

The Tiberian vocalization and the edition of the Hebrew Bible Text

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The most complete and most prestigious manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible come to us with Tiberian vocalization and accentuation. Since the sixteenth century, the Hebrew Bible has normally been printed with the pointing, and more recent scientific editions have carried on with this habit. Most biblical scholars have studied Hebrew from the start as it is represented in the *Codex Leningradensis*—with vowels and accents. Fortunately so, one may be tempted to add: imagine studying Hebrew on the basis of the consonantal text only; imagine trying to teach it to one's students. The Tiberian pointing is a useful tool in biblical studies. But is it only useful? Is it not authoritative too? According to traditional Jewish belief, the vowels and accents were communicated to Moses on Sinai (strictly speaking this is valid only for the Pentateuch, of course).¹ Critical scholars do not accept this claim. Nevertheless, they too give much weight to the pointing, respecting the tradition it represents. They will reject it only when they are forced to.

The authority of the Tiberian pointing has been discussed since the Middle Ages.² In our time, the idea of a critical edition of the Hebrew Bible has given urgency to this issue. It has been hotly debated with regard to the Oxford Hebrew Bible, among both its participants (to which the present writer belongs) and its critics. Is it legitimate to include the traditional vocalization and accentuation in an eclectic edition? Two rather asymmetric positions have been defended. Several scholars have argued that the reconstruction of a text type hailing from Antiquity should not be vocalized, since no vocalization systems were in existence when this text type came into existence.³ Against this, others have underscored that an edition of the Hebrew text printed without vowels would not widely be used.⁴ The compromise within the

¹ See C. D. Ginsburg, *The Massoreth ha-Massoreth of Elias Levita* (London, Longmans, Green, Reader & Dyer, 1867), 48. The earliest authority quoted by Ginsburg to establish this doctrine is the Zohar (13th century).

² See the overview in D. Barthélemy, CTAT 1, *5-12.

³ See, e.g., H.G.M. Williamson, "Do We Need A New Bible? Reflections on the Proposed Oxford Hebrew Bible", *Biblica* 90 (2009), 153-175; Z. Talshir, "Textual Criticism at the Service of Literary Criticism and the Question of an Eclectic Edition of the Hebrew Bible" in H. Ausloos, B. Lemmelijn & J. Trebelle Barrera, eds., *After Qumran. Old and Modern Editions of the Biblical Texts – The Historical Books*, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologiarum Lovaniensium 246 (Leuven, Peeters 2012), 33-60.

⁴ The so-called "Polychrome Bible" published under the general editorship of Paul Haupt at the turn of the 19th century was a full eclectic edition of the Hebrew Bible. It was published with a short apparatus and an excellent textual commentary, but without vowels. It was never widely used as a critical text.

OHB project has been to view the pointing as “accidentals” (i.e., to give them the same status as punctuation and orthography in a manuscript of a play of Shakespeare) and to treat them according to the “copy text” principle. In practice, this means editors will adopt the vowels as long as the critical text is identical with the Leningrad Codex, while printing the Hebrew unpointed wherever the eclectic text diverges from L.

The OHB compromise has been criticized from various quarters.⁵ Notably, Eibert Tigchelaar has objected that Hebrew vowels are hardly to be regarded as “accidentals.” This eminently reasonable remark makes it hard to invoke the “copy text” principle. In the present paper, I will defend the thesis that the Tiberian vocalization merits a place in a critical edition of the Hebrew Bible not mainly for its usefulness, but because it transmits authentic information that cannot be derived from the mere consonantal framework.

The Massoretic accents present a profile similar to that of the vocalization. Nonetheless, I will confine the discussion to the vowels for the time being, and leave the accents for another occasion.

1. History of research: a brief review

The study of Hebrew vocalization systems has involved famous controversies that have not entirely been resolved, but continue, sometimes indirectly and subliminally, to influence present-day attitudes. Let us therefore quickly review some key issues discussed in the history of research.

a) The age of vocalization systems and their application to biblical manuscripts

Historical study of the **Massoretic** vocalization starts in 1538 with the publication of Elias Levita’s *Massoret ha-Massoret*. Against the common opinion of his time,⁶ Levita established that the Tiberian pointing of the Hebrew Bible was not “revealed on Sinai” but invented much more recently, around the beginning of the sixth century.⁷ Levita’s argument was fully accepted by Louis Cappel and other great Hebraists of the seventeenth century. But it was vigorously combated by the elder and younger Buxtorf, who held on to the traditional idea

⁵ See in particular Williamson, “Do We Need A New Bible?”; E. Tigchelaar, “Editing the Hebrew Bible: An Overview of Some Problems”, to appear in a volume on Editorial Problems and the Bible, edited by John Kloppenborg and Judith H. Newman.

