ISRAELIAN HEBREW FEATURES IN GENESIS 49

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No other biblical scholar and no other chapter of the Bible are as closely associated with each other as Stanley Gevirtz and Genesis 49. Through a life long series of articles devoted to this poem, our lamented colleague furthered our understanding of its many enigmas. My own research has followed closely upon Stanley's work in at least two specific areas. The first is the pun in biblical literature, for which Stanley had a unique appreciation, and which I too have discussed in a minor way. The second is the question of a northern dialect of ancient Hebrew. This has been a major enterprise of mine for the last five years. After I had begun this work, I received two of Stanley's last articles, and it was gratifying to see that he too had moved in this direction. Most striking was his and my independent coinage of the term "Israelian Hebrew" (IH) based on H. L. Ginsberg's introduction of the term...

“Israeli” in his book *The Israeli Heritage of Judaism*. I already had completed several of the works listed above in which I use this term, when I received Stanley’s posthumously published article in which he used the same term. I was overjoyed when the words “Israeli Hebrew” leaped off the page and struck my eye.

With this as background, I dedicate this contribution to the memory of a man who embodied the concept of the gentleman and scholar. Stanley was kind and wise, decent and learned, always interested and always interesting.

**INTRODUCTION**

Genesis 49 has come down to us with an external unity, but as almost all scholars have noted, the individual sayings concerning the individual tribes originate as independent compositions. Nahum Sarna’s comment is emblematic of this position:

> In origin, the collection of aphorisms about the tribes is not a unity, and no inner thread of logic binds the diverse elements together. The individual tribal traditions embedded in the poetry are undoubtedly independent of each other and relate to widely separate and discrete situations.

Almost without doubt, the poem’s final redaction was Judahite, but since the individual poems originated in tribal territories throughout the land of Israel, it will not be surprising to find IJH features in sayings concerning the northern tribes.

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6 See N 3.
v 14. *gārem*

The word gerem (pausal *gārem*) "bone" in v 14 appears in the Issachar poem.\(^{10}\) Elsewhere in the Bible it occurs only in northern compositions: Prov 17:22, 25:15, Job 40:18.\(^{11}\) With the derived meaning "self" the word also occurs in 2 Kgs 9:13 in a story concerning the Israeli king Jehu.\(^{12}\) Moreover, the cognate garmā\(^{1}\) is the standard word for "bone" in Aramaic.\(^{13}\) The dictates of dialect geography teach us that Aramaic and IH will share more isoglosses than Aramaic and Judahite Hebrew (JH = the standard dialect of the Bible), and this is one

\(^{10}\)I do not accept the view of earlier scholars, including our departed colleague, who believed that *gārem* must be emended. See, e.g., S. Feiglin, "Ḥamōr Gārim—Castrated Ass," *JNES* 5 (1946): 230–233; and S. Gevirtz, “The Issachar Oracle in the Testament of Jacob,” *Eretz-Israel* 12 (1975): 104*-105*. My approach, stated elsewhere (e.g., Rendsburg, *Psalms* [N 3]: 16–17), is to work with the Masoretic Text and to avoid emendation. I wholeheartedly endorse the statement of A. Hurvitz (A Linguistic Study of the Relationship Between the Priestly Source and the Book of Ezekiel [Paris: J. Gabalda, 1982]: 19) that “a linguistic study whose central purpose is to seek facts and avoid conjectures, should base itself on actual texts—difficult through they may be—rather than depend on reconstructed texts.”


such instance. In sum, distribution of gerem in the Bible and the cognate support of Aramaic point to this word having been characteristic of IH, in contrast with the JH lexeme ‘ešem “bone.” It is, therefore, not surprising to encounter gerem in the Issachar portion of Genesis 49.

