Notes on Israeli Hebrew (I)

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The term Israeli 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. Shirah (Ps 42:9)

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

In light of this discovery, it is apt to revive the suggestion of T. H. Gaster that Ugaritic \(dhrt/drt\) is cognate to Shirah in Ps 42:9.\(^4\) The whole verse reads as follows:

\[
\text{בְּכֵלֶלָה שִׁירָה עָמִי תְפִלָּה לְאֵל הָיִי}
\]

\[
\text{עָמִי תְפִלָּה לְאֵל הָיִי}
\]

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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 “Israeli” to refer to the northern kingdom of Israel; cf. his *The Israeli Heritage of Judaism* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1982).


3 Most scholars are convinced that Ugaritic \(addyt\) “Ashdodite” (gentilic form) equals Hebrew \(זרוע\) (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/Arabic \(ו\). The presence of \(r\) in this root may have had some effect on the phonetic correspondence; compare, for example, the Arabic root \(grb\) “west, sunset, etc.” – Semitic ‘\(rb\). For an excellent treatment of Ugaritic “sign 16,” see E. Ullendorff, “Marginalia Ugaritica,” *JSS* 7 (1962), pp. 348–51.

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 שיר 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 passage).5

This lexeme thus may be added to the list of hollow roots in Hebrew with corresponding medial ה in Aramaic (along with בשת, רשתזרת, etc.).6 In this case, of course, the Ugaritic evidence shows the same correspondence, since now we may equate Hebrew שיר (henceforth II שיר, I propose) with Ugaritic qrht. 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 לארת = qr "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 שיר "vision" should be considered, therefore, as a lexical item characteristic of Israelite 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. שבר (Judg 7:15)

The meaning of שבר 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 שבר "break," that is, the dream has been broken open, viz., interpreted. But this issue is of no direct relevance to the present note.

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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.
9 For an anticipation of the present discussion, see Rendsburg, Linguistic Evidence for the Northern Origin of Selected Psalms, p. 59, n. 51.
The feminine form of this noun is attested in Phoenician, in Karatepe A I:8 in the expression שֶׁבֶר תִּמְלָכָה. This is admittedly a difficult expression, and scholars are divided on the meaning of these words. The majority opinion understands the first word as a 1st person common singular perfect of שֶׁבֶר, 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.”

Accordingly, we should understand שֶׁבֶר as a noun, serving as the nomen regens of a construct phrase with תִּמְלָכָה as nomen rectum. The best explanation is that of R. S. Tombback, who translated the phrase “report(s) of the messengers,” understanding שֶׁבֶר as related to biblical לָשׁוֹן, and תִּמְלָכָה as the masculine plural participle of the Hiph'îl of לִשְׁבַּר. In keeping with the usual English translation of שֶׁבֶר in Judg 7:15, a translation such as “interpretation(s) of the messengers” would work nicely. Note that the Phoenician phrase follows בֶּלִּי אֲלֵמָה “Baal and the gods,” and that in the Bible מַלְלָךְ 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 Israeli Hebrew. A well-known grammatical example is the threefold use of the relative pronoun 'ו instead of standard Biblical Hebrew והם. A lexical example is studied in the next section of this article. In short, שֶׁבֶר “interpretation (of a dream)” and the like, should be considered an Israeli 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.

3. סֵפָל (Judg 5:25, 6:38)

The noun סֵפָל “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 Israeli features, and the latter occurs in

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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 שֵׁבֶר is Akkadian šabrū “interpreter of dreams.” The term “either may have been secondarily etymologized as derived from the verb בָּשָׁר, or may have been a true derivative of בָּשָׁר”; thus CAD 17/1[5], p. 15, sub šabrū. 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). At a later epoch, *כסל* is well attested in Tannaitic Hebrew (more than twenty occurrences). This documentation is explicable in light of the fact that the Mishna and related texts were compiled in the Galilee and reflect northern Hebrew.

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 *כסל* as an Israeli Hebrew vocable.

4. שברות (2 Sam 23:7)

In two prior articles I identified nine features of Israeli Hebrew in the seven verses which comprise “the last words of David” in 2 Sam 23:1–7. The very last word of this poem, namely, שברות, 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 שברות in the sense of “hot wind” or “extreme heat,” meanings which fit the context of 2 Sam 23:7 perfectly. In addition, some textual traditions of B. Ta’anit 6b (line 29) read שברות instead of שברות (the Aramaic equivalent of שברות), suggesting that Aramaic too possessed the root שברות meaning “hot wind” or “extreme heat.”

The picture which emerges from this evidence is that Hebrew שברות “hot wind, extreme heat” in 2 Sam 23:7 should be considered a northern Hebrew lexeme. It is attested in a poem replete with Israeli features, in a rabbinic text, and in the Hebrew Bible. In particular, the administrative 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.

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Michael

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