

# Diachronic Diversity in Classical Biblical Hebrew

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## 11. ABSTRACT NOUNS ENDING IN *-ūṭ*

Elitzur (2018a, 88–92) presents an interesting discussion on a distinction between the Pentateuch and the rest of the Bible when it comes to abstract nouns ending in *-ūṭ*. Basing his analysis on König (1895–1897 2/1, 205–6), but excluding words with vowel-final base forms, e.g., בְּרוּת, כְּסוּת, פְּדוּת—in which cases the *ū* is a part of the root and the ending is actually *-t*—Elitzur (2018a, 88 and fn. 15) observes:

Abstract nouns ending in *-ūṭ* are rare in the Pentateuch and are usually written defectively, without *waw*, whereas in the Prophets/Writings they are frequent and are generally spelled plene, with *waw*.... Note, however, that a final stressed *ū* vowel, which is not in the construct state or declined, is also usually written plene in the Pentateuch. Nevertheless, in the instances examined here, the spelling is defective.

He then provides a table showing that the relevant absolute forms of the lexemes גְּבֻלַת ‘twistedness’, כְּבֻדַת ‘heaviness’, כְּרִיתָה ‘divorce’, מְסֻכָּה ‘storage’, עֵדוּת ‘testimony’, צִמְ(י)תָה ‘perpetuity’, קוֹמָמִיּוּת ‘erectness’, and שִׁרְ(י)רוּת ‘rebelliousness’ come 45 times in the Torah and are written with defective *-ūṭ* in 35 of those cases.<sup>1</sup> These and other nouns ending in *-ūṭ* come some 115 times outside the Torah and are written *plene* on 114 of those occasions. The obvious question is whether the regularity of defective spelling

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<sup>1</sup> The ten cases of *plene -ūṭ* involve קוֹמָמִיּוּת (1 ×) and שִׁרְ(י)רוּת (9 ×). Elitzur (2018a, 89) notes only one case of כְּרִיתָה in the Torah, but this should be corrected to two.

of the suffix in the Pentateuch is to be explained as due to mismatch between the written and reading components. In other words, does the rarity of *plene* -*ūt* in the Pentateuch imply that a significant portion of the words with defective -*ūt* originally ended in a different suffix, so that the realisation -*ūt* was secondarily imposed under the influence of later linguistic norms? Elitzur (2018a, 90, fn. 19) raises several possibilities as to the nature of the alternative ending, without committing himself to any of them.

### 1.0. Diachrony

The use of nouns ending in -*ūt* is commonly seen as especially characteristic of post-exilic forms of ancient Hebrew (see, e.g., Hornkohl 2011, 161, fn. 763, and the references there). Cohen (2012, 371–73) problematises this characterisation, noting, among other things, comparable numbers of lexemes in the Torah and LBH. Elitzur (2018a, 90, fn. 17) accepts Cohen's view, arguing that

[t]he source of the error is the failure to distinguish between the different lexemes in counting the occurrences; the many occurrences of the lexeme מְלָכוֹת in the late biblical books tipped the balance. The use of the word מְלָכוֹת is one of the characteristic features of LBH, apparently under the influence of Aramaic.

Yet, Cohen's methodology is open to question. It is not clear that counting lexemes is sufficient. The example of מְלָכוֹת itself (on which see Hornkohl 2014a, 318–25; Hurvitz 2014, 165–70) shows that one must also be sensitive to the frequency of tokens of given lexemes, especially as the LBH corpus is far smaller than

that of either the Pentateuch or non-Pentateuchal CBH. The prevalence of nouns in -ūt in Aramaic and RH is also a factor to be given due weight in discussions of the diachronic character of the ending in BH. Finally, if the lexemes under discussion in this chapter are deemed to be words that end in a suffix other than -ūt, this would obviously reduce the number of CBH cases of words with that ending. For example, the lone ostensible form of characteristically post-exilic מְלָכוֹת in the Torah is in the Oracles of Balaam in Num. 24.7, the language of which is considered by several scholars ABH (see Mandell 2013, 325). Though the lexeme's diagnostic lateness is not necessarily contradicted by sporadic early usage (Hornkohl 2014a, 6, fn. 15), it is interesting to note that the specific form מְלָכוֹת in Num. 24.7 is written defectively, opening up the possibility that it was intended to reflect מְלָכוֹת rather than מְלָכוֹת.<sup>2</sup>

## 2.0. Interpreting the Data

There is no denying the orthographic distinctiveness of the absolute forms of the nine -ūt-final lexemes, both within the Torah and within the Hebrew Bible. As Elitzur (2018a, 88) observes based on Barr (1989, 113–14), stressed *u*-vowels in closed syllables in absolute and undeclined forms are normally written *plene* in the Tiberian Torah, specifically, and in Tiberian BH, more generally. Moreover, the same ending is nearly always written *plene* outside the Torah.