⁶ Even before Levita, some scholars had known that the Massoretic vowels were not part of the earliest text of the Bible, see Barthélemy, CTAT 1, *11 (Barthélemy mentions Nicholas of Lyra, 13-14th century).

⁷ *Massoreth ha-Massoreth*, 121-123 in the edition of Ginsburg (above, note 1).

that the vowel points went back to the original autographs of scripture. The question unfortunately became entangled in dogmatic opposition between Protestants and Catholics. In the end, however, the historical approach inaugurated by Levita carried the day.⁸

Indeed, as we all know today, the earliest biblical manuscripts have no vowel pointing. Even the Talmud has no knowledge of vocalization systems. Only from the ninth century onward, are fully developed systems of pointing attested in biblical manuscripts—the earliest dated manuscript with vocalization is dated to the year 916 (the St Petersburg Codex of the Prophets). On the basis of these data, it is generally estimated that the Jewish supra- and infra-linear vocalization systems were created from the sixth or seventh century onward.⁹ The Jewish systems most probably developed from Syriac (Nestorian) musters, but they soon surpassed all earlier methods in complexity and phonological accuracy. Three or four different systems are attested, each with its own sub-variants. Only the Tiberian vocalization continued to be used in biblical manuscripts beyond the late Middle Ages.

b) The origin of the information encoded in the pointing of biblical manuscripts

While the graphic representation of the vowels is late, this fact does not by itself tell us anything on the age of the phonological substance encoded. Levita himself was convinced that although the signs were late, the pronunciation they denote was known by the Jews from remotest antiquity, and represents the true and genuine reading as it came from the inspired writers.¹⁰ Cappel agreed with Levita that the Massoretic signs were designed to encode the traditional reading of the sacred text.¹¹ In the course of his text-critical studies, however, Cappel noted many places where the Septuagint or other ancient witnesses reflect a vocalization diverging from the Tiberian one. Consequently, he argued for a critical approach, which should test every reading on its merits. On this point Cappel went well beyond Levita. Other, less learned, Hebraists went overboard and rejected the authority of the Tiberian vocalization altogether, sometimes going so far as to suggest that Jews had falsified the Scriptures for their own purposes.¹²

⁸ CTAT I, *10-*12.

⁹ For an overview, see A. Sáenz-Badillos, *A History of the Hebrew Language*, ET J. Elwolde (Cambridge, CUP, 1993), 86-111.

¹⁰ *Massoreth ha-Massoreth*, 112 in the edition of Ginsburg (above, note 1).

¹¹ L. Cappelus, *Arcanum punctationis revelatum*, Leiden, 1624 (see the quote from this work in Ginsburg, *The Massoreth ha-Massoreth* [note 1], 56).

¹² See CTAT I, *10-*12.

The controversy was revived in a different form in the twentieth century. Paul Kahle, in a memorable paper read at the *Deutsche Orientalistentag* in Leipzig in 1921, argued that the Tiberian pointing reflects, in many respects, not the traditional reading of the Bible, but the grammatical theory of the Massoretes.¹³ Gotthelf Bergsträsser opposed Kahle's ideas, starting at the *Orientalistentag* itself,¹⁴ arguing that Tiberian Hebrew accords far too much with historical-comparative evidence to be a free invention of the 8th-9th century. Later research proved that Kahle had been wrong on many points of detail.¹⁵ Kahle never recanted, however. In his book *The Cairo Geniza* (1959) he reiterated his position, adding new arguments.¹⁶ And his influence continues to be felt in works of Garbini, Beyer, and others.¹⁷ In his manual of Biblical Hebrew of 1994, Rüdiger Bartelmus still defends Kahle's approach explicitly.¹⁸

c) Tiberian and other vocalization systems of Biblical Hebrew

The main arguments fielded by Kahle relate to divergences between Tiberian and non-Tiberian witnesses to the vocalization of the Bible. Origen's second column, Jerome's transcriptions, and Geniza fragments with "Palestinian" pointing, diverge substantially from the Tiberian, as does the vocalization presupposed in the consonantal text of the MT itself. For Kahle, many of these divergences showed that the Tiberian vocalization must be wrong.

