

THE VALIDITY OF THE MASORETIC TEXT AS A BASIS FOR DIACHRONIC LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF BIBLICAL TEXTS: EVIDENCE FROM MASORETIC VOCALISATION¹

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ABSTRACT

The last decade has witnessed a lively scholarly debate regarding the diachrony of biblical Hebrew and the validity of the differentiation between CBH and LBH. Lately, two of the prominent challengers of the traditional views have criticised the diachronic school from a new perspective, arguing against the use of the Masoretic Text as a basis for the linguistic discussion. This paper seeks to establish the validity of the Masoretic Text as a basis for diachronic linguistic analysis from the angle of Tiberian vocalisation. Three case studies from the Book of Qoheleth are examined, each involving an LBH component whose existence in the text is revealed to us only through Masoretic vocalisation. The case studies include the assimilation of third *aleph* with third *he* participles; the use of the abstract nominal pattern *qitlôn*; and the feminine demonstrative הַן. The case studies show that the Masoretes had preserved the difference between CBH and LBH pronunciations, although they were probably unaware of the historical nature of these different pronunciations and of their diachronic dimension. These findings testify to a strong and stable oral Masoretic tradition which accompanied the written one. Both were transmitted for many centuries, and they were, in many cases, precise to the extent they could reflect dialectological differences within Biblical Hebrew. The paper concludes with a comment regarding Masoretic anachronisms and their place in the overall picture of Masoretic traditions.

INTRODUCTION

The last decade has witnessed a lively scholarly debate regarding the traditional view of the diachronic dimension of Biblical Hebrew. This debate was triggered by a series of studies – most prominently by Ian Young, Robert Rezetko and Martin Ehrensverd – which questioned some of the basic premises of the diachronic view, such as the lateness of Late Biblical Hebrew, the diachronic relation between Biblical Hebrew and

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Mishnaic Hebrew, and our ability to date biblical texts on linguistic grounds.² The highlight of Young, Rezetko and Ehrensverd's scholarly oeuvre is a two-volume work (Young, Rezetko and Ehrensverd 2008) containing an in-depth presentation of their criticisms of the diachronic approach, and concluding that CBH and LBH do not reflect different periods, but rather two co-existing styles of literary Hebrew.

Young, Rezetko and Ehrensverd's challenge to traditional scholarship was soon responded to by leading scholars who represent the standard historical-linguistic view.³ Rezetko and Young, in turn, published another volume which criticizes the same system from a new angle (Rezetko and Young 2014). This recent volume is focused not on the concept of periodisation of Biblical Hebrew itself, but rather on the substrate text(s) involved. Rezetko and Young criticize scholars of the diachronic school for relying mostly on the Masoretic Text (Rezetko and Young 2014:68–71, 83–110, 115–116), and claim that it cannot be used as a basis for linguistic dating. The numerous changes made by scribes and copyists over long centuries of transmission makes the MT inadmissible as evidence in a linguistic discussion, because it no longer represents the original language of the authors of the biblical texts (Rezetko and Young 2014:75–79, 110–115). Scribal mechanisms such as deliberate rephrasing and free alternation of “memory variants” have constantly changed the text's original wording (Rezetko and Young 2014:79–83). Accordingly, the very concept of “originality”, when applied to biblical texts, is inappropriate, and the attempt to reconstruct the text as created by its authors or redactors on the basis of the MT is a naïve, simplistic misconception (Rezetko and Young 2014:68–71, 77, 83–110). As an alternative to traditional research methods, Rezetko and Young (2014:117–403) suggest introducing new methodologies into the study of Biblical Hebrew, which combine linguistic and textual analysis. A careful use of these tools leads to the conclusion that “only large-scale and basic features of the language of the biblical compositions are likely to go back to earlier stages of their literary composition”

² See especially Young (2003:276–311; 2005:341–351; 2006:83–91; 2009a:606–629; 2009b:253–268); Ehrensverd (2003:164–188; 2006:177–189; 2012:181–192); Rezetko (2003:215–50; 2009: 237–252); Davies (2003:150–163).

