

Notes on Israelian Hebrew (I)

Gary A. Rendsburg
Cornell University

The term Israelian Hebrew refers to the northern dialect of ancient Hebrew.¹ The following four lexical notes are intended as small contributions to this area of research still in its initial stages.

1. שִׁירָה (Ps 42:9)

J. C. Greenfield demonstrated beyond doubt that Ugaritic *dhrt/drt* “vision” is cognate to the Aramaic root *šhr* “remain awake, hold a night vigil” (cf. Arabic *sahira* “be awake”).² While generally Ugaritic *d* corresponds to Hebrew ד and to Aramaic *d*, the above equivalence is, in my estimation, the first convincing example that Ugaritic “sign 16” can correspond to Hebrew-Aramaic *ψ*.³

In light of this discovery, it is apt to revive the suggestion of T. H. Gaster that Ugaritic *dhrt/drt* is cognate to שִׁירָה in Ps 42:9.⁴ The whole verse reads as follows:

יומם יצוה יהוה חסדו
ובלילה שִׁירָה עמי תפלה לאל חיי

1 The term was coined independently by the present author, e.g., G.A. Rendsburg, *Linguistic Evidence for the Northern Origin of Selected Psalms* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), and by S. Gevirtz, “Of Syntax and Style in the ‘Late Biblical Hebrew’ — ‘Old Canaanite’ Connection,” *JANES* 18 (1986), p. 25 and n. 1. Both of us relied on H.L. Ginsberg’s coinage of the term “Israelian” to refer to the northern kingdom of Israel; cf. his *The Israelian Heritage of Judaism* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1982).

2 J.C. Greenfield, “Keret’s Dream: *dhrt* and *hdrt*,” *BSOAS* 57 (1994), pp. 87–92.

3 Most scholars are convinced that Ugaritic *addy* “Ashdodite” (gentilic form) equals Hebrew אַשְׁדּוֹד (toponym), but proper nouns do not behave necessarily along regular lines of correspondence. Thus my statement that this is “the first convincing example” of Ugaritic *d* = Hebrew/Aramaic *ψ*. The presence of *r* in this root may have had some effect on the phonetic correspondence; compare, for example, the Arabic root *ḡrb* “west, sunset, etc.” = Semitic *ʿrb*. For an excellent treatment of Ugaritic “sign 16,” see E. Ullendorff, “Marginalia Ugaritica,” *JSS* 7 (1962), pp. 348–51.

4 T.H. Gaster, “Psalm 42:8,” *JBL* 73 (1954), pp. 237–38. Gaster’s suggestion was accepted by M. Dahood, *Psalms I* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), p. 259.

I offer the following translation, in full recognition of the fact that my rendering glosses over various difficulties that remain:

“By day YHWH sends his faithful care,
and by night his vision is with me,
a prayer to my living God”

The noun שִׁיר cannot mean “song” here, but instead must refer to some sort of communication that the psalmist receives at night from God. This meaning matches the cognate Ugaritic and Aramaic evidence gathered by Greenfield (and, incidentally, argues against the various proposals to emend the passage⁵).

This lexeme thus may be added to the list of hollow roots in Hebrew with corresponding medial ה in Aramaic (along with רהט/רוץ, רהת/בוש, etc.).⁶ In this case, of course, the Ugaritic evidence shows the same correspondence, since now we may equate Hebrew שִׁיר (henceforth II שִׁיר, I propose) with Ugaritic *dhrt*. By the same token, the variant Ugaritic form exhibits the hollow form *drt*. At other times, Hebrew may have the medial *h* and Ugaritic may lack it, as is the case with צהר = *zr* “top.”⁷ In short, we are dealing with a class of roots (both verbal and nominal) that may be hollow in one language and display medial *h* in the cognate language.