More recent research—by Einar Brønno on the *secunda*, by John Revell on the

¹³ See P. Kahle, "Die überlieferte Aussprache des Hebräischen und die Punktation der Masoreten", ZAW 39 (1921), 220-239. Note the following statement: "Ich glaube nun den Nachweis führen zu können, daß ein großer Teil dieser Bedenken berechtigt ist, und daß wir uns ganz allgemein mit der Tatsache abzufinden haben, daß in der masoretischen Punktation, insbesondere in der tiberischen, nicht einfach die etwa im 6.—8. christlichen Jahrhundert übliche Aussprache des Hebräischen festgehalten wurde, sondern daß in ihr vielfach eine von den Masoreten — natürlich in bester Absicht — vorgenommene Korrektur dieser Aussprache vorliegt. Diese Punktation gibt also — so meine ich — in vieler Hinsicht nicht an, wie tatsächlich gesprochen wurde, sondern wie — der Ansicht der Masoreten nach — korrekterweise gesprochen werden müsste" (232).

¹⁴ See E. Y. Kutscher, *The Language and Linguistic Background of the Isaiah Scroll (I Q Isa^a)* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974), 45-46.

¹⁵ Kutscher, *Isaiah Scroll*, 45-46; J. Blau, *Phonology and Morphology of Biblical Hebrew. An Introduction* (Winona Lake, Eisenbrauns, 2010), 80-81. See also note 19.

¹⁶ See P. Kahle, *The Cairo Geniza* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1959²), 164-188.

¹⁷ See, e.g., G. Garbini, *Il Semitico di Nord-Ovest* (Naples, Istituto Universario Orientale, 1960); K. Beyer, *Althebräische Grammatik. Laut- und Formenlehre* (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969).

¹⁸ R. Bartelmus, *Einführung in das Biblische Hebräisch* (Zürich, Theologischer Verlag, 1994) 20-22.

Palestinian supra-linear system, by James Barr on Jerome's transcriptions¹⁹—showed that Kahle's judgments were often problematic: forms he identified as earlier than their Tiberian counterpart proved to be later, and some divergences he observed turned out to be due to difficulties in transcribing Hebrew into Greek or Latin. No one contests the existence of varying systems of vocalization as such, however. Even the closely allied Babylonian and Tiberian systems differ in many respects. Notably, the Babylonian pointing has only one sign corresponding to Tiberian and Palestinian *patah* and *segol*. The divergences with other systems are more considerable.

Such variation, however, does not necessarily show that any of the attested systems is the product of artificial theories. Differences may be due to distinct stylistic registers (e.g., spoken versus literary),²⁰ variations of age (e.g., second temple Hebrew versus Hebrew of the post-destruction era), or dialectal diversity (e.g., the dialect of Jerusalem versus a more northern dialect). The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls has been important in this respect. Close study of the language of the Scrolls has fostered the idea that Hebrew, when it was still a living language, was known in different, contemporary dialects.²¹ The different traditions of vocalization may link up with these dialects.

d) Variant readings expressed in the vocalization

Some of the variant vocalizations, of course, are not linguistic but textual in nature: they do not affect only the way the word is pronounced, but also what it means. It has already been mentioned that Cappel discovered many such variants by comparing the MT with the Septuagint. But similar variants exist also between the Hebrew traditions.

An interesting example illustrating both the linguistic and textual aspect is the vocalization of the word read וַיִּדְבֹּר “and he subdued” in the MT of Ps 18:48 but ουιεδαββερ in Origen's second column. The distinct forms of the *waw*—vocalized *wa-* in the MT but *u-* in the *secunda*—probably reflect a dialectal or language-historical difference. While MT

¹⁹ See L. L. Grabbe, *Comparative Philology and the Text of Job: A Study in Methodology* (Missoula, Scholars Press, 1977), 179-197.

²⁰ Kutscher, *Isaiah Scroll*, 46.