³ See especially the various essays in Miller-Naude and Zevit (2012). For other studies see, e.g., Joosten (2005:327–339); Hurvitz (2006:191–210).

(Rezetko and Young 2014:112) while less-frequent features, which usually serve as a basis for linguistic and stylistic analyses, are unreliable (Rezetko and Young 2014:111–112, 168–169, 407–408). Rezetko and Young's innovative methodologies are beyond the scope of the current article and deserve a treatment of their own. Our interest here is their denial of the validity of the MT as a basis for a diachronic discussion.

On the surface, Rezetko and Young's approach is tempting, if only because a minimalist, sceptical attitude seems to be a scientifically justified point of departure for any scholarly discussion. However, when carefully reviewed, their arguments turn out to stand in conflict not only with the solid conclusions of traditional study of Biblical Hebrew, but with many of the achievements of modern Bible research. Various disciplines of biblical studies are based upon a strict analysis of biblical phraseology. Thus for instance, the documentary hypothesis builds on a meticulous sorting of terminology, and its consequences, although still debated from several respects, are too impressive to be altogether dismissed. No less convincing are the achievements of other types of studies, such as the study of biblical genres (the differences between wisdom and prophecy, for instance, are based on phraseology); the literary approach (the exposure of carefully designed structures in prose and poetry is dependent upon specific terms which follow specific patterns); attempts to identify the unique profile of certain prophets or to distinguish between primary and secondary prophetic materials; and basically any philological endeavour aiming at understanding a certain text on the basis of its terminology. Traditionally, these and similar approaches build on the MT while seriously taking into account other ancient versions. Generally speaking, the linguistic and stylistic patterns they identify are too consistent to be a mere coincidence. If a good theory is tested by its ability to explain as many details of the relevant phenomena as possible, Rezetko and Young's approach does not live up to this criterion. It cannot explain how the conclusions of numerous different studies from various disciplines are so impressively reflected in the MT, including its minor stylistic details.

In fact, Rezetko and Young's attitude toward the MT stands in conflict with their own theory as stated in their 2008 work (Young, Rezetko and Ehrensverd 2008/1:361; 2008/2:72–105). There Young and Rezetko attempt to ascribe the differences between CBH and LBH to non-diachronic factors, mainly to intentional stylistic choices. However, if the MT is too corrupt to tell us anything about the original language of the text, it also cannot teach us anything about its original style. This makes redundant Rezetko and Young's 2008 extensive project, whose alternative theory as to the differences between CBH and LBH relies on the assumption that these differences are indeed meaningful.

The purpose of the current paper is to examine the validity of the MT as a basis for linguistic discussion from an often neglected aspect, i.e., its vocalisation.⁴ Vocalisation is one of the most vulnerable and potentially least stable components of the Masorah. Basically reflecting an oral pronunciation tradition, the graphic notation system referred to as vocalisation was unknown before the seventh century C.E. at the earliest,⁵ more than a millennium – perhaps a millennium and a half – after the composition of the earliest biblical texts. Naturally, this originally oral tradition, which involved memorisation of thousands of minor details by dozens of scribal generations, has been dismissed by some scholars who prefer to rely on the much earlier consonantal text. However upon closer inspection, Masoretic vocalisation often turns out to have succeeded in preserving genuine pronunciations, which in many cases shed light on issues of biblical diachrony.⁶

The authenticity and accuracy of Masoretic vocalisation was acknowledged already by nineteenth-century Hebraists, and has been accepted by many researchers until today.⁷ Among the indications suggested by scholars for the antiquity of the

⁴ For the sake of the current discussion, we shall refer to the Tiberian vocalisation system.

⁵ Bergsträsser (1918:9); Morag (1968/5:cols. 840–841); GCK §7h, with further literature; Khan (2013:43–44).

⁶ By this we do not suggest, of course, that the Masoretic vocalisation reflects the exact original pronunciation of biblical times. See discussion below.