v 15 nāʾēmāh

In a previous study I already have discussed at length the northern associations of the root ṉm “good.” I limit my remarks here to a summary of the material. The root ṉm is the standard word for “good” in Phoenician and Ugaritic. In the Bible it appears 30 times; at least 22 of these occurrences and perhaps as many as 26 of them are in northern contexts. Thus, as was the case with gerem above, the data from the cognate languages and the distribution of this root in the Bible serve as converging lines of evidence to adduce the fact that ṉm “good” was an IH feature. Accordingly, it is not unexpected to find nāʾēmāh in Genesis 49 in the Issachar poem.

v 21 ʾimrē

The word ʾimrē in v 21 in the Naphtali line of the poem has been translated alternatively as “words” (JPSV), “fawns” (RSV), “boughs” (NEB), etc. The correct meaning is “lambs,” as Gevirtz demonstrated beyond doubt. Cognates of this word are Phoenician ʾmr, Ugaritic imr, Aramaic ʾimmērā and further afield Akkadian immeru. I

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15Rendsburg, “Additional Notes” (N 3); see also Rendsburg, Psalms (N 3): 30–31.


19Gordon (N 16): 361.

20Early occurrences are Fakhrīyeh 20 (see A. A. Assaf, “Die Statue des HDYS Y. König von Guzana,” MDOG 113 [1981] 13, 19) and Sefire 1:A:23, II:A:2 (see J. A.
conclude, therefore, that the word was at home in the dialects and languages used to the north of Israel, and that it was current in the Hebrew of the tribe of Naphtali as well. The present usage in v 21 is the only occurrence of this word in the Bible. Thus, *’immār, the presumed singular absolute of ‘imrē, is the IH word for “lamb,” in opposition to kebēš/kešēb, the JH or standard biblical vocable. It is noteworthy that cognates to this latter word are to the south, e.g., Arabic kabs,22 South Arabian kabs.23 Probably we are to reckon with two Proto-Semitic words for “lamb,” a northern lexeme ‘mr and a southern lexeme kbs.24 The meeting ground for these two words was the land of Canaan, with the Bible attesting to both.

v 21 šāper

Several scholars have attempted to explain šāper in v 21 in light of Akkadian supūru “sheepfold,” especially in light of the resulting equivalence of Hebrew ‘imrē šāper and Akkadian immir supūri “sheep of the

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21 *CAD* 7 [I, J]: 129; and *AHW* I: 378.


24 Syriac kebā’ is very rare; only a few citations are given by R. Payne Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1879): 1.1675. And in any case it is a loanword from Arabic, as indicated by the š instead of expected s, see S. Fränkel, *Aramäische Fremdwörter im Arabischen* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1886): 109.

fold." This is undoubtedly an attractive proposal, yet I demur in favor of the traditional derivation of šaper from the root špr “good, pleasing, beautiful.” First, although there are a few examples of Akkadian s = Hebrew ś, the correspondence is atypical. Second, cognates to Akkadian supūru are not attested in Northwest Semitic, whereas špr “good, pleasing, beautiful” is well attested in this branch, specifically in Aramaic (see below). Accordingly, I see no reason to depart from the accepted meaning of šaper in v 21 as “beauty.”

Elsewhere in the Bible the root špr occurs in Ps 16:6, Job 26:13. The former of these is in a clear instance of a northern psalm, and the latter has northern affinities as well. The root is slightly more common in Mishnaic Hebrew, which represents the spoken dialect specifically of northern Israel. Beyond Hebrew the root is extremely common in Aramaic; it appears at Sefire, five times in Daniel, and frequently in later Aramaic. It may also appear in Ugaritic. The combination of regularity in Aramaic and attestation in northern texts such as the blessing concerning Naphtali points to the root špr being a characteristic of IH.

