

Diachronic Diversity in Classical Biblical Hebrew

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8. FS הוּא VERSUS הִיא

The dominant written form of the FS independent subject pronoun across ancient Hebrew sources and traditions is הִיא (ה). Its pronunciation in Tiberian is *hī*, in Samaritan *ī*. These data are in line with broader Semitic evidence. From this perspective, the written component of the Tiberian tradition of the Pentateuch represents a conspicuous outlier. Whereas the combined Tiberian written-reading tradition in the MT Prophets and Writings routinely exhibits the unified orthographic-vocalic form הִיא (in 282 of 291 cases), in the Torah such unity is rare (just 18 of 212 cases). Instead of הִיא, standard outside the Pentateuch and in ancient Hebrew more generally, the 3FS independent pronoun in the Tiberian Torah is most of the time written הוּא, but consistently pointed and read as a *qere perpetuum* as הִיא.¹

Two questions call for answers. First, how to explain the anomalous spelling הוּא for 3FS referents in the written component of the Tiberian Torah? Second, how to account for the fact

¹ The figures above include four occasions in the Hebrew Bible where readers are explicitly instructed via the *ketiv-qere* mechanism to read FS הִיא where MS הוּא is written (Deut. 13.6; 1 Kgs 17.15; Isa. 30.33; Job 31.11) and five further cases in which the *ketiv-qere* gives the opposite instruction, namely, to read MS הוּא for written FS הִיא (1 Kgs 17.15; Ps. 73.16; Job 31.11; Qoh. 5.8; 1 Chron. 29.16). Thus, 1 Kgs 17.15 and Job 31.11 each involve both changes. The figures should be taken as representative, but scholars differ on their counts. Throughout the MT, written-reading agreement on הִיא comes in approximately 300 of 500 instances.

that the distribution of the anomaly is limited to the written component of the Tiberian Torah?

1.0. Explanations for the Spelling **הוּא** with 3FS

Referents

Broadly speaking, explanations for the routine written-reading mismatch in the Tiberian Pentateuch come in two types: graphic and linguistic.

1.1. Graphic Explanations

According to a well-rehearsed argument in favour of a graphic origin for the phenomenon, the written component of the Tiberian Torah is said to go back to a manuscript characterised by defective spelling, where the 3MS and 3FS independent subject pronouns shared the written form **הוּא**.² Subsequently, either *mater waw* was mechanically inserted, even where **הוּא** represented the 3FS independent pronoun, or formerly distinctive *waws* and *yods* became too similar to distinguish (as seen in some DSS manuscripts) and were uniformly copied as *waws*. No attempt was made to correct the anomalous forms out of respect for the sanctity of the Pentateuch (for various renditions of the proposed course of events, see GKC §321; Cross 1998, 222–23; JM §39c).

Of course, these explanations leave several nagging questions unanswered, especially the matter of why only in the word **היא** ‘she’, and in no other word, the *yod* was consistently mistaken

² Defective spellings of the 3MS form are found in Iron Age epigraphy, e.g., Arad 18.10, 12; Kuntillet ‘Ajrud 9.1; Lachish 21.5; Mesha‘ (KAI 181) 6, 21; Deir ‘Alla (KAI 312) 1.

for a *waw*. Fassberg (2012, 171–72) also observes that such a mechanical graphic account fails to explain the Masoretic Pentateuch's 18 exceptions in which the written and reading traditions agree on FS אִי.

1.2. Linguistic Explanations

Linguistic explanations also come in different flavours.

1.2.1. An Epicene 3CS Independent Subject Pronoun

One linguistic proposal is that the written component of the Tiberian Torah preserves an otherwise undocumented epicene 3CS pronoun אִי(ו) *hū*, which the corresponding reading tradition brought into line with the more standard convention of distinct 3MS and 3FS forms, as elsewhere in the Tiberian tradition and in ancient Hebrew more generally (Green 1872, 96; Lambert 1931, 35, fn. 3; Rendsburg 1982; Tropper 2001; Morgenstern 2007, 49–50; Elitzur 2018a, 84–88). Difficulties with this approach include (a) absence of the alleged feature outside the written component of the Tiberian Pentateuch; (b) a distinction between 3MS and 3FS morphology throughout BH grammar, including that reflected in the written component of the Tiberian Pentateuch; and (c) a distinction between 3MS and 3FS morphology in the Semitic languages more broadly.³

³ Distinctions in masculine and feminine inflectional morphology are not necessarily matched by gender distinction in pronouns. My friend and colleague Geoffrey Khan notes (personal communication) that in many NENA dialects the gender distinction has been lost in pronouns, but not in inflection.