⁷ See, e.g., Bacher (1895:13–20); Buhl (1892:236–239; with reservations); Kutscher (1965:24–51); Morag (1974:307–315; the latter is especially relevant for the current discussion as it presents rare vocalisations which reflect LBH pronunciations, including an example from the book of Qoheleth which is not treated in the present paper); Barr

pronunciations reflected in Masoretic vocalisation system is the Masoretes' treatment of *bgdkpt* after *shewa medium* as plosive, and the correspondence of Masoretic ψ with Proto-semitic /š/ (Kutscher 1965:2, 40). Both conventions accord with comparative Semitic knowledge which was inaccessible to the Masoretes and should therefore be explained as reflecting genuine traditions. Other telling examples are supplied by the relics of archaic stems which are sporadically found in Biblical Hebrew. The forms וְהִתְקַדְּדָה and וְהִתְקַדְּדוּ , for instance, are considered rare remnants of the archaic *qal* reflexive.⁸ If this interpretation is correct, the Masoretic lack of *dagesh* and use of *gameš* preserve a very old tradition which predates the standard CBH verbal system. The same is true for the archaic *hiph 'il* reflexive.⁹

The present study seeks to suggest another modest contribution to this pool of evidence, through three case studies taken from the book of Qoheleth. Each of the three case studies involves an LBH component whose existence in the text is revealed to us only through Masoretic vocalisation.¹⁰ Following the analysis of these three cases is a discussion of the implications of our consequences on the place of Masoretic tradition in general, and Masoretic vocalisation in particular, in the study of periodisation of biblical Hebrew.

(1987:194–207); Blau (2010:80–81). An exceptional view was suggested by Kahle, who believed the Masoretes to be reformers who changed biblical phonology and morphology by introducing intended innovations. These include a new pronunciation of the gutturals, a reconstruction of lost end-vowels of the 2nd person pronoun suffix, and the double pronunciation of *bgdkpt* (Kahle 1959:51–188, esp. 184–188). Kahle's far-fetched theory has been rejected by many scholars. See Bergsträsser (1924:582–586); Kutscher (1965); Barr (1987:214–217).

⁸ Brockelmann (1908/1:529–530); Jöüon §53 *g*; Blau (2010:199) *contra* GCK §54 *l*.

⁹ Blau (2010:199) *contra* GCK §67 *l*.

¹⁰ In all the cases discussed in this paper, the Masoretic forms are based on Codex Leningrad (the Aleppo Codex in its current state does not include Qoheleth), taking into account variants in other manuscripts of Tiberian Masorah as reported by Ginsburg (1906). Upon examination, no variant readings are reported for the big majority of the forms discussed in this paper. The few exceptions are: אָחַדְּךָ (9:2), where several manuscripts have אָחַדְּךָ ; מִהֲיָדָה עֲשֶׂה (2:2), where זֹאת is also attested; and וְהָיָה in 7:23 and 9:13, for which the variant וְהָיָה is sporadically attested. These variants probably reflect scribal corrections which are influenced by standard Hebrew grammar.

THE ASSIMILATION OF THIRD *ALEPH* WITH THIRD *HE* PARTICIPLES

The book of Qoheleth shows a strong tendency to treat third *'ālep* as third *hê* forms and vice versa.¹¹ A typical example is the vocalisation of masculine participles. Five third *'ālep* participles occur in the book,¹² of which four are irregularly vocalised with *sēgōl*:

1. טוב לפני האלהים ימלט ממנה וחוטא ילקד בה (7:26)

2. אשר חטא עשה רע מאת ומאריך לו (8:12)

3. כטוב כחטא (9:2)

4. וחוטא אקד יאבד טובה הרבה (9:18)

5. ומוצא אני מר ממנות אֶת־הָאִשָּׁה (7:26)

The opposite direction of the same phenomenon occurs in the vocalisation of *niph'al* participles of the root עשה.¹³ These are often vocalised with *qameṣ*, as if they were perfect forms, although the context clearly points to a participle. A typical example is the common expression אשר נעשה תחת השמש (4:3; 8:9; 8:17; 9:3; 9:6; and sim. 1:13; 8:14; 8:16).¹⁴ The obvious habitual aspect of this phrase indicates that the vocalisation

¹¹ See, e.g., Whitley (1979:1, 85); Schoors (2004/I:98). In addition to the masculine participles discussed below, this phenomenon is also manifest in the feminine participle אָץ (10:5) for יוצאת; in the form אָץָּ where third-*'ālep* spelling is mixed with third-*hê* vocalisation; and perhaps also in יהוא (11:3). Note that יוצָץ is the standard equivalent of CBH יוצאת in good manuscripts of Tannaitic sources, such as MS. Kaufmann of the Mishnah. For further discussion see Schoors (2004/I:98).

