers are explicitly in-
structed via the (inter)marginal *ketiv-qere* mechanism to read 3FS
הִיא instead of apparently 3MS written הוא (Deut. 13.16; 1 Kgs
17.15; Isa. 30.33; Job 31.11). In five additional cases, the *ketiv-
qere* gives the opposite instruction, that is, to read 3MS הוא for the
apparent 3FS spelling היא (1 Kgs 17.15; Ps. 73.16; Job 31.11; Qoh.
5.8; 1 Chron. 29.16).[2] Finally, in 192 instances in the Pentateuch

---

[1] The figures given here are representative, but scholars differ on their
counts. Throughout the MT, written-reading agreement on הִיא obtains
in about 300 out of 500 instances.

[2] Thus, 1 Kgs 17.15 and Job 31.11 each involve both changes.

and once in the Prophets, the written form הוא is vocalised with *ḥiriq* to signal the *qere perpetuum* הִוא.[3] As already noted, in the Tiberian Pentateuch, the orthography and vocalisation agree on the realisation of 3FS היא just 18 times in 210 cases (see §5.1 for citations).

Scholarly explanations for the routine written-reading mismatch in the Tiberian Pentateuch vary from the graphic to the linguistic. According to one widely accepted version of the graphic approach, the Tiberian Torah ultimately goes back to a manuscript characterised by defective spelling, where both the 3MS and 3FS independent subject pronouns were originally written הא (cf. the 3MS forms in Arad 18.10, 12; Kuntillet Ajrud 9.1; Lachish 21.5; Meshaʿ [*KAI* 181] 6, 21; Deir ʿAlla [*KAI* 312] 1). Into this form in a manuscript of the proto-Masoretic tradition, so it is claimed, a scribe mechanically inserted *mater waw*, not realising that הא often represented the 3FS independent pronoun (GKC §32l). In a variation of the same approach, the scribe attempted to distinguish the two pronouns, but wrote *waw* and *yod* so similarly (a practice common in the DSS), that later copyists, unable to discern any difference, reproduced *waw* on all occasions. Even later copyists, loathe out of respect for the manuscript to modify the apparent 3FS הוא spellings, left them uncorrected (Cross 1998, 222–23; JM §39c). Neither explanation accounts for the Masoretic Pentateuch's 18 exceptions in which the written and reading traditions agree on 3FS היא (Fassberg 2012, 171–72).

---

[3] Rendsburg (1982, 353) gives the figure 120, which is repeated by Fassberg (2012, 171).

A well-known linguistic proposal is that the Hebrew of the Tiberian Torah preserves an epicene 3CS pronoun ה(ו)א *hū* (Green 1872, 96; Lambert 1946, 34, fn. 3; Rendsburg 1982; Tropper 2001; Morgenstern 2007, 49–50). The spelling in the Tiberian Pentateuch would thus preserve an old feature that is out of line with the corresponding Pentateuchal recitation tradition as well as with the combined written-reading tradition of the rest of the Masoretic Bible. According to recent versions of this approach, the explanation for the epicene pronoun in the Pentateuch is Hittite or Hurrian influence (Rendsburg 1982) or a single 3CS oblique pronoun הוא [huʔā] (< *huʔắt) (as opposed to distinct 3MS and 3FS nominative pronouns) (Tropper 2001). The problems with approaches of this sort are that (a) the alleged feature is not known outside the written component of the Tiberian tradition as preserved in the Pentateuch; (b) the Semitic languages commonly distinguish 3MS and 3FS pronouns; and, perhaps most decisively, (c) Tiberian BH grammar, e.g., the verbal system, pronominal suffixes, including that reflected in the written component of the tradition in the Pentateuch, consistently reflects gender distinction in the 3rd-person singular.

The current chapter takes as its jumping-off point a different sort of linguistic hypothesis. As suggested by Cohen (2007, 113–15) and buttressed by Fassberg (2012), the הוא spelling common to the 3MS and 3FS independent subject pronouns in the written component of the Tiberian tradition reflects distinct morphological forms, namely 3MS *huwa* or *hūw* and 3FS *hiwa* or *hīw*, which in the corresponding Pentateuchal reading tradition,

and the Masoretic biblical reading tradition more generally, shortened to *hū* and *hī*, respectively (see further below, §3.0).

2.0. Non-Tiberian Biblical and Extra-biblical Evidence

Beyond the Tiberian biblical written and pronunciation evidence, it is instructive to consider additional ancient Hebrew evidence. The rather opaque inscriptional 3MS form הא has already been cited. The quality of its medial vocalisation is uncertain, as is the presence, quality, and quantity of a final vowel (though final long vowels are generally thought to have been marked in ancient inscriptional Hebrew). No 3FS form is attested in the extant epigraphic corpus.

