

## How far back in antiquity can we trace the oral tradition underlying Tiberian Hebrew?

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**Abstract:** In an appreciable number of instances, the Tiberian Hebrew vocalization of words or forms in the Hebrew Bible differs between the early and late sub-corpora. This phenomenon suggests that the oral reading tradition underlying the received text of the Hebrew Bible reaches back further than is commonly envisaged.

**Keywords:** Tiberian vocalization, diachronic linguistics, reading traditions

### Introduction

Although the vowel pointing of the Hebrew text of the Bible emerged only during the Middle Ages, most Hebraists estimate that the information it encodes goes back much further.<sup>1</sup> Many linguistic features expressed in the Tiberian vocalization are atypical of post-biblical Hebrew, yet they seem valid in historical-comparative perspective.<sup>2</sup> It is hard to imagine that medieval scribes got such details right on the basis of their knowledge of historical Hebrew grammar. The pointing must reflect an oral tradition reaching back to a period before the disappearance of spoken Hebrew.<sup>3</sup>

If one attempts to define more precisely the time frame when the oral tradition underlying Tiberian Hebrew was fixed, the Second Temple period is an obvious place to look. This is the period during which our oldest manuscripts were copied, the period of the earliest explicit commentaries on scriptural texts, and the period during which we first hear of attempts to define the canon. In a recent review of the question, Stefan Schorch has argued for the end of the second and the beginning of the first century BCE as the most likely period when reading traditions may have crystallized.<sup>4</sup> Much of his evidence is circumstantial: different currents, such as the Qumran group and the Samaritans, may have fixed their reading traditions in contradistinction to one another; the connection between the written words of scripture and Jewish halakha became much stronger from the first century BCE onward; public reading of scripture in religious assemblies is first attested in the first century CE.

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<sup>1</sup> See Buhl 1892, 207–219; Grabbe 1977, 179–197; Khan 2012, 43–62.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, the distinction of *sin* and *shin*, the characteristic vowels of the *qal* stem, the distinction between long and short forms of the prefix conjugation, and the distinction between infinitive absolute and infinitive construct of strong roots. See further Steiner 2007, 73–83.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Kahle (1927, 36–56) formulated a strong challenge to this view, and his approach continues to be echoed by Semitists until today. However, Kahle's evidence has been refuted by several leading Hebraists. See e.g. Ginsberg 1930, 127–138. For further discussion see Joosten 2015a.

<sup>4</sup> Schorch 2004, 56–60.

Some internal evidence also points to the Second Temple period. Some of the secondary traits in Tiberian Hebrew demonstrably go back to this time.<sup>5</sup> Masoretic formations such as צְלִמּוֹת “shadow of death” (for earlier *šalmût*\* “deep darkness”) and theological corrections such as the *niphal* of רָאָה in the formula: “to be seen with the face of the LORD” (originally: “to see [*qal*] the face of the LORD”) are almost certainly secondary, but they are already reflected in the Septuagint translation, showing that they were widely accepted in the Hellenistic period. Such cases indicate a slightly earlier time frame than the one Schorch argued for. It seems that at least some of the reading tradition had become fixed by the second or even third century BCE.

Evidence exists, however, showing that some of the tradition may be older still. In several instances words or forms are pointed in one way in early biblical texts and in another way in late biblical texts. This phenomenon suggests that during the Second Temple period, when the reading traditions that would be faithfully transmitted for centuries to come were established, learned tradents knew of variant vocalizations that had been in use for certain words in a distant past. However much the crystallization of oral tradition homogenized the biblical text, some elements of early Biblical Hebrew were transmitted alongside their later equivalents in uninterrupted oral tradition from the time the early texts were composed until the Tiberian Masoretes. Consequently, some of the vocalizations contained in the Masoretic text would appear to go back to the sixth century BCE or earlier.