¹² This list does not include stative verbs of the pattern *qātēl*, where the standard pattern of third *'ālep* is adhered to. See Schoors (2004/I:98).

¹³ Isaksson (1987:74) believes that the influence is unidirectional from final *hê* to final *'ālep*, but the examples discussed in the previous notes show that this is not the case.

¹⁴ While the two plural occurrences אשר נעשים תחת השמש (1:14) and אשר נעשו תחת השמש (4:1) indicate that both perfect and participle are basically acceptable, there are several cases of אשר נעשה which strongly point to a participle. These include 8:11, where the phrase is negated by אֵין, which is only applicable to participles, along with some examples where the phrase is elucidated by parallel participles (8:14, 8:16; 9:3). Thus, even if one tends to interpret *some* of the occurrences of אשר נעשה as perfect forms which refer to the present tense, one still has to admit that this interpretation does not hold true for all cases. See further: Schoors (2004/I:96–97); Bar-Asher (2009/II:121 no. 69).

הַעֲשֶׂה instead of הַעֲשֵׂה does not imply the perfect, but rather a participle whose vocalisation follows the pattern of third *'ālep* instead of that of third *hê*.¹⁵

The tendency to conflate third *'ālep* and third *hê* forms is a well-known characteristic of Mishnaic Hebrew (Segal 1927:90–95), and is manifest to some degree already in LBH.¹⁶ This phenomenon is most probably inspired by Aramaic, where the merging of third *'ālep* with third *hê* is a standard part of the paradigm.

Significantly, the information concerning the lateness of third-weak masculine participles in Qoheleth is latent in the consonantal text. It is only through vocalisation, with its long-lasting oral roots, that we are informed about this LBH feature in Qoheleth. It is hard to imagine that the inventors of the vocalisation system, sometime between the seventh and ninth centuries C.E., would find it appropriate to use an exceptional vocalisation for third weak participles precisely in Qoheleth, if it were not for an ancient tradition which reflects an original differentiation between these forms. This is of course not to say that the Masoretic vocalisation reflects the exact original pronunciations of biblical texts as authored. Historical linguistic study of Hebrew has taught us that the pronunciation of Hebrew went through a constant process of change and development through time. Accordingly, our aim here is not to reconstruct the exact pronunciation of the two forms represented by the graphemes הַעֲשֶׂה vs. הַעֲשֵׂה in a given period. Regardless of the specific quality of these pronunciations, one can still trace a pattern which shows that there was a difference between them and that this difference is in accordance with diachronic factors. The data indicate that the Masoretes had a tradition which instructed them to treat third *'ālep* and third *hê* participles in Qoheleth differently than those of other books. They were ignorant as to the reasons for this difference, and probably also as to the original pronunciation from which it originated, but they still took great care to adhere to it. Had they let their own style or dialect freely colour the text they were transmitting, as maintained by Rezetko and Young, such a differentiation would not have been preserved.

¹⁵ The general linguistic context as explained above indicates that there is no need to correct the MT by reading הַעֲשֶׂה (*contra* BHS on 8:11; Ginsberg 1961:109; Schoors 2004/I:96. For other scholars who adopted this correction see Isaksson 1987:74, n. 15).

¹⁶ See GCK § 75nn–rr. As shown by GCK, this phenomenon occurs also in CBH, but in LBH it is much more common (*contra* Fredericks 1988:93–94, 136).