Lastly, and to the point of the present article, note that Psalm 42 is part of the Korah collection, previously identified as a group of northern psalms.⁸ The noun שִׁיר “vision” should be considered, therefore, as a lexical item characteristic of Israelian Hebrew, though not of Judahite Hebrew. It and its cognates are attested only in a northern text in the Bible, in Ugaritic, and in Aramaic.⁹

2. שִׁבַּר (Judg 7:15)

The meaning of שִׁבַּר in Judg 7:15 is clear from the context. It must mean “interpretation” of the dream (thus it represents a unique usage; in all other cases the noun means either “break” or “grain”).¹⁰ Possibly this usage is to be derived from the common verb שִׁבַּר “break,” that is, the dream has been broken open, viz., interpreted. But this issue is of no direct relevance to the present note.

5 For brief discussion, see J.J. Stamm, *Hebräisches und aramäisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament*, vol. 4, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990), p. 1374.

6 I realize that the usual examples (such as the two just presented) are verbal roots, whereas now I am dealing with a noun based on a hollow root.

7 C.H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1967), p. 407.

8 J. Peters, *The Psalms as Liturgies* (New York: Macmillan, 1922); J. Peters, “A Jerusalem Processional,” *JPOS* 1 (1920), pp. 36–41; and M.D. Goulder, *The Psalms of the Sons of Korah* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982).

9 For an anticipation of the present discussion, see Rendsburg, *Linguistic Evidence for the Northern Origin of Selected Psalms*, p. 59, n. 51.

10 Stamm, *Hebräisches und aramäisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament*, vol. 4, pp. 1306–07.

The feminine form of this noun is attested in Phoenician, in Karatepe A I:8 in the expression שברת מלצם. This is admittedly a difficult expression, and scholars are divided on the meaning of these words.¹¹ The majority opinion understands the first word as a 1st person common singular perfect of שבר, thus, “I broke.” But as C. H. Gordon saw very early in the work on this important inscription, the word should not be parsed as a verb “because that would interrupt a long chain of adverbial infinitives [=infinitive absolutes — G.A.R.] followed by ’NK to express past time.”¹²

Accordingly, we should understand שברת as a noun, serving as the *nomen regens* of a construct phrase with מלצם as *nomen rectum*. The best explanation is that of R. S. Tomback, who translated the phrase “report(s) of the messengers,”¹³ understanding שברת as related to שבר, and מלצם as the masculine plural participle of the Hiph’il of ליץ. In keeping with the usual English translation of שבר in Judg 7:15, a translation such as “interpretation(s) of the messengers” would work nicely. Note that the Phoenician phrase follows בעל ואלם “Baal and the gods,” and that in the Bible מליץ can serve not only as a translator between people speaking different languages (Gen 42:23), but also as an intermediary between God and man (Isa 43:27, Job 33:23).

We are left with a lexical link between Phoenician and a biblical story set in northern Israel, the Gideon cycle (En-harod and environs). These chapters in the Bible contain other features of Israelian Hebrew. A well-known grammatical example is the threefold use of the relative pronoun ש instead of standard Biblical Hebrew אשר.¹⁴ A lexical example is studied in the next section of this article. In short, שבר “interpretation (of a dream)” and the like, should be considered an Israelian Hebrew lexical item. That is to say, it is not a coincidence that it is attested only in a northern Israelite context and in Phoenician.¹⁵

3. ספל (Judg 5:25, 6:38)

The noun ספל “cup, bowl, basin,” is attested in Biblical Hebrew in only two passages: Judg 5:25 and 6:38. The former occurs in a poem replete with Israelian features,¹⁶ and the latter occurs in

11 For a survey of opinions, see J. Hoftijzer and K. Jongeling, *Dictionary of the North-West Semitic Inscriptions*, vol. 2 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), pp. 1105–06.

12 C.H. Gordon, “Azitawadd’s Phoenician Inscription,” *JNES* 8 (1949), p. 113.

13 R.S. Tomback, *A Comparative Semitic Lexicon of the Phoenician and Punic Languages* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978), p. 313.

14 For discussion, see Rendsburg, *Linguistic Evidence for the Northern Origin of Selected Psalms*, pp. 90–91.

15 Possibly, though not necessarily, related to Hebrew שבר is Akkadian *šabrû* “interpreter of dreams.” The term “either may have been secondarily etymologized as derived from the verb *barû*, or may have been a true derivative of *barû*”; thus *CAD* 17/I[Š], p. 15, *sub šabrû* B. In any case, the presence of this (relatively rare) word in Akkadian does not affect our conclusion.