## 1. Early and Late Biblical Hebrew

A few remarks on the history of Hebrew in the biblical period will set out the framework of the discussion.<sup>6</sup> The texts contained in the Hebrew Bible most probably came into being over a prolonged period. It is widely agreed that diachronic developments in the language have left their marks in the biblical books. Very roughly, a corpus of “early Biblical Hebrew” (EBH) consisting of the books of Genesis to 2 Kings can be distinguished from a corpus of “late Biblical Hebrew” (LBH) consisting of the books of Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, Esther, Ecclesiastes and Daniel. Although each corpus shows inner diversity and signs of diachronic development, the former is globally characterized as earlier than the latter. Since Wilhelm Gesenius, EBH is associated with the monarchic period (tenth to sixth century BCE), LBH with the Persian period (fifth and fourth century BCE). Books like Jeremiah and Ezekiel come between the two main corpora and represent a phase that has been called “transitional Biblical Hebrew.”<sup>7</sup>

The diachronic approach to Biblical Hebrew has been criticized. Notably, Ian Young and Robert Rezetko have published a number of studies arguing that the biblical corpus does not give any evidence of linguistic development.<sup>8</sup> Instead they would attribute differences between corpora to the stylistic choices of biblical authors. Their work has elicited many responses, both from established scholars in the field defending their views and from newcomers bringing new methods and

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<sup>5</sup> Joosten 2015b.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. Sáenz-Badillos 1993.

<sup>7</sup> See Hendel & Joosten 2018.

<sup>8</sup> See notably Young, Rezetko, Ehrensverd 2008; Rezetko, Young 2014.

approaches to the table.<sup>9</sup> It is fair to say that Young and Rezetko have reinvigorated diachronic research on Biblical Hebrew. But by and large they have not been able to convince other Hebraists of their alternative approach.<sup>10</sup>

EBH and LBH represent the same language, but distinct chronolects. Differences between the two are numerous. In regard to vocabulary, the *Lexicon of Late Biblical Hebrew* published by Avi Hurvitz contains 80 items.<sup>11</sup> In the area of syntax, too, many differences have been identified, even if they have not been gathered systematically.<sup>12</sup> In regard to morphology and phonology, however, most specialists are happy to admit that the differences between EBH and LBH are unimpressive and few in number.<sup>13</sup> The Masoretic vocalization is said to have “homogenized” the biblical corpus, masking subtle differences in vocalization and pronunciation that must have existed. Only recently has material come to light that shows this “homogenization” was less complete than was formerly thought.

## 2. Earlier studies

The first scholar to point out examples of differences in vocalization between Early and Late BH was Shelomo Morag.<sup>14</sup> In defense of the basic dependability of the Masoretic pointing, Morag argued that irregular forms may represent late or dialectal features. As examples of late Hebrew forms he pointed to שְׁהוּא and שְׁהָא in Ecclesiastes (Eccl 2:22;<sup>15</sup> 3:18), instead of expected שְׁהוּא and שְׁהָא.<sup>16</sup> The vocalization with *shewa* is similarly found in these specific combinations in some traditions of post-biblical Hebrew.<sup>17</sup> Morag also drew attention to forms of the *nuphal* stem, which in BH are found only in LBH (נִגְלָדוּ 1 Chr 3:5; 20:8), and become more frequent in post-biblical Hebrew. These forms differ from the more normative *niphal* only in the vocalization.

After Morag opened up this line of research, several other scholars added examples that had incidentally come to their attention in their own research. Daniel Boyarin signaled that the adjective אֲמֵלֵל “miserable,” attested in Ps 6:3, turns up in the form אֲמֵלֵל (in fact plural אֲמֵלֵלִים) in the late book of Nehemiah, 3:34. The form אֲמֵלֵל is the one attested in Tannaitic sources. Boyarin remarks:

...this instance gives important confirmation to the reading traditions on which the Masoretic vocalization is based. Indeed the Masoretes knew (or better, were taught by

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., the studies edited by Cynthia L. Miller-Naudé and Ziony Zevit in *Diachrony in Biblical Hebrew*, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. the thoughtful essay of Notarius 2018 and the recent recapitulation of the discussion in Hornkohl 2026.

<sup>11</sup> Hurvitz 2014.

<sup>12</sup> For a review, see Hendel & Joosten 2018.

<sup>13</sup> They are far from non-existent. For instance, the *piel* of hollow verbs is limited to LBH texts in the Hebrew Bible.

<sup>14</sup> Morag 1974.

<sup>15</sup> BHS has שְׁהוּא with *segol* in this verse, but the Codex Leningrad indeed vocalizes with a *shewa*.