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26I exclude the noun šapīṭō “his canopy (?)” in Jer 43:10, which may or may not be related to our root.
28See above (N 11). It is possible that šprāḥ in Job 26:13 is to be disassociated from špr “good, pleasing, beautiful,” in which case only Ps 16:6 remains in addition to Gen 49:21.
30Rendsburg, “Galilean Background” (N 3):
31The word is used in Sefire III:29; see Fitzmyer, Sefire (N 20): 100–101, 120, 190.
32Kochler and Baumgartner (N 13): 1134.
v 22  pōrāt

I am not overly concerned here with the exact meaning of pōrāt in the Joseph blessing. Gevirtz accomplished more than could be expected of any scholar investigating this word, and I am happy to accept his translation of “she-ass.” Instead, I would like to concentrate on the feminine singular nominal ending -āt in this word. As is well known, this ending occurs in most of the Canaanite dialects (JH and Deir ‘Alla are two exceptions) as well as in Aramaic in nouns derived from IIIwly roots.

The Bible has quite a large number of feminine singular nouns ending in -āt (in absolute or construct state) and -at (in the absolute state). Most are to be explained as northernisms; only a limited number are to be explained otherwise (see below). The examples occurring in northern contexts are as follows. šip‘ at “multitude” in 2 Kgs 9:17 appears in a story about the northern kings Jehoram and Jehu and is actually placed in the mouth of an Israeli scout. Jeremiah utilizes the words yitrat “abundance” (48:36) and ṭāhillāt “praise” (49:25Q) in speeches addressed to Moab and Damascus respectively; thus he has colored his native Anathoth dialect to reflect the speech of his addressees. mō‘ at “hundred” in Qoh 8:12 is one of many pieces of evidence pointing to the northern origin of this book. Five examples appear in the northern psalms: Ps 10:2 ga‘āwat “haughtiness,” Ps 16:5 mōnāt “portion,” Ps 16:6 naḥālāt “heritage,” Ps 74:19 ḥāyyat “beast,” and Ps 132:4 šēnāt “sleep.” In addition, the musical instruments māḥālat in Ps 53:1, 88:1, and nāginat

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37. See Rendsburg, “Morphological Evidence” (N 3).
in Ps 61:1 may have been borrowed from Canaanites who preserved the -at suffix. Moreover, the evidence from toponyms which retain -at is germane, in that they are concentrated mainly in the north: two in Asher (heiqlat, libnāt), three in Naphtali (hammat, ‘ānāt, raqqat), one in Issachar (‘ānāhārāt), one in Zebulun (dābrat), one in Ephraim (mikmēṭāt), and two in Transjordan (ṭabbāt, qanāt).

Other forms with the ending -āt are to be explained by different means. The vocables mōhōrāt “morrow” (25x) and rabbat “much” (7x) are adverbs where the ending -āt was felt to have an adverbial function and thus did not shift to -āh.41 The form zimrāt “might” in Exod 15:2 appears in an early poem dating presumably from a time before the shift of -at > -āh.42 Other nouns are borrowings, e.g., qāṣāt “end” in Dan 1:2, 1:5, 1:15, 1:18, Neh 7:20, is an Aramaism, and bārgat “emerald” in Ezek 28:13 is most likely an Akkadianism (cf. Akkadian barraqatu).

In light of this analysis, I am inclined to view pōrāt in v 22 as a northern feature. The only other real option is to treat it as an archaic feature à la zimrāt, but since Genesis 49 “exhibit[s] numerous forms of standard poetic Hebrew,”43 this is an unlikely explanation.44 In sum, IH shared with Phoenician, Ammonite, etc., the retention of -at in feminine singular nouns, and pōrāt “she-ass” in the blessing to Joseph is an example thereof.

v 23 baʿālē ḥīṣīm

Gevirtz already compiled the evidence from Phoenician, Ugaritic, and Byblos Amarna to demonstrate that the “double plural” syntagma, with both the nomen regens and the nomen rectum of a construct chain in the plural, is a northern feature.45 In a separate article he noted that baʿālē ḥīṣīm “masters of arrows” in v 23 within the Joseph poem is