THE USE OF THE ABSTRACT NOMINAL PATTERN *QITLŌN*

Seven different abstract nouns of the pattern *qitlōn* occur in Qoheleth:

1. יְתָרוֹן (1:3; 2:11,13; 3:9; 5:8,15; 7:12; 10:10,11).
2. זְכָרוֹן (1:11; 2:16).¹⁷
3. הֶסְרוֹן (1:15).
4. רַעְיוֹן (1:17; 2:22; 4:16)
5. כְּשָׁרוֹן (2:21; 4:4; 5:10).
6. הַשְּׁבוֹן (7:25; 7:27).
7. שְׁלִטוֹן (8:4; 8:8).

The use of *qitlōn* as an abstract nominal pattern is clearly late.¹⁸ The issue has been dealt with at length in a special monograph by Ben-Zion Gross (Gross 1993), and will therefore not be discussed here in full. As shown by Gross, CBH almost never uses *qitlōn* for abstract nouns,¹⁹ preferring instead the well-documented pattern *qittālōn*.²⁰ It is only in LBH that *qitlōn* becomes dominant as an abstract nominal pattern. Of special interest in this regard is the common CBH noun זְכָרוֹן, whose LBH equivalent זְכָרוֹן occurs, as mentioned above, twice in Qoheleth. זְכָרוֹן and זְכָרוֹן thus form a pair of diachronic ‘alternatives’, to use the terminology coined by Avi Hurvitz.²¹ In addition

¹⁷ On pure grammatical grounds, זְכָרוֹן in both its occurrences might theoretically be taken as a construct form of classical זְכָרוֹן followed by a propositional phrase, i.e., זְכָרוֹן לְרֵאשִׁימִים could be interpreted as זְכָרוֹן הֶרֶאשִׁימִים + ל, and זְכָרוֹן לְהֶקֶם as ל + זְכָרוֹן הֶהֱקֶם. For this interpretation see, e.g., Ginsberg (1968:208); Whitley (1997:111). On this syntactic structure in general, see GKC §130a; Joüion §129 n. S. However, this somewhat awkward reading is unnecessary in light of Qoheleth’s clear preference for the pattern *qitlōn*. The absolute state of זְכָרוֹן was identified already by several mediaeval Jewish scholars, e.g., Ibn Janah in his *Rikmah*. Among the moderns see, e.g., Herzberg (1963:68 n. 11); Delitzsch (1891:225); Hurvitz (1968:20–21); Gross (1993:245); Schoors (2004/I:63).

¹⁸ Note that “abstract” is intended here as a general title, referring to the basic meaning of this pattern. Naturally however, the pattern has often metonymically developed to denote concrete nouns. See Gross (1993:240–241), who presents a bright discussion of the pattern’s semantics.

¹⁹ For exceptions and their possible explanations see Gross (1993: 204 n. 68, 248).

²⁰ Twenty eight different nouns of the pattern *qittālōn* are documented in CBH, with a total 130 occurrences throughout the corpus. For details see Gross (1993:15–24, 239–240). Cf. further Hurvitz (1968).

²¹ See recently in his *Concise lexicon of Late Biblical Hebrew* (2014). In earlier works he sometimes preferred the terms “Contrast” or “Apposition”.

to Qoheleth, where it is especially common, the abstract pattern *qitlôn* is also documented in Ezra, Chronicles and Psalm 146.²² The rise of *qitlôn* probably reflects an Aramaic influence. Consider for example the Biblical Aramaic terms רַעֲיוֹן and דְּכָרוֹן which form exact parallels for Hebrew רַעֲיוֹן and זְכָרוֹן.²³ *Qitlôn* becomes common in Mishnaic Hebrew, where it is used side by side with the older *qittālôn*.²⁴ In some cases, *qitlôn* and *qittālôn* occur as two variants of the very same term.²⁵

Here too, the data as preserved in the MT clearly support the authenticity of the Masoretic vocalisation at this point. Otherwise it would be difficult to explain why an anonymous Masorete would insist on using *qitlôn* instead of the classic *qittālôn* forms precisely in the book of Qoheleth, and sporadically also in some other late books. One cannot even suggest that *qitlôn* was chosen by the Masoretes intentionally because they were aware of its Second Temple era origin which requires a late usage. The book of Qoheleth was ascribed to King Solomon from very early times. Had any scribe or copyist attempted to customise their morphology in accordance with their view of the book's date, they would have sought to use earlier, not later forms. The most reasonable explanation of the evidence would therefore be that the use of *qitlôn* in Qoheleth reflects an original tradition as to the pronunciation of this form at the time when the book was authored, while the use of *qittālôn* in earlier books reflects a different pronunciation which was at use in earlier times. As with the case of third-weak participles, the graphemic data only point to the existence of this difference, not

²² See רַעֲיוֹן* (Ps 146:4); רַעֲיוֹן (Ezek 3:7); and הַשְּׁבוֹן* (2 Chr 26:15). For the latter see Gross's instructive discussion (1993:26–27).