Babylonian Torah manuscripts know the same phenomenon seen in the Tiberian Pentateuch. Yeivin (1985, 1103) notes the written-reading mismatch in a vocalised Babylonian manuscript at Deut. 11.10.

In DSS Hebrew, alongside the more standard spellings הוא and היא come הואה and היאה, respectively (Qimron 1986, 57–58; 2018, 261–62; Reymond 2014, 158). The two sets of forms occur in both biblical and non-biblical manuscripts, the former more frequently than the latter. Crucially, where the written component of the Tiberian biblical tradition has 3FS הוא, corresponding DSS manuscripts usually have היא (or הי or היאה), showing agreement with the *qere perpetuum* of the recitation tradition (see §5.2

for citations).[4] A minority of BDSS manuscripts appear to match the Tiberian written tradition with 3FS הוא (see §5.2 for citations; but cf. Reymond 2014, 158).

The combined written-reading tradition of the SP furnishes important information. The written component of the tradition, as evidenced in the Shechem Synagogue Ms 6 (C), consistently has היא against Tiberian written 3FS הוא (Ben-Ḥayyim 2000, 226, §3.1.4). This is in agreement with the Samaritan pronunciation tradition, according to which היא is realised as *ī*.

In BS manuscripts from antiquity and the Middle Ages, 3FS היא is consistently distinguished from 3MS הוא.

The same is true for the Tannaitic RH tradition of Codex Kaufmann of the Mishna, where the form is הִיא.

Most of the evidence cited in this section shows Second Temple unanimity regarding a realisation of the 3FS independent subject pronoun in line with the standard non-Pentateuchal Tiberian orthography היא. According to a straightforward reading of the data, the Tiberian reading tradition of the Torah joins in with the combined Tiberian written and reading tradition of the rest of the Bible and with various Second Temple traditions on pronunciation resembling *hī*, including *hiʾā, hiyā,* and *ī*.

---

[4] This assumes that the relevant editor has correctly distinguished *waw* and *yod* in texts where the distinction can be anywhere from minimal to non-existent.

3.0. A Linguistic Explanation for 3FS הוא in the Written Component of the Tiberian Torah

Both internal and external evidence militate against the theory that apparently 3FS הוא in the written component of the Tiberian Torah reflects an epicene 3CS pronoun. Beyond the fact that the Semitic languages, in general, and ancient Hebrew, more specifically, routinely distinguish gender in the 3rd-person singular, the Tiberian written tradition of the Torah reflects gender distinction in 3rd-person singular morphology, including pronominal suffixes and the verbal system. An epicene 3rd-person singular independent pronoun would thus from multiple perspectives be exceptional.

Explanations based on the graphic similarity of *waw* and *yod* are also probably to be rejected, since they fail to account for the generally correct distinction between *waw* and *yod* in other words in the Tiberian Torah and leave a number of cases of standard היא unexplained.

If the 3FS הוא spelling is not to be attributed to graphic factors, a different sort of the linguistic explanation must be sought. As mentioned above, Cohen (2007, 113–13) has proposed an intriguing alternative. In his view, development of the standard Tiberian 3FS independent subject pronoun היא may be schematised as follows (Cohen 2007, 114–15):

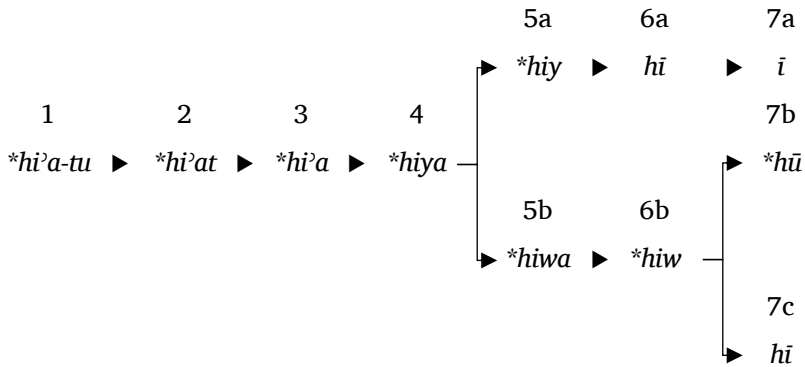| 1	2	3	4	5	6	7
*hiʾa-tu >	*hiʾat >	*hiʾa >	*hiwa >	*hiya >	*hiy >	hī