1.2.2. Variant 3^{FS} Morphology

If, as argued above, arguments focusing on graphic confusion and episcene morphology are to be rejected, then a different sort of linguistic explanation must be sought. One such approach has been explored by Cohen (2007, 113–15), with further support supplied by Fassberg (2012). According to this view, the הוּא spelling common to the 3^{MS} and 3^{FS} independent subject pronouns in the written component of the Tiberian Torah reflects distinct morphological forms, respectively, 3^{MS} **hu'a* > **huwa* or **hūw* and 3^{FS} **hi'a* > **hiwa* or **hīw*, which in the corresponding Pentateuchal reading tradition, and the Masoretic biblical reading tradition more generally, shortened to *hū* and *hī*, respectively. While limitations inherent in the extant data make it impossible to prove such a proposal, the approach is consistent with several facts. First and foremost, it makes sense of the otherwise anomalous 3^{FS} spelling הוּא in the written component of the Tiberian Torah. Moreover, it is not incompatible with the minority DSS spelling הִיא, which can be viewed as the explicit *plene* spelling of a comparatively archaic form (Qimron 1986, 57–58; 2018, 261–62; cf. Kutscher 1974, 433–34). In positing the contemporaneous use of two allomorphs of the 3^{FS} independent subject pronoun, it also comprehends diversity seen more generally in BH pronominal morphology. Finally, if the Pentateuchal written tradition's occasional use of standard ^{FS} הִיא in face of dominant ^{FS} הוּא is in any way indicative of the degree of its use, its agreement with the dominant *hī* realisation of the Tiberian reading component of the Torah is reminiscent of the relationship between other dissonant written and reading features, involving the levelling of

disparate features in favour of early alternants, sometimes even via the extension of minority options, in agreement with Second Temple conventions.

Before proceeding, however, it is worth pausing to consider potential complications in the suggested approach. According to the development of the 3FS independent subject pronoun hypothesised by Cohen (2007, 114–15), at some point **hi'a* developed to **hiwa*. Yet, as Fassberg (2012, 175, fn. 13) notes, this is hardly the expected phonological development, a *y* glide being expected contiguous to an *i*-vowel, as in Arabic *هي*. If a realisation such as **hiwa* or **hiw* (Fassberg 2012, 177) stands behind the spelling of FS הוּא in the Tiberian Torah, then perhaps the unexpected shift of *hi'a* to *hiw(a)* came about due to analogical pressure from the corresponding—and more common—3MS form, where the development **hu'a* to **huwa* is expected. Here it is worth noting the tendency in the Semitic languages to simplify contrastive morphology between opposing masculine and feminine forms via analogy, such that forms formerly distinguished by multiple features are ultimately distinguished by fewer or just one, e.g., Proto-Semitic 2MPL *-tum(u)* and 2FPL *-tin(n)(a)* developing in Hebrew to *-tēm* and *-tēn*, respectively (with a similar reduction in distinguishing features in other Semitic languages, too).

As to development of the putative realisation **hiw(a)*—according to Fassberg (2012, 177), FS הוּא in the written component of the Tiberian Pentateuch may conceivably reflect the realisation **hū*—due not to original epicene morphology, but to phonetic neutralisation along the lines of **hiw'a* > **hiwa* > **hiw* > *hū*. Alternatively, **hiw'a* may have eventually developed the

standard 3FS realisation *hī*.⁴ For while the diphthong *iw* most commonly resolves to *ū* in ancient Hebrew, the alternative development to *ī* is not unknown (Blau 2010, 97, §3.4.3.3).

2.0. Interpreting the Data

Whatever the correct explanation for FS הוּא in the Tiberian Pentateuch—whether due to graphic or linguistic factors—the phenomenon raises a series of additional questions. Why the distinction between the Tiberian Torah’s written component and the testimony of all other ancient Hebrew witnesses? Why the distinction between the written component of the Tiberian Torah and the combined written-reading tradition of the rest of the Tiberian Bible? Why the apparent distinction between the written component of the Tiberian Torah and the Tiberian Torah’s corresponding vocalisation component? What, if any, diachronic ramifications are there?

If the phenomenon in question is purely graphic, there are several potential diachronic implications. It has been demonstrated that the books of the Tiberian Torah share a particularly defective orthography vis-à-vis the rest of the Tiberian Bible (Andersen and Forbes 1986, 285, 313–14; below, ch. 12). While the spelling הוּא is no longer characteristic of Tiberian manuscripts, the assumption that it might once have been is not inconsistent with the relatively defective orthography of extant Tiberian exemplars. Whether such הוּא spellings were once more common in

⁴ The extant Tiberian realisation הוּא *hī* differs from **hiw*, the latter presupposing the Tiberian pointing הוּא; cf. שוּא ‘vanity, falseness, emptiness’.

the Prophets and Writings cannot be determined. One might contend that the apparent conflation of הוּא and הִיא in the Pentateuch—in contrast with their rather consistent distinction in the rest of the Bible—is evidence that the *mater* was added to originally defective spelling in the Pentateuch, but was organic in the Prophets and Writings. But this is simplistic. It is just as possible that defective הָ was formerly common throughout the biblical text, that an indistinct *mater* was secondarily added throughout, but that only in the Pentateuch was anomalous FS הוּא preserved due to the Torah's early crystallisation and perceived sanctity. In the rest of the Bible, conversely, scribes may have felt freer to correct the text in line with standard usage. Nothing can be said with any certainty.