<sup>16</sup> In other biblical books, *še* is pointed with *segol* in similar environments: note *šehēm* in Cant 6:5; Lam 4:9.

<sup>17</sup> A large collection of examples can be found in Bunis 2023, 59–63.

tradition) how to vocalize according to the late form precisely in Nehemiah, without any hint from the consonantal text.<sup>18</sup>

On the face of it, early and late vocalizations were handed down to the Masoretes through oral reading traditions.

Menahem Kister drew attention to the dual of the noun קֶרֶן “horn,” which exhibits the form קֶרְנִים in Hab 3:4 (see also Gen 14:5; Am 6:13), but קֶרְנִים in the late book of Daniel, Dan 8:3 (twice), 20.<sup>19</sup> The latter form is the normal one in Mishnaic Hebrew.

Noam Mizrahi noted the plural קֶרְבֵי “innards” in the late Psalm 103:1, or perhaps rather the dual or pseudo-dual, if the form is the same as Mishnaic Hebrew קֶרְבֵי.<sup>20</sup> EBH systematically reserves the singular קֶרֶב for this meaning. As Mizrahi notes, “the dual-like form [in Psalm 103:1] is witnessed only by the vocalization.”

Richard Steiner has pointed to the difference between עֲרָבִי “Arab” in Isa 13:20; Jer 3:2 and עֲרָבִי “Arab” in Nehemiah and Chronicles (eight times in all).<sup>21</sup> The form in the late books is Aramaicizing.

Nili Samet has contributed a very valuable study to the issue under discussion.<sup>22</sup> Focusing on the late book of Ecclesiastes she gathered several examples of vocalizations and vocalization patterns, where EBH uses different forms:

- אָחַס vs EBH חוּטָא and other instances of confusion between third *aleph* and third *he* verbs;
- the *qitlôn* pattern vs the EBH *qitlôn* pattern;
- the feminine demonstrative הַ.

As Samet points out, the late forms in Ecclesiastes were preserved in spite of the fact that the book was universally regarded as Solomonic during the entire period of the oral transmission of its vocalization. The book of Ecclesiastes was transmitted with a reading tradition that differed on several points from that of other books of the Bible.

### 3. Methodological remarks

The evidence that has been identified thus far is of various sorts: some examples are phonological in nature (e.g. *šehû* - *šahû*), others are morphological (e.g. *qarnayim* - *qarānayim*), while still others are lexical (*umlal* - *āmēlāl*). What they all share is that the distinction is expressed only in the pointing “without any hint from the consonantal text,” as Boyarin puts it.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Boyarin 1988, 63–64.

<sup>19</sup> Kister 1998, 246, note 9.

<sup>20</sup> Mizrahi 2015, 43, note 15. For the late date of Ps 103, see Hurvitz 1972, 107–130.

<sup>21</sup> Steiner 2016, 313, note 12.

<sup>22</sup> Samet 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Boyarin 1988, 64.

All scholars who have noted examples claim that they are indicative of historical development. In this view, the Tiberian vocalization preserves data attesting two strata of biblical Hebrew. In the earlier stratum, one said *šehû*, in the later one *šəhû*; in the earlier stratum, one pronounced *ʿumlal*, in the later one *ʾāmēlal*, and so on. In principle, however, other explanations may seem possible. In some cases, the varying vocalizations might reflect distinct lexemes or distinct grammatical forms, not different ways of pronouncing the same word. Variant vocalizations turn up here and there in the Masoretic Text. In 1 Sam 13:21, the plural of the noun אָת “plowshare” is אָתִים, but in Isa 2:4; Mic 4:3; Joel 4:10 it is אָתִם. The word חַמְלָה “mercy” in Gen 19:16 and Isa 63:9 turns up as חַמְלָה in Ezek 16:5. There are many similar examples.<sup>24</sup> Delitzsch in his *Lese- und Schreibfehler* lists 19 pages of suspect or irregular vocalizations in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>25</sup> Some of these variants may be evidence of distinct dialects, others may be due to uncertainty as to the vocalization of rare words at an early phase of the tradition, and some may reflect an exegetical concern to distinguish nuances of meaning or use.