²¹ See E. Qimron, “Observations on the History of Early Hebrew (1000 B.C.E.-200 C.E.) in the Light of the Dead Sea Documents”, in D. Dimant, U. Rappaport (eds.), *The Dead Sea Scrolls: Forty Years of Research* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 349-361; Z. Ben-Hayyim, *A Grammar of Samaritan Hebrew* (Jerusalem/Winona Lake, Magnes/Eisenbrauns, 2000); A. E. Yuditsky, דקדוק העברית שבתעתיקי אוריגנס (Jerusalem, Academy of the Hebrew Language, forthcoming).

differentiates between “strong” *waw*, used when the prefix conjugation has a preterit meaning, and “weak” *waw* used when the meaning is future, the dialect reflected in the *secunda* does not make this distinction.²² The divergent vocalization of the verbal form, however, almost certainly flows from textual variation. Where the MT reads a Hiphil form, the *secunda* has the Piel.

Textual variations like these do not invalidate the traditions transmitting the variants. They are to be treated in the same way as variants expressed in the consonantal text.

e) Concluding remarks

A majority of Hebraists subscribe to the idea that the Tiberian vocalization represents an authentic oral reading tradition transmitted among the Jews for many generations before it was written down. The Tiberian vocalization meticulously encodes a very old and dependable oral tradition.²³ It is not infallible, however. It is to be studied in conjunction with other traditions: transcriptions in the Septuagint and patristic writings, Origen’s second column, medieval manuscripts with Babylonian, Palestinian and “mixed” pointing, and the Samaritan reading tradition of the Pentateuch, should all be taken into account. None of the non-Tiberian witnesses are available for the entire biblical corpus. They are also generally of lesser quality than the Tiberian, in regard to both the accuracy with which they encode phonological information, and the antiquity of the tradition upon which they rest. Nevertheless, in this field as in others, the race is not to the swift: the non-Tiberian systems may occasionally transmit variants that are to be preferred.

In a way, the Tiberian vocalization is not unlike the consonantal MT: it faithfully reflects old tradition, but needs nevertheless to be approached critically.

2. Secondary vocalizations in the Tiberian tradition

Although the Tiberian vocalization globally reflects early tradition, all authorities agree that it contains a number of readings that are clearly secondary. In what follows, four different categories will be illustrated with an example and briefly discussed: midrashic alterations, grammatical modernizations, forgotten words, and miscellanea. The question when the

²² To be more precise, the dialect reflected in the *Secunda* doesn’t systematically make this distinction. For discussion, see Alexey (Eliyahu) Yuditsky. *The Grammar of the Hebrew of Origen’s Transliterations* (Jerusalem: Academy of Hebrew Language, forthcoming) [in Hebrew], § 3.5.3.

²³ See now the admirable overview of G. A. Khan, *A Short Introduction to the Tiberian Masoretic Bible and its Reading Tradition* (Piscataway NJ, Gorgias: 2012).

secondary readings came into being is of special interest since it may inform us on the age of the Tiberian tradition as a whole. In what follows, this question will be addressed repeatedly.

a) Midrashic alterations

In a number of passages, the vocalization appears to have been altered for religious or exegetical reasons. Cases were first collected by Abraham Geiger in 1857.²⁴ A relatively certain instance is:

Isa 1:12

פִּי תִבְאוּ לְרֹאוֹת פָּנַי מִיִּבְקֶשׁ זֹאת מִיָּדְכֶם

When ye come *to appear before me*, who hath required this at your hand?

Literally, the Hebrew means “to be seen my face,” which is awkward. Instead of the niphāl, it seems originally the qāl, *lir’ot*, was meant. This was changed because it suggested too corporal an image of God.²⁵ A similar alteration was made also in Ex 34:24 and Deut 31:11.

Another example from the prophets is the “queen of heaven” in the book of Jeremiah (Jer 7:18; 44[LXX 51]:17, 18, 19, 25), whose name is systematically vocalized, in the MT, as מְלֶכֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם, suggesting the meaning “the host (מְלֶכֶת *status constructus* of מְלֶאכֶה “work, creation”) of heaven,” certainly for theological reasons.²⁶

The date of such corrections can be approximately determined when other textual witnesses confirm them. The reading לְרֹאוֹת in Isa 1:12, Ex 34:24 and Deut 31:11 is reflected in all three places in the Septuagint. Since the reading is quite forced grammatically, particularly in the Isaiah passage, there is little chance that its attestation at once in the MT and in the Septuagint is due to polygenesis. An old reading tradition must lie at the basis of both. Similarly, in Jeremiah, the reading “host of heaven” is already attested in the Septuagint of Jer 7:18, τῆ στρατιᾶ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ “to the host of heaven”; in the other passages, situated in the second part of Jeremiah, the Greek has τῆ βασιλίσση τοῦ οὐρανοῦ “to the queen of heaven”. The Peshitta also knows both readings, but distributes them differently: the prophet and the men of Judah say *pulhān šmayyā*, “service of heaven,” 7:18; 44:17, 18, 25; but the women call her *malkat šmayyā* “queen of heaven” 44:19.