It is worth quoting Cohen in full:

> According to this hypothesis, it appears that the *ketiv* and
> the *qere* before us—הִיא/הוא—are in fact nothing but differ-
> ent forms of the same 3FS pronoun, testifying to different
> stages of development in the form of this pronoun (stage 4
> *hiwa* [=*הִוַא] and final stage 7 *hī* [=הִיא]), and it is not
> impossible that these two forms, which were a sort of dou-
> blet in Hebrew, served contemporaneously in two parallel
> linguistic traditions. (Cohen 2007, 115, my translation)

This approach has the advantage of making sense of the other-
wise anomalous 3FS spelling הוא. Moreover, it is not incompatible
with the minority DSS spelling היאה, which can be viewed as the
retention of a comparatively archaic form (Qimron 1986, 57–58;
2018, 261–62; cf. Kutscher 1974, 433–34). In allowing for the
contemporaneity of the two pronunciations, it also comprehends
diversity both within and beyond the Torah. Finally, the typolog-
ically later *hī* realisation in the Tiberian reading component of
the Torah is consistent with the combined written-reading tradi-
tion in the rest of the Hebrew Bible, apparently reflecting stand-
ardisation of a Second Temple feature with early roots as a
minority form.

Yet, Cohen's approach is not without problems. Fassberg
(2012, 175, fn. 13) observes that the conjectured development
from stage 3 *hiʾa* to stage 4 *hiwa* is unexpected, a *y* glide being
expected contiguous to an *i*-vowel, as in Arabic هِيَ *hiya*. If *hiwa*
or *hīw* (Fassberg 2012, 177) are behind the spelling of 3FS הוא
in the Tiberian Torah, then one must assume that the unexpected
shift of -*iʾa* to -*iw(a)* was motivated by analogical pressure from
the more common corresponding 3MS form, where the develop-
ment *huʾa* to *huwa* is expected.

Fassberg (2012, 177) also entertains the possibility that 3FS הוא in the Tiberian written tradition of the Pentateuch reflects the realisation *$h\bar{u}$*, apparently not as an original epicene pronoun, but as a result of phonetic neutralisation, presumably along the lines of *$hiwa$ > *hiw > $h\bar{u}$*. In any case, it may be that Cohen's proposed scheme should be reordered and modified to allow for parallel developments, i.e.,

$$
\begin{array}{ccccccccc}
 & & & & & \text{5a} & & \text{6a} & & \text{7a} \\
 & & & & & \blacktriangleright\ *hiy & \blacktriangleright & h\bar{\imath} & \blacktriangleright & \bar{\imath} \\
\text{1} & & \text{2} & & \text{3} & \text{4} & & & & \text{7b} \\
*hi\textʾa\text-tu & \blacktriangleright & *hi\textʾat & \blacktriangleright & *hi\textʾa & \blacktriangleright\ *hiya & & & \blacktriangleright & *h\bar{u} \\
 & & & & & \text{5b} & & \text{6b} & & \\
 & & & & & \blacktriangleright\ *hiwa & \blacktriangleright & *hiw & & \text{7c} \\
 & & & & & & & & \blacktriangleright & h\bar{\imath}
\end{array}
$$

According to this revised scheme, the Tiberian reading tradition reflects stage 6a, the DSS stages 3, 4, and/or 6a, the Samaritan reading tradition 7a, and the Tiberian written tradition of the Torah 5b, 6b, or 7b (with the passage from stage 4 to 5b due to the aforementioned analogy to 3MS *$huʾa$ > *$huwa$*). It is also not impossible that the 3FS pronunciation $h\bar{\imath}$ in the Tiberian Torah in 7c (= 6a) could have developed naturally from *hiw*. While the diphthong iw is expected to resolve to $\bar{u}$, the alternative development to $\bar{\imath}$ is not unknown (Blau 2010, 97, §3.4.3.3).[5]

---

[5] It is worth noting that according to the approaches adopted here, the earliest form included a glottal stop, the orthographic representation of which persisted despite its eventual elision. Also, the early form begin-

4.0. Conclusion

On the assumption that the spelling of 3FS הוא in the Tiberian
Pentateuch represents a linguistic reality different from הִיא of the
Tiberian reading tradition, it would not be surprising that it pre-
serves an authentically old variant pronunciation, nor that it
should be replaced in the reading tradition by a rival ancient
form that became common in Second Temple Hebrew. As a con-
servative linguistic tradition, the Tiberian recitation component
preserves genuine Iron Age features. But as a tradition that crys-
tallised in the Second Temple Period, it was also subject to the
standardisation of certain Second Temple conventions.