Possibly, then, the examples that have been identified are not evidence of language change, but variants that only by accident turn up in the EBH and LBH corpora respectively. If so, no inference can be made as to the early roots of the oral tradition underlying the vocalization.

In order to decide between the two approaches: diachronic development versus random variation, a few methodological reflections will prove helpful.

First of all, it bears spelling out that only contrastive examples can be used as evidence. What we are looking for are cases where the EBH corpus attests one vocalization and LBH books another one. Late vocalizations in LBH that have no early counterpart prove very little. The first example presented by Morag is weak in this respect. Although it is found a few times in earlier texts, relative *š* is far more typical of LBH, and the only other passages where it combines with third person personal pronouns are Lam 4:9 and Song 6:5, both attesting שָׁהּ. Neither of these represents “early” BH. Lamentations is transitional, and Song of Songs arguably LBH itself.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, statistics have a role to play. Variant vocalizations attested once are weaker evidence than variations that are attested several times. Although קָרְבִי in Psalm 103:1 lines up with Mishnaic Hebrew קָרְבִיִּים, it is a *hapax legomenon* in Biblical Hebrew. Considering the aberrant form in isolation, one might be tempted to view it as a case where post-biblical Hebrew influenced the reading of the Hebrew text, rather than an instance of diverging vocalization representative of LBH. Similarly, vocalizations found only in one late book are weaker than ones occurring in more than one. Samet’s evidence is of high quality, but its restriction to Ecclesiastes does leave open the possibility that these vocalizations are not typical of LBH, but of the particular book in which they are found—still interesting, but not necessarily diachronic.

Finally, an important distinction of historical linguistics needs to be taken into account. When one qualifies a linguistic element as “late” this can mean two different things: either the element is

<sup>24</sup> See e.g. Nöldeke 1912.

<sup>25</sup> Delitzsch 1920, 62–80.

<sup>26</sup> See Dobbs-Allsopp 2005.

considered late because it is attested in late sources (criterion of distribution), or it is considered late because it has some objective quality making it late (criterion of typology). The contrast between אֲמַלְלָא and אֲמַלְלָא is a good example of *distributional* lateness: the only reason to qualify אֲמַלְלָא as a late form (late in relation to BH generally) is that it is attested in Nehemiah and Rabbinic sources but not in earlier texts. A good example of *typological* lateness is the contrast between קִרְנַיִם and קִרְנַיִם: the former is a dual constructed on the singular, as is usual in Semitic (cf. רִגְלַיִם); the latter is a dual constructed on the model of the plural, a form produced by analogy after the dual had fallen from active use as a genuine grammatical category. The form found in Daniel is late because it occurs in Daniel and in Mishnaic Hebrew, but it is also late typologically: the distributional and typological criteria align.

Several other examples similarly align typology with distribution. The *nuphal* is clearly a late analogical development in Hebrew, based on the *niphal* but with an [u] vowel recalling the passive *pual* and *hophal* stems.<sup>27</sup> Aramaic influence accounts for the late forms עֲרַבִּי, חֲטָא, זָכְרוֹן. Aramaic is the primary factor driving diachronic change in Hebrew during the Babylonian and Persian periods.

The distinction between distributional and typological lateness gives a handle on the question whether our varying vocalizations have diachronic implications or not. A case that is distributional only might be regarded as a random variation. Cases of typological lateness without late distribution would play havoc with the theory of historical evolution briefly presented above. However, where the distributional and the typological criteria are aligned, the diachronic explanation becomes more attractive. It is highly unlikely that random differences in vocalization should systematically be distributed in such a way that the typologically older form occurs in the earlier corpus and the typologically later form in the later corpus.

An example that “ticks all the boxes” is that proposed by Richard Steiner, contrasting EBH עֲרַבִּי “Arab” to LBH עֲרַבִּי “Arab”: there is an opposition, both forms are well attested, and the distributional and typological criteria align. The EBH form is found twice, in Isa 13:20 and Jer 3:2, both of them arguably pre-exilic texts; the LBH form occurs seven times in unequivocally postexilic texts: Nehemiah and Chronicles.<sup>28</sup> The LBH form continues into Mishnaic Hebrew. The contrast is clear, and the attestation sufficiently abundant to exclude the possibility of chance influence of late Hebrew on an LBH passage. Typologically, the EBH form is the genuine Hebrew *nisbe*, while the LBH form is influenced by Aramaic. Aramaic is the main factor differentiating LBH from EBH.