The possible diachronic import of the linguistic alternatives is also extremely speculative and complicated. The proposal of an epicene 3CS independent subject pronoun הוּא has been rejected above. But entertaining its acceptance for the sake of argument, the distinction between the written component of the Torah, on the one hand, and the reading component of the Torah together with the combined written and reading tradition of the rest of the Bible, on the other, would presumably be explained according to one of two scenarios. The Torah's written component uniquely preserves unconventional morphology either because its traditions alone actually date to a time when that morphology was in use or because a once more common morphology has been specially preserved in the written component of the Torah, while it was superseded by later, more conventional

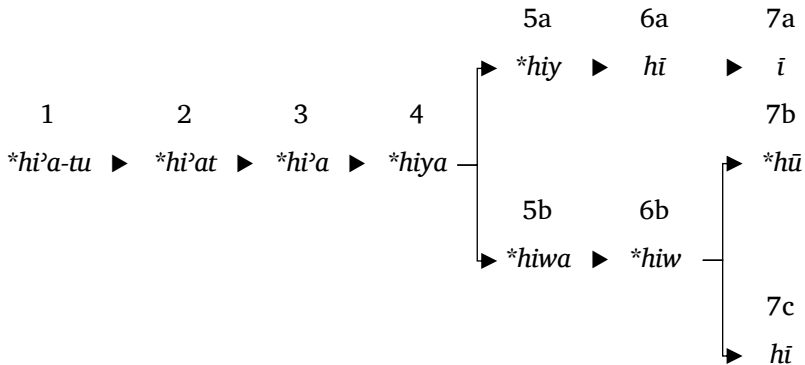
morphology in the Torah's reading tradition and in the combined written-reading tradition of the Prophets and Writings.

On the Masoretic Pentateuch's 18 exceptions in which its written and reading traditions agree on FS אֵיךְ—while any mechanical graphic explanation cannot account for these, the linguistic alternatives are only marginally more successful. The random distribution of the lot, found scattered among purported sources in Genesis–Numbers (see below, end of this section), belies any simplistic source-critical explanation.⁵ The most compelling suggestion would be that these exceptions reflect early penetrations, whether primary or secondary, of standard 3FS pronominal into the Torah's anomalous majority 3FS pronominal morphology. In the case of many other features discussed in this volume, the CBH₁ of the Torah is distinct from non-Pentateuchal CBH₂, but includes a minority of features standard in CBH₂.

The preferred explanation here, that MS and FS אֵיךְ in the written component of the Tiberian Torah reflect the distinct pronunciations *hu(wa)* and *hiw(a)*, respectively, raises some of the same, and more complicated, diachronic possibilities. On the basis of Fassberg's (2012, 175–77) critique of Cohen's (2007, 113–15) theory, Hornkohl (2023, 168) has sketched the schematisation of various paths of development for the 3FS independent subject pronoun in ancient Hebrew, as seen in Figure 1 (facing page).

⁵ 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.

Figure 1: Reconstructed developmental paths for the 3FS independent subject pronoun in ancient Hebrew



From a typological perspective, perhaps the most significant point to observe is that the realisations proposed as underlying the written and reading components of the Tiberian Torah, namely, **hiwa* and **hiy*, each represent developments from the single conjectural form **hiya*. If diachrony comes into the picture, it would involve the possible secondary levelling of a once more diverse situation in accordance with a later situation of uniformity. Perhaps the 3FS realisation **hiw(a)* and the corresponding spelling הוּא were once found more commonly in the pre-Tiberian Bible, i.e., beyond the Pentateuch, but were brought into conformity with Second Temple linguistic conventions in the CBH Prophets and Writings, and preserved only in the Pentateuch, thanks to its early consolidation and revered status.

While all the explanations entertained above are possible, none can be considered more than conjecture. Given the dearth and nature of the evidence, such conjecture is useful—even necessary—for attempting to construct narratives that explain the relevant facts. From this perspective, the explanation proposing synchronic allomorphs is arguably more plausible than the

respective alternative explanations assuming graphic confusion or an epicene pronoun. Whatever the case may be, all theories are compatible with arguments that account for the difference between the written and reading components of the Tiberian Torah and for the affinity between the reading component of the Tiberian Torah and the combined written-reading tradition of Tiberian CBH Prophets and Writings.

Finally, it is worth noting that the distribution in the Pentateuch of majority FS הוּא and minority FS הִיא is not a function of putative source, as the incidence of both forms cuts across the sources.