²⁴ A. Geiger, *Urschrift und Uebersetzungen Der Bibel* (Frankfurt a. M., Mada, 1928²).

²⁵ See the discussion in CTAT 2, 3-5.

²⁶ See BHS.

Some of the altered vocalizations are not reflected in other witnesses, however. Such cases are hard to date: they may be old, as similar cases demonstrably are, but they may also have arisen in late Antiquity or the Middle Ages:

Isa 66:21

וְגַם־מִמֶּנּוּ אֶקַּח לְכֹהֲנִים לְלוֹיִם

I will take some of them (i.e., probably, those of the nations) *for* the priests and the Levites.

All ancient versions read here, as is indeed most natural: לְלוֹיִם and לְכֹהֲנִים, without article:

LXX καὶ ἀπ' αὐτῶν λήμψομαι ἐμοὶ ἱερεῖς καὶ Λευίτας

Tg ואף מנהון אקריב למהוי כהניא ליואי

“From them too I will take some *to be* priests (and) Levites.

The Tiberian reading, with the article, is probably a midrashic alteration seeking to avoid the suggestion that God would, in the eschaton, choose priests from among the nations. The earliest echo of the Tiberian vocalization is found, unless I err, in medieval commentaries such as that of David Qimhi (לְצוּרֵךְ הַכֹּהֲנִים “for the needs of the priests”). But again, this doesn’t prove the vocalization arose in the Middle Ages. The first echoes are only a date *ad quem*.

b) Grammatical modernizations

In other cases, the vocalization was altered for grammatical reasons. The old Hebrew morphology presupposed by the consonantal text was overlaid by a more recent system. Although single cases had been pointed out earlier, the first scholar who came to an adequate understanding of this phenomenon was Mayer Lambert, who also collected a number of convincing examples.²⁷ More recently, H. L. Ginsberg, Elisha Qimron, Jeremy Hughes, David Talshir and Noam Mizrahi have written studies on this subject.²⁸

²⁷ M. Lambert, “Le waw conversif”, *Revue de Études Juives* 26 (1883), 47-62; idem, “L’emploi du Nifal en hébreu”, *Revue de Études Juives* 41 (1900), 196-214.

²⁸ See H.L. Ginsberg, מבעד למסורת, *Tarbiz* 5 (1934-5), 208-223; *Tarbiz* 6 (1935-6), 543; J. Hughes, “Post-Biblical Features of Biblical Hebrew Vocalization”, in S.E. Balentine, J. Barton, eds., *Language, Theology, and the Bible. Essays in Honour of James Barr* (Oxford, OUP, 1994), 67-80; E. Qimron, “על מסורת הלשון של סופרי המקרא”, in Y. Bentolila, *Hadassah Shy Jubilee Book* (Jerusalem, Mosad Bialik, 1997), 37-43; D. Talshir, “אחות בלשון רבים”, in M. Bar-Asher, M. Florentin, *Samaritan, Hebrew And Aramaic Studies*

A good example from the realm of verbal syntax is the following. With *pe-yod* verbs, an unpointed 3ms *qal* can be read either as a perfect or an imperfect (*yarad* – *yered*). In light of this, the vocalization in the following passage appears not to reflect the original grammar:

1 Sam 3,7

גָּלָה אֵלָיו דְּבַר־יְהוָה וְשִׁמוּאֵל טָרַם יָדַע אֶת־יְהוָה וְטָרַם ?

Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

In Biblical Hebrew, the particle טָרַם is usually followed by the imperfect, even in past-tense contexts.²⁹ This makes the combination יָדַע טָרַם suspicious. As Samuel Driver says, in his *Notes on Samuel*: "...the parallel יָגֵלָה makes it probable that the narrator himself would have vocalized יָדַע."³⁰ A change appears to have been made in the reading tradition, from יָדַע to עִיָּדַע. The reason for the change would seem to be that, in later Hebrew, it had become rare to use the imperfect in reference to the past. In the Bible, טָרַם + perfect is attested only twice, but in Qumran Hebrew it is found eight times.³¹ Now in most other cases, the use of the imperfect following טָרַם could be changed only with difficulty, since it was encoded in the consonantal text. In 1 Sam 3,7, however, the change affected only the vocalization. With the verb יָדַע, the third masculine singular *qal* has an initial *yod* in the perfect as well as in the imperfect.

