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Table of Contents

VOLUME ONE

Introduction	vii
List of Contributors	ix
Transcription Tables	xiii
Articles A-F	I

VOLUME TWO

Transcription Tables	vii
Articles G-O	I

VOLUME THREE

Transcription Tables	vii
Articles P-Z	I

VOLUME FOUR

Transcription Tables	vii
Index	I

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Shibboleth

The English word *shibboleth* has its origins in an episode narrated in Judg. 12.1–6. The story there revolves around the Hebrew word שִׁבּוֹלֵת *šibbōlet*, meaning both 'ear of grain' and 'flow, stream, torrent' (15× and 4×, respectively, in the Bible). In Judg. 12.6 the form שִׁבּוֹלֵת *sibbōlet* occurs as well, alongside the standard form of the noun. The use of both forms in this verse is prime evidence for the existence of regional dialects in ancient Hebrew, at least in the realm of phonology (in this case, a dialectal difference between Ephraimites and Gileadites), even if scholars do not agree on the details.

The story in Judg. 12.1–6 describes a battle between the tribe of Ephraim in Cisjordan and the people of Gilead in Transjordan. The latter seized control of the fords of the Jordan River, and whenever an Ephraimite attempted to cross the river in order to retreat homeward, the men of Gilead asked him to pronounce the word שִׁבּוֹלֵת *šibbōlet*. Typically he was unable to do so and instead said שִׁבּוֹלֵת *sibbōlet*, thus revealing his Ephraimite identity.

A number of theories have been advanced to explain the phonological issue at hand (see Rendsburg 1992 for a summary). The present entry follows the lead of Speiser (1942) and Swiggers (1981), who argued that the Gileadites retained the proto-Semitic phoneme /t/ [θ]. Swiggers adds that the meaning 'ear of grain' derives from the root *šbl* (as shown by Semitic cognates), while 'flow, stream, torrent' derives from the root *t̄bl* (though unfortunately there are no Semitic etyma to confirm this). He notes that in the context of Judg. 12.6 the meaning of the word must be 'stream', since in parallel folktales the password used in such incidents is related to the narrative framework. The Ephraimites were crossing the Jordan at this point, and so 'stream' is more germane than 'ear of grain'.

In Transjordanian Hebrew the word was apparently pronounced [θibboleth]; when a Cisjordanian was asked to utter this word he was unable to articulate the voiceless interdental fricative and thus said [sibboleth]. This is a well-known linguistic phenomenon: speakers who lack the voiceless interdental fricative /θ/ in their phonetic inventory approximate the sound as [s] (for example, Germans when speaking English, or non-Arab Muslims who learn or recite Arabic).

Support for the Speiser-Swiggers approach emerged when Rendsburg (1988a; 1988b) demonstrated that Ammonite (a neighboring dialect of Gileadite) preserved the phoneme /t/, but that Cisjordanians pronounced the sound as [s]. The evidence consists of the Ammonite royal name בעלישע *b'lyš'* (the root of the second element in this name is *yš'* 'save'), which has been preserved on a seal found at Tell el-ʿUmeiri, and which appears in Jer. 40.14 as בַּעְלִיִּים *ba'ālīs* 'Balis'. That is to say, two neighboring Transjordanian dialects, Gileadite and Ammonite, share the isogloss of retention of proto-Semitic /t/ [θ], in contrast to Cisjordanian (and other Canaanite?) dialects, in which /t/ [θ] merged with /s/ [ʃ].

Swiggers and Rendsburg's explanation, however, has not won universal acceptance. The main objection to the theory outlined above is the lack of any cognates within Semitic to the proposed *t̄ibbōlet* 'flow, stream, torrent'. Thus, for example, Faber (1992), Hendel (1996), and Woodhouse (2003) have all proposed different articulations of the underlying sibilant phonemes, especially /š/, in order to explain the statement recorded in Judg. 12.6.

The word *shibboleth* passed into English beginning in the mid-17th century (cf. *The Oxford English Dictionary*), most likely through the influence of the King James Bible (1611), with the meaning of “a peculiarity of pronunciation, behavior, mode of dress, etc., that distinguishes a particular class or set of persons; slogan, catchword” (*American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*).

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Sibilant Consonants

Fricative consonants in Hebrew can be subdivided into two classes: *bgdkpt* and sibilants. In the latter class of sounds “the principal source of the sound is the turbulent airstream produced when the jet of air created by the dental or alveolar constriction strikes the teeth, which form an obstacle downstream from the constriction itself” (Ladefoged and Maddieson 1996:145). The constriction is formed by the tongue by forming a tongue hollowing or dome and results in high frequency friction (> 3000 Hertz). The Hebrew class of sibilants consists of ʔ *z*, ʔ *s*, ʔ *š*, ʔ *š*, and ʔ *š* and has been characterized in Tiberian Hebrew as the class of rilled consonants by Malone (1993:28–30) (i.e., [+RILL]).

I. PROTO-SEMITIC

All Proto-Semitic (PS) consonants, including sibilants, could be geminated. The consonant inventory of PS is characterized by consonant triads of voiceless, voiced, and ‘emphatic’ members. Sibilant triads that have been reconstructed for PS are (Huehnergard 2004):

- the affricates /ts, dz, tsʔ/ (traditionally transcribed *s or s₃, *z, *š);
- the laterals /l, l, lʔ/ (traditionally *ś or s₂, *l, *ǰ or *š);
- the interdental /θ, ð, θʔ/ (traditionally *θ, *ð, *θ);
- single /s/ (traditionally *š or s₁).

The idea that the PS consonants traditionally transcribed as *s, *z and *š were in fact the affricates *ts, *dz, and *tsʔ (the ‘affricate hypothesis’) seems to have been accepted by most scholars (Streck 2006). This is based on internal evidence from Akkadian and other languages (Faber 1981; 1985), as well as evidence from transcriptions of Semitic words into other languages (e.g., Egyptian; Hoch 1994). Alternation of *š with *z and *s is well attested in the Semitic languages (Steiner 1977:118; 1982:44, 84) and may even have existed in Proto-Semitic (Steiner 1982:84, n. 144). Most of the attested Semitic languages underwent deaffrication of *ts and *dz. The retention of *tsʔ as an affricate is seen as a possibility by Steiner (1982), due to the fact that its glottalic articulation made it immune to deaffrication. In Tiberian Hebrew, it has been argued based on descriptions in the Palestinian *Hidāyat al-qāri* ‘guide for the reader’ that there existed an emphatic allophone of *z, so-called *zāy makrūk* (Eldar 1984–1985:32; “[z]” in Khan 1997).

PS *ś and *š represent the laterals /l/ and /lʔ/ (Cantineau 1941; Steiner 1977). An illustrative example of the evidence supporting this idea is Greek βάλσαμον from Semitic *bšm ‘balsam-oil’. The laterals underwent drastic changes in most Semitic languages, though /l/ is still a phoneme in the Modern South Arabian languages, and was preserved in early stages of Akkadian and Arabic (Huehnergard 2004). In Hebrew, the phoneme /l/ (*ś) remained distinct during the classical period, but was written with the same