²³ In other cases, the parallel Aramaic pattern is *qutlān*, but it still might have been influenced the abandoning of Hebrew *qittālôn* in favor of *qitlôn*, because both *qutlān* and *qitlôn* lack the *dagesh* forte and the long vowel ā. See Hurvitz (1968:21), and cf. further Kutscher (1959:155). For the possibility that the shift at stake originates from an inner-Hebrew development see Kutscher (1959:21 n. 15).

²⁴ Examples of *qitlôn* in Mishnaic Hebrew include, e.g., הַשְּׁבוֹן, הַקְּלוֹן, פְּגִיּוֹן, שְׁלֵטוֹן. See the following examples from the Mishnah according to MS. Kaufmann and MS. Parma: *m. Ter.* 10.12; *m. Šebi'it* 5.3; *m. Bek.* 5.3; *m. Qidd.* 3.6. See further Gross (1993:25–43; but note that Gross's list here mostly consists of nouns whose vocalisation is unknown). The general impression is that *qittālôn* still predominates *qitlôn* in Mishnaic Hebrew, but since the lion's share of the manuscripts is not vocalised, the picture is far from complete.

²⁵ This phenomenon occurs, *inter alia*, in גְּלִיּוֹן, זְכָרוֹן, פְּדִיּוֹן. See, e.g., *m. Menahot* 12.1; *m. Roš Haššanah* 4.6; *m. Yadayim* 3.4; Porath (1938:137).

to its exact nature; but this information suffices for the purpose of the current discussion. It tells us that the same scribes who transmitted *qitlôn* when copying Qoheleth also preserved *qittālôn* when copying other biblical books. In both cases they testify to an original tradition, which goes back to the time of authorship of the relevant books.

It seems appropriate at this point to refer briefly to the meaning of the term “original tradition” as used here. As mentioned above, the idea of originality is treated at length by Rezetko and Young, who often blame historical linguists of simplistically assuming that they use the original text as composed by its original author (Rezetko and Young 2014:68–71, 77, 83–110). However, historical linguists of biblical Hebrew are not interested in authorship. When we refer to the distribution of *qitlôn* vs. *qittālôn* as reflecting an original pronunciation, what we actually say is that these two graphemes indicate that there existed a difference between two pronunciations, one common in First Temple times, and the other in the Second Temple period. By no means does this identification of the forms’ date rule out complicated processes of editing and reshaping; it only locates them within limits of dialect and time.

THE FEMININE DEMONSTRATIVE זה

The feminine demonstrative occurs six times in Qoheleth. In all its occurrences, it takes the unique form זה:

1. לשחוק אַמְרַתִּי מִהוֹלֵל וּלְשַׁמְחָהּ מִה־זֶה עֲשֵׂה (Qoh 2:2)
2. גַּם־זֶה רְאִיתִי אֲנִי כִּי מִיַּד הָאֱלֹהִים הִיא (Qoh 2:24)
3. וְגַם־זֶה רָעָה חוֹלָה (Qoh 5:15)
4. זֶה מַתַּת אֱלֹהִים הִיא (Qoh 5:18)
5. כָּל־זֶה נִסִּיתִי בְּהַכְמָה (Qoh 7:23)
6. גַּם־זֶה רְאִיתִי חֲכָמָה תַּחַת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ (Qoh 9:13)

Outside Qoheleth, זה occurs only five times, three in the expression כֹּזֵה וְכֹזֵה, and twice in other cases:

1. כֹּזֵה וְכֹזֵה עֲשֵׂה לִי מִיָּכָה וַיִּשְׁפְּרַנִּי וְאֶהְיֶה־לוֹ לְכֹהֵן (Judges 18:4)

2. כִּי־כֹהָ וְכֹהָ תֹאכַל הַחֶרֶב. (2 Sam 11:25)
3. כֹּהָ וְכֹהָ תִדְבֵר אֵלַיָּהּ. (1 Kings 14:5)
4. וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם אֱלִישָׁע לֹא זֶה הַדְּרֹךְ וְלֹא זֶה הַעִיר. (2 Kings 6:19)
5. וַיִּדְבֹר אֵלַי זֶה הַלְשָׁכָה אֲשֶׁר כָּנְיָה דְרָךְ הַדְּרוֹם. (Ezek 40:45)

In addition, two attestations of the spelling וֹז are found in Hosea and Psalms:

1. יִפְלוּ בַחֲרֹב שְׂרִייהֶם מִזַּעַם לְשׁוֹנָם זֹו לַעֲגָם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם. (Hos 7:16)
2. אִם־יִשְׁמְרוּ כְנִיךְ בְּרִיתִי וְעַדְתִּי זֹו אֶלְמָדָם. (Ps 132:12).²⁶

The evidence may be summarised as follows: while the use of וֹז/זֹה throughout the Bible is rare and sporadic,²⁷ in Qoheleth this usage is the rule, not the exception.

The standard equivalent of the rare form זֹה is of course זָאת, which appears 616 times in the Bible. וֹז/זֹה is a later usage, typically known from Mishnaic Hebrew.²⁸ Its consistent use in Qoheleth is therefore rightfully taken by scholars as a mark of LBH.²⁹

As in the examples discussed above, here too the occurrence of the LBH feminine form זֹה in Qoheleth is attested to only through Masoretic vocalisation. However, this case is also different from the two previous examples in that the alternative reading of

²⁶ Note however that in the case of Ps 132:12, וֹז might stand for the relative pronoun וְזוּ. See, e.g., Rendsburg (1990:89).

²⁷ The occurrences of זֹה outside Qoheleth have often been explained as a sign of Northern Hebrew, because most of the relevant contexts have to do with northern setting in one way or another. See already Burney (1903:208–209), and cf. also Segal (1927:41). For a criticism of this explanation see, e.g., Young (1995:66).

²⁸ Young and Rezetko attempt to ascribe the typical distribution of זָאת vs. זֹה to an intentional stylistic choice rather than to a diachronic development (Young and Rezetko 2008/I:247–248; 2008/II:26, 95). As has already been observed, this argument contradicts their claim in their 2014 volume as to the uselessness of the MT in representing the original language of a given text.

²⁹ Interestingly, the spelling זֹה which appears in Qoheleth is not identical with the common spelling וֹז in Mishnaic Hebrew. The spelling זֹה is probably earlier. In addition to LBH books, it appears sporadically in several good manuscripts of tannaitic sources. The relationship between זָאת, זֹה and וֹז should be reconstructed as follows: the two terms זָאת and זֹה served in two contemporary dialects during First Temple period. זָאת was used in CBH. זֹה was used in some proto-Mishnaic dialect, which, as assumed by many scholars, was probably similar to or identical with northern Hebrew. When this latter dialect, or a derivative dialect of it, became widespread during Second Temple times, זֹה was replaced by וֹז, which represents a more standard spelling of MH. Yet זֹה has been preserved in earlier examples of this dialect, including Qoheleth. See, e.g., Segal (1927:41).