#### 4. Old and new cases

The argument for the antiquity of the Tiberian vocalization is of necessity cumulative. One or two cases suggest a tantalizing possibility, but five or six begin to form the basis for a persuasive

<sup>27</sup> See Bar Asher 2014, 338–339.

<sup>28</sup> Neither Isa 13:20 (in an oracle on the destruction of Babylon) nor Jer 3:2 (for which see above at note 7) belongs to the core EBH corpus. Both texts are almost certainly earlier than Nehemiah and Chronicles, however, thus satisfying the criterion of distribution.

demonstration. In aggregate, the examples that have been gathered are rather impressive. And there are several more.

1) A simple case is that of נִאָצָה “contempt” in 2 Kgs 19:3 par. Isa 37:3 vs. נִאָצָה (or rather the plural נִאָצוֹת) in Neh 9:18, 26.<sup>29</sup> The former represents a native Hebrew pattern for deverbal nouns (*nomen actionis*) comparable to גָּעַרָה “rebuke,” נִקְמָה “vengeance” and many others. The latter represents a pattern borrowed from Aramaic and attested almost exclusively in late Biblical texts (e.g. בִּקְשָׁה “request” in Esther and Ezra, בִּקְרָה “oversight” in Ezekiel) and post-biblical Hebrew (e.g. כַּפְרָה, קַבְלָה, etc.).<sup>30</sup> One might argue that these are not varying vocalizations but distinct words. The semantics seem to be nearly the same, however, and the distribution favours the notion of linguistic evolution: in the early period, the verbal noun of the verb נָאָץ was formed in the normal Hebrew way, but in the later period, Aramaic influence interfered.

2) In Neh 1:7, the well-known paronomastic construction involving a finite verb form and an infinitive occurs with the latter vocalized as an infinitive construct instead of the expected infinitive absolute: הָבַל תְּבַלְנוּ “we have dealt very corruptly.” The use of the infinitive construct can be understood in light of the clear obsolescence of the infinitive absolute in later Hebrew: in LBH, this form is much rarer than in EBH, and in Mishnaic Hebrew it disappears completely. What is striking, however, is that the pointing does not normalize the form to תְּבַל, the infinitive absolute: as it seems, the reading tradition preserves knowledge of the fact that in EBH the infinitive absolute was required in paronomastic usage, while in LBH the infinitive construct might be used instead.

3) The next example requires more background information. As is well known, EBH uses the imperfect and the converted perfect (*yiqtol* and *weqatal* in present-day terminology) to express repeated processes in the past: “A spring would well up (יַעֲלֶה) from the earth and water (וְהַשְׁקָה) the whole surface of the ground” (Gen 2:6). When the description of repeated processes is relatively long, one or two converted imperfections (*wayyiqtol*) may be interspersed:

For whenever the Israelites put in seed, the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the east would come up (*weqatal*) against them. They would encamp (*wayyiqtol*) against them and destroy (*wayyiqtol*) the produce of the land, as far as the neighbourhood of Gaza, and leave (*yiqtol*) no sustenance in Israel. (Jud 6:3–4)

Although the entire passage narrates events that happened from year to year, only the first and the last verbal form positively express iterativity. The two middle clauses use the neutral *wayyiqtol* form. This syntax is entirely normal, being attested around a dozen times in the EBH corpus.<sup>31</sup> In LBH this type of alternation does not occur. Instead one encounters a number of cases of iterative *weyiqtol*:

In the time of their suffering they would cry out to you (*yiqtol*), and you would hear them (*yiqtol*) from heaven and give them saviours according to your great mercies, and they would save (*weyiqtol*) them from the hands of their enemies. (Neh 9:27)

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Ezek 35:12 נִאָצוֹתֶיךָ.

<sup>30</sup> Hurvitz 2014, 77.

<sup>31</sup> See Joosten 2012, 177–178.