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42On the early date of Exodus 15 see D. A. Robertson, Linguistic Evidence in Dating Early Hebrew Poetry (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1972): 153–156. The word zimrāt also appears in Isa 12:2, Ps 118:14 in the expression ‘ōzzī wūẓīmīrāt yāh, but one can surmise that it is merely a fossilized form in the three-word phrase which apparently became a byword in ancient Israel.
43Robertson, (N 42): 153–156.
44This position of mine alters my statement in Rendsburg, Psalms (N 3): 23 n. 28.
an example of this usage. Accordingly, there is little for me to add concerning this phrase. But I do take the opportunity to put forward seven other examples of this feature, all from northern Psalms: Ps 29:1 bonê 'ēlîm “sons of the gods,” Ps 45:10 bənōt mālākîm “daughters of kings,” Ps 47:10 nāḏîḇē ʿammîm “princes of peoples,” Ps 74:13 rāʿšē tannînîm “heads of the sea monsters,” Ps 77:6 šanōt ʿōlāmîm “years of eternities,” Ps 78:49 mālʿākē rāʿîm “messengers of evils,” Ps 116:9 ʿārṣōt hāhâyyîm “lands of the living.”

v 24 zōrōʾè yādāw

The phrase zōrōʾè yādāw, literally “arms of his hands,” in v 24 is another example of the “double plural” syntagma in the Joseph poem. It serves, therefore, as another IH element in the material concerning the northern tribes in Genesis 49.

v 24 ʿābîr yaʿaqōb

The divine epithet ʿābîr yaʿaqōb in v 24 in the Joseph poem occurs in four other places in the Bible. Two are in the northern composition Psalm 132 (vv 2 and 5). The remaining two instances are Isa 49:26, 60:16, examples of the reemergence of IH elements in Exilic and post-Exilic texts after the reunion of northern and southern exiles in Mesopotamia. This distribution points to ʿābîr yaʿaqōb being an IH feature.

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47Rendsburg, Psalms (N 3): 35, 48, 57, 70, 78, 84.
49On Psalm 132 see Rendsburg, Psalms (N 3): 87–90.
51This has been suggested previously by J. Schreiner, Sinai-Jerusalem Jahres Königssitz (Munich: Kösel-Verlag, 1963): 177–178 n. 17.
SUMMARY

These eight features of IH appear in the poetry devoted to the northern tribes in Genesis 49, specifically the material concerning Issachar, Naphtali, and Joseph. It is striking that there are no IH traits in the sayings concerning the southern tribes (Simeon [and Levi], Judah, Benjamin). In the case of others (Reuben, Zebulun, Dan, Gad, Asher), it is simply a matter of coincidence that IH features are not present. All of these poems are short, so to some extent it is only by chance that a northern characteristic appears in a saying devoted to a northern tribe. But irrespective of the lack of IH features in the poems of some of the northern tribes, it is still noteworthy that the eight IH features isolated above all appear in the Issachar, Naphtali, and Joseph compositions. The view that the individual poems originated among the individual tribes is strikingly confirmed by the linguistic evidence.

52 Through textual emendation, albeit only of the vowels and not of the consonants, Gevirtz ("Asher" [N 4]: 158–159) introduced two IH features in v 20 in the line about Asher. He proposed repointing סֶמֶנָה "fat" to סֶמִמְמָה "who rations," with both the relative pronoun śe- and the verb mnḥ "appoint, ration" as northern features.

Similarly, Gevirtz ("The Reprimand of Reuben," JNES 30 [1971]: 88–91 suggested the reading ytr s'ṭ = yeter ša'ēt "pre-eminent in dignity" in v 3 in the Reuben poem, be reread as ytr ṣ'ṭ "pre-eminent in authority" on the basis of Phoenician ṣ’ṭ in the Karatepe inscription. If this proposal is accepted, then another northermism in Genesis 49 presumably could be counted, though one would expect more isoglosses with Moabite than with Phoenician in the Reuben sub-dialect of IH.