The date of grammatical modernizations is to be discussed on a case-by-case basis. Lambert and Ginsberg loosely spoke of "Rabbinic Hebrew" influence. But the discoveries of the Qumran texts show that many of the later features underlying the vocalization existed already in the Second Temple period. In the case studied above, we have seen that the Massoretic pointing aligns with the syntax of Qumran Hebrew. In later Hebrew, the particle טָרַם fell from use.

Presented to Professor Abraham Tal (Jerusalem, Bialik, 2005), 159-175; N. Mizrahi, "Colliding Traditions in Biblical Hebrew in Historical Linguistic Perspective", in R. I. Zer, Y. Ofer, eds., *ISRAEL. Linguistic Studies in the Memory of Israel Yeivin* (Jerusalem, HUBP, 2011), 341-354, xxviii [Hebrew, with English abstract].

²⁹ The particle is followed by the perfect in Gen 24:15. On the date of Gen 24, see A. Rofé, "An Enquiry into the Betrothal of Rebekah", in E. Blum et al., eds., *Die hebräische Bibel und ihre zweifache Nachgeschichte*, FS R. Rendtorff (Neukirchener, Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1990), 27-39.

³⁰ S.R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text and the Topography of the Books of Samuel* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1912²), 42-43.

³¹ See CD 2:7; 1QHa 5:25; 7:27; 9:9; 4Q176 f22:3; 4Q180 f1:2; 4Q180 f2 4ii:10; 11Q5 21:11.

c) Forgotten words and forms

A third category of mismatches between the consonantal text and its vocalization occurs when old words or forms were no longer recognized by later readers and were consequently transformed in different ways. Well-known examples include the noun צְלִמּוֹת (Isa 9:1 and 17 more). Originally pronounced perhaps *šalmût* or *šallamût* and deriving in all likelihood from the root צלם “to be dark,” this word was interpreted as a composite, “shadow of death,” according to the Tiberian vocalization.³² Another example is the noun יפח/יפיה (Hab 2:3 and nine more), meaning “witness” but pointed almost everywhere as a form of the verb פוח “to blow.”

In other instances, only the grammatical form of the word was forgotten, while the lexical meaning remains clear. For instance, the name of the Philistine city of Ekron is always vocalized עֶקְרוֹן. Comparative evidence and the form Ακκαρων transmitted in the Septuagint make it likely that the original form of the name would be of the *qattalân* pattern, *‘iqqaron* or *‘aqqaron*.³³

The period when these words were forgotten is not easy to establish. At least some of them will have fallen into oblivion before the Hellenistic period. For the word צלמות the Septuagint reflects the same type of interpretation as is found in the MT: σαυὰ θανάτου. Likewise, יפח/יפיה is rendered with verbal forms. The name of Ekron, however, is still correctly transcribed in the Septuagint, suggesting that its vocalization changed somewhat later.

d) Miscellaneous cases

For the sake of completeness, some other types of mismatches between the consonantal framework and the vocalization need to be mentioned.

The Tiberian tradition transmits a small number of “mixed forms,” in which the

³² See Chaim Cohen, “The Meaning of צלמות 'Darkness': A Study in Philological Method,” in *Texts, Temples, and Traditions: A Tribute to Menahem Haran* (Winona Lake, Eisenbrauns, 1996), 287-309.

³³ Several other cases where the Septuagint appears to have preserved an earlier form of proper names are listed in W. E. in Staples, “The Hebrew of the Septuagint,” *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 44 (1927), 6-30, in particular 8.

pointing combines two different ways of reading the word.³⁴ A good example is וַיִּלְדֹּתָ in Gen 16:11; Jud 13:5,7, reflecting the readings וַיִּלְדֹּתָ and וַיִּלְדֹּתָ.³⁵

In a paper published recently in *Textus* I have argued that the form יִבְעֶר in Ex 22:4 should not be analyzed as a jussive of the *hiphil* of בער but reflects a kind of clandestine *qere* based on the reading יבעה, attested in a Qumran fragment.³⁶ There are other instances of this kind.³⁷

In all categories reviewed, there are good reasons to view the Tiberian pointing as being at variance with the original vocalization. In a critical edition the vocalization of these words should not be retained in the text. Whether a corrected vocalization should be inserted instead is a moot question: in practically all cases, this would amount to adopting a conjectural emendation in the text. Moreover, at least some of the original vocalizations can no longer be recovered (e.g. in the case of צלמות).