This syntax is normal in LBH. It is found in several other passages (Neh 9:28; 2 Chr 24:11; and perhaps Neh 3:14–15; Eccl 8:10). Moreover, the usage is an expected one. Iterative *weqatal* has fallen from use in LBH thus creating a need for iterative *weyiqtol* in verb-initial clauses starting with the copula.<sup>32</sup>

The difference between the EBH and LBH usages is expressed only in the vocalization. The contrast is clear-cut: iterative *weyiqtol* is never found in EBH, nor iterative *wayyiqtol* in LBH. The attestations are relatively numerous. Moreover, the LBH usage is typologically later than the EBH one. Note that the LBH usage does not in this case continue in post-biblical Hebrew, where the participle plays a much larger role.

4) Another somewhat involved example is the following. In biblical Hebrew, “to fill someone’s hand” (מלא + יד) is a well-known idiomatic expression meaning “to consecrate to a priestly office.” In EBH the *qal* is used when the action is reflexive (Exod 32:29 מלאו ידכם “ordain yourselves”), whereas the *piel* is found when the action concerns an external object (Judg 17:5 וימלא את יד אחד מבניו “he ordained one of his sons”). A similar pattern is found with other verbs too, for instance אָזַר: the *qal* means “to gird oneself,” the *piel* “to gird another.”

The expression “to fill the hands” is found three times in Chronicles, although arguably in a somewhat different meaning.<sup>33</sup> What is presently relevant is that Chronicles uses the *piel*, all three times, in a reflexive sense:

Whoever comes, *filling his [own] hand* (מלאו) with a young bull or seven rams, becomes a priest (2 Chr 13:9).<sup>34</sup>

This variation between classical and post-classical Hebrew is not encoded in the consonantal text and can only be observed on the basis of the vocalization.<sup>35</sup> The variant vocalizations are distributed in a way that sharply distinguishes the EBH and LBH corpora,<sup>36</sup> though admittedly all LBH examples are found in Chronicles. No relevant post-biblical material seems to be attested.<sup>37</sup> Typologically the LBH usage is later than the EBH one: it is well known that the *piel* of many verbs in time replaces the *qal*.

## Conclusions

Scholars have signaled cases in Tiberian Hebrew where a given word or form is vocalized differently in texts from different epochs. They have argued that such cases of linguistic variation attest language development. The claim is extraordinary. It implies that features not encoded in writing were transmitted orally along with the written text from the sixth century BCE or earlier. When reading

<sup>32</sup> See Joosten 2006.

<sup>33</sup> Joosten 1999.

<sup>34</sup> See also 1 Chron 29:5; 2 Chron 29:31.

<sup>35</sup> *Qal* and *piel* are distinct as to their consonantal orthography in the participle, but the present expression is not attested in the participle.

<sup>36</sup> Ezek 43:26 sides with EBH in this respect.

<sup>37</sup> Cases in Ben Sira and the DSS are inconclusive because they are unvocalized.

traditions were established for the books that ended up in the Hebrew Bible, those early features were not assimilated to the later features in use at the time, but preserved as they were—all of this, again, in oral tradition.<sup>38</sup> During the early Middle Ages, finally, this complex oral tradition—no doubt modified here and there during the intervening period—was written down in successive stages of exhaustivity.

A single example, or even two, would not suffice to sustain the claim. The variation could be explained by other causes than diachronic development, such as dialect or stylistic register. It could be due to inadvertent mixing of various traditions, or to a mistake when the vowels were finally written down. Taken together, however, the evidence grows in persuasiveness. In the checklist below, 13 cases are enumerated that seem to be sufficiently strong to pass muster. No doubt other examples can be found.<sup>39</sup> But even 13 is a significant number. What is particularly impressive is that in 11 cases out of 13 the vocalization found in the earlier text is typologically earlier than the vocalization in later texts. The former are characteristic of natural Hebrew, while the latter reflect weakening of the gutturals (no. 1), Aramaic influence (6, 7, 8, 10), analogical leveling (2, 4, 11, 12; possibly 9) or pseudo-classical reinterpretation (13). Such a conjunction of distribution with typology would hardly come about by chance, nor is it compatible with the idea of dialectal, stylistic or exegetical origin of the variation. Instead, it strongly suggests linguistic development.