5.0. Citations

5.1. Tiberian Biblical Tradition

3FS הוא: Gen. 2.12; 3.12, 20; 4.22; 7.2; 10.11, 12; 12.14, 18, 19; 14.7, 8; 17.14;
19.20, 38; 20.2, 3, 5, 5, 12; 21.22; 22.20, 24; 23.2, 15, 19; 24.44; 25.21; 26.7,
9, 9, 12, 12; 27.38; 29.2, 9, 25; 32.19; 34.14; 35.6, 19, 20, 22, 27; 37.32; 38.1,
14, 16, 21, 25; 43.32; 47.6, 17, 18; 48.7; Exod. 3.8; 8.15; 12.15, 19; 22.26, 26;
31.13, 14, 14, 17; Lev. 2.6, 15; 5.12; 6.2, 10, 18, 22; 7.20, 21, 27; 10.12, 13,
17; 11.6, 6, 26; 13.4, 8, 11, 20, 22, 23, 25, 25, 26, 28, 28, 28, 42, 52, 55, 57;
14.44; 15.3, 23, 25; 17.11, 14; 18.7, 8, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 22; 19.8, 20;
20.6, 14, 21; 22.3, 12; 23.3, 30, 36; 25.10, 11, 12, 33; 27.4; Num. 5.6, 13, 14,
18, 28, 31; 8.4; 9.13; 13.18, 19, 20, 27, 32; 14.8, 41; 15.25, 30, 31; 18.19; 19.9,
13, 20; 21.16, 26; 22.4; 32.4; 33.36; Deut. 1.9, 16, 18; 2.20, 34; 3.4, 8, 11, 12,
18, 21, 23; 4.6, 14; 5.5; 9.19, 20; 10.1, 8, 10; 11.10; 14.28; 17.5; 20.20; 21.3,
4, 6; 22.18, 24; 24.4; 29.21, 26; 30.11, 11, 12, 13; Isa. 39.1. **3FS היא:** Gen. 14.2;
19.20; 20.5; 26.7; 38.25; 40.10; Exod. 1.16; Lev. 5.11; 11.39; 13.6, 10, 21;
16.31; 20.17, 18; 21.9; Num. 5.13, 14.

---

ning with *h* may well have arisen due to lenition of more archaic *š*, as
in east Semitic.

5.2. Biblical Dead Sea Scrolls

3FS היא: 1Q3 f3–4.2 || Lev. 20.11; 1Q13 f23–25.5 || Deut. 11.10; 2Q12 f1.5 || Deut. 10.10; 4Q1 f5.3 || Gen. 35.19; 4Q6 f1.13 || Gen. 48.7; 4Q22 25.7 (2x) || Exod. 22.26 (2x); 4Q22 37.7 || Exod. 31.14; 4Q23 f4.5 || Lev. 14.44; 4Q23 f34ii + 44–50.22 || Num. 5.6; 4Q24 f9i + 10–17.20 || Lev. 22.12; 4Q24 f9ii + 11ii + 18–20i.2 || Lev. 23.3; 4Q25 f5.2 || Lev. 5.12; 4Q26b f1.2 || Lev. 7.20; 4Q26b f1.4 || Lev. 7.21; 4Q27 f3ii + 5.7 || Num. 13.18; 4Q29 f1–2i + 3.16 || Deut. 30.11; 4Q29 f1–2i + 3.17 || Deut. 30.13; 4Q30 f12–15.3 || Deut. 11.10; 4Q31 1.15 || Deut. 2.34; 4Q31 2.12 || Deut. 3.23; 4Q33 f17–19.1 || Deut. 21.4; 4Q35 f1.8 || Deut. 1.9; 4Q37 1.6 || Deut. 5.5; 4Q38 f2.9 || Deut. 11.10; 4Q40 f1–3.5 || Deut. 3.21; 4Q41 2.10 || Deut. 5.5; 4Q134 f1.11 || Deut. 5.5; 4Q138 f1.26 || Deut. 11.10; 8Q4 f1.28 || Deut. 11.10; 11Q1 4.7 || Lev. 25.33; XQ3 1.12 || Deut. 5.5. **3FS הוא:** Mas1b 3.21 (addition) || Lev. 10.17; Mas1b 4.9 || Lev. 11.6; 4Q26 f4.16 || Lev. 17.11; 8Q3 f26–29.19 (2x) || Deut. 11.10.