The wisest course might be to leave the words unvocalized and to provide all information in the apparatus.

3. Old readings in the Tiberian vocalization

Collecting the secondary readings expressed in the vocalization has the paradoxical effect of establishing the relatively great age of the Tiberian tradition. Many of the secondary readings themselves demonstrably go back to the Second Temple period. Other readings may be more recent—but none can be proven to be so. More importantly, the secondary readings are in a sense the exceptions proving the rule. For every “forgotten word” re-vocalized according to late exegesis there are many old words whose morphological shape is transmitted correctly. For every construction overlaid by late grammatical rules, there are many constructions of classical Hebrew that are faithfully reproduced in the Massoretic tradition.

³⁴ See the summary discussion, with additional examples, in F.E. König, *Historisch-kritisches Lehrgebäude der Hebräischen Sprache*, Bd II (Leipzig, Hinrichs, 1895), 356-357. See also Jan Joosten, “הַדְּרִלְתָּי *forma mixta?*” *ZAW* 102 (1990), 96-97.

³⁵ Revell has argued that the aberrant form is a genuine variant of the participle, see E.J. Revell, “Obed (Deut 26:5) and the Function of the Participle in MT”, *Sefarad* 48 (1988), 197-205. Note however that the aberrant form is found only in contexts where the second person is called for. The same syntagm in a third person context is vocalized univocally as a participle (Isa 7:14).

³⁶ See J. Joosten, “A Note on the Anomalous Jussive in Exodus 22:4”, *Textus* 25 (2010), 9-16.

³⁷ Joosten, “Anomalous Jussive”, 12.

a) Tiberian Hebrew versus post-biblical Hebrew

Admittedly, a large part of the pointing of the biblical text is fairly straightforward. In prose texts, particularly, many vocalizations are self-evident once one knows the underlying grammatical system. It is also true that Biblical Hebrew is governed in part by the same rules as post-biblical Hebrew. Someone with a good knowledge of Mishnaic Hebrew will be able to vocalize a large proportion of a biblical text. There are, nonetheless, many forms in the biblical language that did not continue into Mishnaic Hebrew. These are generally vocalized correctly as far as we can tell. An excellent example is the *wayyiqtol* form. As is well known, the *yiqtol* in *wayyiqtol* is not the normal imperfect, but an apocopated form morphologically identical with the jussive. One says *wayhi*, not *wayyihyeh*. This distinction is well understood in historical-comparative perspective: Akkadian and Arabic too use the short form as a preterit. Now in Hebrew, with some verbs, like *hayah*, the morphological difference shows up in the consonantal text. With many other verbs, there is no recognizable difference. With a third group, however, the difference is expressed only in the vocalization (sometimes confirmed by a *mater lectionis*, but not systematically): one says *yaqûm* but *wayyaqom*, *yabdîl* but *wayyabdel*. This distinction no longer exists in Mishnaic Hebrew, yet the Massoretes get it right almost invariably.

Something similar can be said about the distinction between infinitive construct and infinitive absolute: with some verbs it shows up in the consonants, but with many verbs the distinction is expressed only in the vocalization: *šmoaʿ* versus *šamoʿaʿ*. In Mishnaic Hebrew, the infinitive absolute has fallen from use, yet the Massoretes always correctly distinguish the forms.

Cases like these too are compatible with the idea that the Tiberian tradition goes back to the period of the second temple, when *wayyiqtol* forms and the infinitive absolute, although waning, were still alive. Stefan Schorch has recently taken this position. In a wide-ranging analysis, he argues for the end of the 2nd and the beginning of the 1st century BCE as the most likely period when established reading traditions—not only the Massoretic one, but the Samaritan as well—may have crystallized.³⁸

b) Early versus late biblical Hebrew in the Tiberian pointing

Other evidence, however, is hard to reconcile with a date around 100 BCE and suggests a

³⁸ S. Schorch, *Die Vokale des Gesetzes. Bd 1 Genesis*, BZAW 339 (Berlin, De Gruyter, 2004), 56-60.