David Carr has argued that classical texts in Antiquity would not simply be copied from ancient manuscripts, but that scribes would memorize them at the same time.<sup>40</sup> Explicit evidence for this view can be found in Egyptian and Mesopotamian texts, but the same procedure may be postulated also in Israel. A scribe copying the book of Genesis would not come to the mute consonantal text and copy it on the basis of his knowledge of Hebrew: he would know the entire text more or less by heart even before setting out to make a new copy. Oral and written transmission worked together, practically from the moment the work was created (or at least from the moment it became part of the scribal curriculum). In this model one can imagine the preservation of early pronunciations even when they were no longer in use in the living practice of Hebrew.

Our evidence does not guarantee that all vocalizations encoded in the Tiberian vowels reflect the time when the texts were created. Homogenization did undoubtedly happen. The name of Jerusalem was not universally pronounced יְרוּשָׁלַיִם before the late Second Temple period (cf. the Septuagint's Ἰερουσαλῆμ). However, according to MT the name ends in *-ayim* throughout the entire Bible, most often against the consonantal writing (ירושלם). There are many other cases where the vocalization in the earlier books was adapted to later pronunciation.<sup>41</sup> In conclusion one might say that the

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<sup>38</sup> Similarly, in France, children are taught in school that the Old French noun *roi* “king” was pronounced [rwè], not [rwa] as in contemporary French. Cf. <http://blablalagr3.blogspot.com/2011/01/tres-ancien-francais-phonetique.html>.

<sup>39</sup> See e.g. Samet 2016, where additional cases in Ecclesiastes are proposed, and Hornkohl 2023 and 2024. Although Hornkohl does not focus on vocalization exclusively, several of his examples do involve variation that is limited to the Tiberian pointing. His conclusions are in line with the ones reached in the present paper—indeed, they go further, notably suggesting instances of diachronic variation within EBH.

<sup>40</sup> Carr 2005.

<sup>41</sup> See Joosten 2015b and Hornkohl 2023 for other examples.

dependability of the vocalization is comparable to that of the consonantal text. Textual criticism has shown clearly that the consonantal text of the Hebrew Bible has been transmitted very carefully. Nevertheless, there are many secondary readings. Our task as critics is to weigh the textual material—vowels as well as consonants—and try to define what is genuine and what is secondary.

Table 1. Check List

|    | <b>EBH</b>                             | <b>LBH</b>                             | <b>Typology</b> |
|----|--|--|-----------------|
| 1  | שָׁהֶם (Lam 4:9)                       | שָׁהֶם (Eccl 3:18)                     | √               |
| 2  | נֹלֵד (Gen 21:3)                       | נֹלְדוֹ (1 Chr 3:5)                    | √               |
| 3  | אֶמְלֵל (Ps 6:3)                       | אֶמְלֵלִים (Neh 3:34)                  | No              |
| 4  | קִרְנִים (Hab 3:4)                     | קִרְנִים (Dan 8:3)                     | √               |
| 5  | קִרְבִּי (Isa 16:11)                   | קִרְבִּי (Ps 103:1)                    | ?               |
| 6  | עֲרָבִי (Isa 13:20)                    | עֲרָבִי (Neh 6:1)                      | √               |
| 7  | חֲטָא (Isa 1:4)                        | חֲטָא (Eccl 8:12)                      | √               |
| 8  | זָכְרוֹן (Exod 12:14)                  | זָכְרוֹן (Eccl 1:11)                   | √               |
| 9  | זֶה ( <i>passim</i> )                  | זֶה (Eccl 7:23)                        | √               |
| 10 | נֶאֱצָה (2 Kgs 19:3)                   | נֶאֱצוֹת (Neh 9:18, 26)                | √               |
| 11 | אָכַל תֹּאכַל (Gen 2:16)               | חָבַל חֲבַלְנוּ (Neh 1:7)              | √               |
| 12 | <i>wayyiqtol</i> iterative (Jud 6:3–4) | <i>weyiqtol</i> (Neh 9:27)             | √               |
| 13 | מֵלֵא <i>qal</i> + יָד (Exod 32:29)    | מֵלֵא <i>piel</i> + יָד (2 Chron 13:9) | √               |

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