16 Judges 5 deserves a study unto itself, but in the meantime one can consult the list of items in the Index of Rendsburg, *Linguistic Evidence for the Northern Origin of Selected Psalms*, p. 128. For an early treatment, see

the Gideon cycle discussed above. The Ugaritic cognate *spl* occurs twice in the corpus, once in an administrative text dealing with the distribution of materials (*UT* 145:17) and once in a list of medical equipment (*UT* 2050:3).¹⁷ At a later epoch, ספל is well attested in Tannaitic Hebrew (more than twenty occurrences).¹⁸ This documentation is explicable in light of the fact that the Mishna and related texts were compiled in the Galilee and reflect northern Hebrew.¹⁹

The totality of the evidence — a word attested in northern biblical texts only, in Ugaritic, and widely in Tannaitic Hebrew — points to the identification of ספל as an Israelian Hebrew vocable.

4. שבת (2 Sam 23:7)

In two prior articles I identified nine features of Israelian Hebrew in the seven verses which comprise “the last words of David” in 2 Sam 23:1–7.²⁰ The very last word of this poem, namely, שבת, remained a crux for biblical scholars, but a recent treatment has at last solved this puzzle. Shlomo Naeh pointed out that Bereshit Rabbah 29:2 uses שבת in the sense of “hot wind” or “extreme heat,” meanings which fit the context of 2 Sam 23:7 perfectly.²¹ In addition, some textual traditions of B. Ta’anit 6b (line 29) read שבתנא in place of the usual reading שודפנא (the Aramaic equivalent of שדפון), suggesting that Aramaic too possessed the root שבת meaning “hot wind” or “extreme heat.”

The picture which emerges from this evidence is that Hebrew שבת “hot wind, extreme heat” in 2 Sam 23:7 should be considered a northern Hebrew lexeme. It is attested in a poem replete with Israelian features, in a rabbinic text (I repeat what I said above: rabbinic texts for the most part are compositions or compilations of northern Israel), and in Aramaic.

Michael Heltzer has spent a lifetime studying Northwest Semitic texts, especially those from Ugarit, and in particular the administrative texts thereof. I am especially happy to be able to cite such evidence in this contribution to his Festschrift.

C.F. Burney, *The Book of Judges* (London: Rivingtons, 1918), pp. 171–76; and see the brief comments by C. Rabin, “The Emergence of Classical Hebrew,” in A. Malamat, ed., *The Age of the Monarchies: Culture and Society* (World History of the Jewish People) (Jerusalem: Massada, 1979), p. 72.

17 Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook*, p. 451. See there also the reference to the syllabic form *sà-ap-lu*. On *UT* 2050, see C.H. Gordon, “An Inventory of Instruments from the Bronze Age,” *Revista de Universidade de Coimbra* 27 (1979), pp. 141–45.

18 Academy of the Hebrew Language, *Historical Dictionary of the Hebrew Language*, Materials for the Dictionary, 200 B.C.E.–300 C.E. (Jerusalem: Academy of the Hebrew Language, 1988), Microfiche 067, Plate 13724.

19 G.A. Rendsburg, “The Galilean Background of Mishnaic Hebrew,” in L.I. Levine, ed., *The Galilee in Late Antiquity* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1992), pp. 225–40.

20 G.A. Rendsburg, “The Northern Origin of ‘The Last Words of David’ (2 Sam 23,1–7),” *Biblica* 69 (1988), pp. 113–21; and G.A. Rendsburg, “Additional Notes on ‘The Last Words of David’ (2 Sam 23, 1–7),” *Biblica* 70 (1989), pp. 403–08.

21 S. Naeh, “A New Suggestion Regarding 2 Samuel xxiii 7,” *VT* 46 (1966), pp. 260–65.

Michael

Historical, Epigraphical and Biblical Studies
In Honor of Prof. Michael Heltzer

Editors:

Yitzhak Avishur and Robert Deutsch

REPRINT

Archaeological Center Publications
Tel Aviv–Jaffa
1999