much higher date for the origin of the Tiberian tradition. The most striking evidence are instances in which a word or construction is vocalized differently in the earlier and the later books of the Bible. Shelomo Morag was the first scholar pointing out this phenomenon.³⁹ But even better evidence was found later. Daniel Boyarin signaled the following:

Ps 6:3 קָנַנְי יְהוָה כִּי אֶמְלַל אֲנִי

Neh 3:34 מָה הִיהוּדִים הָאֶמְלִלִים עֹשִׂים

The form ^a*mēlal* is the one used in Tannaitic sources.⁴⁰ As Boyarin remarks:

Thus we observe once more the continuity between LBH and Rabbinic Hebrew. Furthermore, this instance gives important confirmation to the reading traditions on which the Massoretic vocalization is based. Indeed the Massorettes knew (or better, were taught by tradition) how to vocalize according to the late form precisely in Nehemiah, without any hint from the consonantal text.

If the oral reading of the Bible had been fixed only around 100 BCE, a long time after the creation of the biblical books, one would not expect to find similar distinctions in the Tiberian vocalization system. The examples show that the formative period of Tiberian Hebrew is not to be limited to the Second Temple period. They suggest that the time frame of the oral tradition issuing in Tiberian Hebrew is similar to the formative period of the consonantal text of the Bible.

c) The nature of the tradition issuing in Tiberian Hebrew

How can one imagine that very early elements, perhaps going back to the pre-exilic period, were transmitted orally all the way to the Tiberian Massorettes? Schorch refers to the public reading of the biblical text as the main locus of the reading tradition. An important plank in his discussion is the notion that public reading was not practiced regularly before the end of the 2nd C. BCE.

Arguably, however, what we are looking for is not public reading of scripture, but mechanisms of scribal transmission. Recent work on scribal activity in Antiquity has shown that literary texts were transmitted at once orally and in writing. In his book *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart*, David Carr has argued that Israelite scribes would not only copy down

³⁹ See S. Morag, "On the Historical Validity of the Vocalization of the Hebrew Bible" JAOS 94 (1974), 307-315.

⁴⁰ See D. Boyarin, "Towards the Talmudic Lexicon IV" *Te'uda VI. Studies in Hebrew and Arabic in Memory of Dov Eron*, edited by Aron Dotan (Tel Aviv, University Publishing, 1988), 63-75, in particular 63-64.

the classical texts of their curriculum from older manuscripts but memorize them as well.⁴¹ In fact, memorization, declamation and copying would go hand in hand. Carr elaborated his hypothesis mostly on the basis of Mesopotamian and Egyptian parallels. Data on scribal activity in the biblical world are scarce. Nevertheless, the hypothesis provides a good model for explaining how the vocalization of an old text might be transmitted down the ages. There seems to be no good reason to doubt that the reading traditions of biblical Hebrew could go back more or less to the time when the texts were created.⁴²

4. Conclusions and perspectives

The Tiberian pointing and other sources transmit early and valuable information concerning the vocalization of the biblical text. An eclectic edition aiming to reconstruct the oldest attainable phase of the text should not exclude this material but seek to integrate it in a critical way. Including the vowel points in a critical edition of the biblical text is warranted, not because they will make the edition easier to use, but because the information they transmit is valuable and old, possibly reflecting the same age as the consonantal text.

As in the case of the consonantal MT, the quality and the availability of the Tiberian vocalization amply justify taking it as the basis of the edition. On a practical level, this means the “copy text” principle remains valid. The Tiberian vocalization is to be adopted unless there is evidence showing that it is secondary.

The incorporation of different levels of information within one critical text may be offensive to some. But it is not unheard of in other areas of the humanities. It finds a nice analogy in the edition of musical scores. Early notations of music were little more than mnemonic devices, encoding only part of the information necessary for the execution of works known largely by heart. Modern editions of Gregorian chants or baroque music will usually include many indications that were lacking in the earliest manuscripts, although they were known to all those involved in the production of the music in question. The presence of such indications does not make these modern editions unscientific. Similarly, the combination of information transmitted in writing with information transmitted orally for over a thousand years before finally being written down will in no way impair an edition of the biblical text.

⁴¹ D. M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart. Origins of Scripture and Literature* (Oxford, OUP, 2005).

⁴² Alternatively, one might say the reading tradition goes back to the time when the writings became part of the scribal curriculum. The two periods may coincide, however.