The question is whether this glaring distinction is merely orthographic in nature or reflects diverse morphology. If it is

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<sup>2</sup> I thank my friend and colleague Ben Kantor for this observation.

even partially linguistic, then some portion of the cases would be explicable as instances of alternative endings secondarily interpreted as words ending in *-ūt* in conformity to more standard, and possibly later, Hebrew. It is, of course, also possible that defective spellings of the *-ūt* ending were also once more frequent in CBH beyond the Torah, and only secondarily became *plene* in the process of textual growth and transmission.

Some evidence for the possible orthographic character of the distinction between the Torah and the Prophets and Writings comes in the minority *plene* spelling of עֲדוּת ‘testimony’ (27 × defective in the Torah; 8 × *plene*) and in the *plene* spellings of קוֹמָקִיּוּת ‘erectness’ (1 × ) and שֶׁרָרִיּוּת ‘rebelliousness’ (1 × ) in the Tiberian Pentateuch. If these are early *plene* spellings, or at least *plene* spellings in line with early pronunciation, then they confirm the possibility of *-ūt* forms in the Torah. Of course, they in no way necessitate the *-ūt* interpretation of defectively spelled forms in the Torah. Also, it is not impossible that their *plene* spelling is itself secondary, early evidence of reinterpretation of the morphology in line with a different, presumably later, morphological system, which the reading tradition reflected in the vocalisation only extended.

Due to the nature of the evidence, little can be said with certainty. The Tiberian Torah certainly exhibits archaism in this regard, but it is unclear whether the archaism in question is merely orthographic or morphological.

Source-critically, most occurrences of *-ūt* lexemes in the Torah come in P (38 of 45). Of these, most spellings are defective (29 of 38). The other sources show incidence as follows: E (1

defective); R (1 defective); Dtr<sup>1</sup> (2 of 3 defective); Other (2 defective). The relevant citations per Friedman (1989, 246–55) are:

גְּבֻלָּה—defective: Exod. 28.22 (P); 39.15 (P); כְּבֹדָה—defective: Exod. 14.25 (E); כְּרִיתָה—defective: Deut. 24.1 (Other), 3 (Other); מִסְכְּנָה—defective: Deut. 8.9 (Dtr<sup>1</sup>); עֵדָה—defective: Exod. 16.34 (P); 25.16 (P), 21 (P), 22 (P); 26.34 (P); 27.21 (P); 30.6 (P), 6 (P), 26 (P), 36 (P); 31.7 (P), 18 (P); 32.15 (E); 34.29 (P); 38.21 (P); 39.35 (P); 40.5 (P), 20 (P); Lev. 24.3 (P); Num. 1.50 (P), 53 (P); 4.5 (P); 7.89 (P); 9.15 (R); 10.11 (P); 17.22 (P); 18.2 (P); *plene*: Exod. 26.33 (P); 40.3 (P), 21 (P); Lev. 16.13 (P); Num. 1.53 (P); 17.19 (P), 23 (P), 25 (P); צִמְ(י)תָה—defective: Lev. 25.23 (P), 30 (P); קוֹמָמִיּוֹת—*plene*: Lev. 26.13 (P); שְׁרִירוֹת—*plene*: Deut. 29.18 (Dtr<sup>1</sup>)

If -ūt endings are especially characteristic of later forms of ancient Hebrew, their accumulation in the Torah in P may be significant. The apparent significance of this fact is tempered, though, by the frequency of עֵד(וּ), accounting for 35 of the 45 occurrences in the Torah and 35 of the 38 in P, as well as by the appearance of nouns ending in -ūt in other purported Penta-teuchal sources.