the consonantal word is not the CBH form זאה but rather the masculine form זָה. Hence in this case, it is theoretically possible to ascribe the vocalisation זֶה to later Masoretes who deduced from the context that a feminine form is required here.³⁰ Yet this possible explanation is problematic. In most of the relevant cases, זֶה refers to the neuter, which could be either masculine – as in זֶה הַקֶּלֶל, or feminine – as in זֶה-זֵה גַם-זֵה. רָאִיתִי אֶנְי כִּי מִיַּד הָאֱלֹהִים הִיא זֶה. Were the Masoretes enforcing a later reading on the consonantal זֵה, we would expect them to be consistent in their treatment of neuter זֵה. The non-uniform use of neuter זֶה in Qohelet indicates that we are not dealing here with a conscious attempt to reshape Qoheleth's consonantal text in light of a certain linguistic paradigm, but rather with a natural heterogeneous tradition. Thus the best explanation of the evidence would be that the correlation between the feminine demonstrative in Qoheleth and in Mishnaic Hebrew, together with the special vocalisation which marks it as a feminine, bears witness to their original affinity, not to an artificial late reading of the biblical forms imposed by medieval Masoretes.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined the validity of the MT as a basis for linguistic discussion from the perspective of Masoretic vocalisation. Having its roots in a centuries-long oral system, vocalisation is at the highest risk for oblivious changes, thus being the weakest link of the Masoretic tradition. As such, vocalisation could be considered an “edge-case” of the greater problem of the authenticity of the entire system. If vocalisation turns out to reflect original traditions, then the system's more stable components, as manifested in the consonantal text, are even more likely to testify to the language of the biblical text in the period when it was authored and edited.³¹

³⁰ Indeed, some scholars suggest that זֶה in Qoheleth might reflect an original זָה which was hypercorrected by Masoretes to a feminine form after the consonantal text was already stable. See the literature cited by Schoors (2004/I:54).

³¹ The authenticity of a similarly susceptible component of Masoretic tradition – its orthography – has been recently treated by Aaron Hornkohl. Hornkohl shows that diachronic developments are discernible in the current form of Masoretic orthography (see Hornkohl 2014:643–671). For extensive studies of this issue, see Andersen and Forbes

We have attempted to show, in three different cases, that the Masoretes preserved the difference between CBH and LBH pronunciation of certain forms, although they were probably unaware of the historical nature of these different pronunciations and of their diachronic dimension. These differences cannot be deduced from the consonantal text; they are revealed to us only through vocalisation. We must therefore conclude that a strong and stable oral Masoretic tradition accompanied the written one. Both were transmitted for many centuries, and they were, in many cases, precise to the extent they could reflect dialectological differences within Biblical Hebrew.

These conclusions are nothing new to students of Biblical Hebrew. The authenticity of Masoretic vocalisation has been acknowledged and established by such eminent scholars as Kutscher, Morag, Barr and lately also Khan.³² In fact, the current discussion is but a small exemplar of the enormous modern enterprise to reconstruct the history of the Hebrew language on the basis of the MT, including its vocalisation. Beginning with Gesenius and continuing until today, the study of the various aspects of Biblical Hebrew, from phonology to syntax, has relied mostly upon the MT as its point of departure, allowing for corrections wherever it was deemed necessary. The extraordinary accomplishments of this discipline, which accord with vast extra-biblical materials and fits nicely into the wider framework of Semitic languages as a whole, cannot be dismissed by a theoretical premise as to the unreliable nature of the MT.

Yet this picture will not be complete without commenting on the issue of Masoretic anachronisms. Next to the majority of forms, whose vocalisation usually reflect original traditions, scholars have also identified cases where the vocalised text seems to enforce late readings on early consonantal forms.³³ The detailed studies of such cases show that contrary to Rezetko and Young's argument, students of Hebrew do not take the MT's authenticity for granted, but rather examine each case in its own. Thus, two centuries of modern study of Biblical Hebrew have shown that the MT

(1986); Freedman, Forbes and Andersen (1992); Forbes and Andersen (2012:127–145).

³² See note 6 above.

³³ See, e.g., Ginsberg (1934:208–223; 1935:534); Ben-Hayyim (1983/1:25; 1985:25); Hughes (1994: 67–80); Talshir (2005:159–175); Blau (2010:49 n. 17, 198); Joosten (2012:21–31); Kahn (2015:201–222).

generally reflects genuine oral traditions. At the same time it included linguistic anachronisms which reflect misunderstandings or misreadings of early forms in light of later ones. While the exact statistical relation between these two opposite tendencies is yet to be studied, this latter phenomenon in no way overshadows the overall accuracy of the vocalisation found in the MT.

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