# ENCYCLOPEDIA OF HEBREW LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS

## Volume 1
## A–F

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# Biblical Hebrew: Dialects and Linguistic Variation

During much of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, scholars theorized the existence of different Hebrew dialects in ancient Israel (cf., e.g., GKC §2w), though only Burney made a serious attempt to identify specific evidence. In his commentary on Judges (1918:171–176), Burney isolated various northern features in the Song of Deborah (Judg. 5); while in his commentary on Kings (1903:208–209) he performed the same task with regard to the Elijah and Elisha narratives (most of 1 Kgs 17–2 Kgs 13).

Nonetheless, these early efforts were sufficient to establish the basic picture. Since so much of the Bible emanates from Judah in general and Jerusalem in particular (or was written by exiles from Judah/Jerusalem, e.g., Ezekiel, Second Isaiah, etc.), the working assumption is that Standard Biblical Hebrew (SBH) represents the dialect of Judah/Jerusalem (Rabin 1979). But since a significant proportion of the biblical canon stems from northern Israel, and since these texts reflect atypical grammatical and lexical traits—atypical, that is, from the vantage point of SBH—one can assume a distinct dialect for northern Israel. Building on Burney,

such works would include not only the Song of Deborah, but other material in the book of Judges geographically situated in the north (e.g., the Gideon cycle, i.e., Judg. 6–8); along with all the portions of the book of Kings concerning the northern kingdom, beyond the chapters concerning Elijah and Elisha expressly. In addition, one may look to the book of Hosea, and perhaps Amos, too, as northern compositions with linguistic elements representative of the northern dialect (Rabin 1981).

The result is the recognition of two main dialects of ancient Hebrew: (a) Judahite Hebrew (JH), essentially the same as SBH (see above), though there may have been some dialectal variations in certain villages and sub-regions of Judah; and (b) Israelian Hebrew (IH), which serves as an umbrella term for a host of sub-dialects (Samarian, Galilean, Transjordanian), even if in most cases we lack the evidence and hence the finesse to say more about these sub-dialects. The most active researcher into these regional dialects has been Rendsburg, who in a series of studies devoted to specific books and chapters has uncovered scores of grammatical and lexical features which together give us an excellent picture of IH. The main studies are Rendsburg 1990 (on selected psalms), Rendsburg 2002 (concerning the northern material in the book of Kings), and Noegel and Rendsburg 2009:3–62 (regarding the Song of Songs). For a comprehensive summary covering the entire biblical canon, with the information presented mainly in outline form, see Rendsburg 2003a.

The basis for identifying IH elements is threefold. First, the feature must occur exclusively, almost exclusively, or disproportionately in northern texts. Second, the feature should have a cognate in a language or dialect spoken to the north of Israel, such as Ugaritic, Phoenician, and/or Aramaic (or, in the case of the Transjordanian variety of IH, in a dialect spoken in that region, such as Deir ʿAlla, Ammonite, and/ or Moabite). Third, the feature should stand in contrast to the equivalent JH trait. Unfortunately, due to the lack of evidence—after all, the Israelian material in the Bible remains the minority, while the evidence for the neighboring Canaanite dialects is even more limited—one cannot always invoke all three of the above points. At times, accordingly, the scholar must be subjective in the treatment of the evidence, a

point which has led to some scholarly disagreement (cf., e.g., Young 1995; Schniedewind and Sivan 1997). Notwithstanding these difficulties, however, a reasonable picture of IH has emerged in the last few decades. Fortunately, additional assistance is provided by Mishnaic Hebrew (MH), since frequently an IH feature surfaces a millennium later in rabbinic sources, a phenomenon to be explained by the fact that the Mishna and related texts were written and compiled in the Galilean centers of Sepphoris and Tiberias.

Space allows for only a limited number of examples of IH features, identified via the above methodology. Distinctive IH grammatical features (extracted from the convenient list in Rendsburg 2003a) include (a) special forms for the infinitive construct of ל״י (final *yod*) verbs (cf. Ugaritic), e.g., לְהֵרָאֹה *ləhēråʾō* 'to appear' (*nifʿal*) (Judg. 13.21 [Samson]), שְׁתֹה *šåṯō* 'to drink' (*qal*) (1 Sam. 1.9 [Shiloh]), לְהֵרָאֹה *ləhēråʾō* 'to appear' (*nifʿal*) (1 Sam. 3.21 [Shiloh]), כַּלֵּה *kallē* 'to complete' (*piʿel*) (2 Kgs 13.17 [Elisha]), וּכְחַכֵּי *u-ḵə-ḥakkē* 'to wait' (*piʿel*) (Hos. 6.9 [northern prophet]); (b) the preposition קֳבָל *qåḇål* 'before' (cf. Aramaic), e.g., קֳבָל־עָם *qåḇål-ʿåm* 'before the people' (2 Kgs 15.10 [Shallum]); (c) indefinite noun + indefinite demonstrative pronoun construction (cf. Phoenician), e.g., חֳלִי זֶה *ḥålī ze* 'this illness' (2 Kgs 1.2 [Ahaziah]; 8.9 [Ben-Hadad]); יוֹם הוּא *yōm hū* 'that day' (Mic. 7.12 [northern section of Micah]); גֶּפֶן זֹאת *geḇen zōṯ* 'this vine' (Ps. 80.15 [IH psalm]).

Examples of IH lexical items (three nouns and one verb; for further examples, again, see Rendsburg 2003a) include (a) חֵלֶק *ḥeleq* 'field' (cf. Aramaic) (2 Kgs 9.10, 36, 37; Hos. 5.7; Amos 7.4); (b) כַּד *kaḏ* 'jug' (cf. Ugaritic, Phoenician, Aramaic) (1 Kgs 17.12, 14, 16; 18.34 [Elijah]; Judg. 7 [4x; Gideon]; Qoh. 12.6 (IH), Gen. 24 [9x]) (→ Style-Switching); (c) שֶׁפַע *šεḇaʿ* / שִׁפְעָה *šiḇʿå* 'abundance, multitude' (cf. Phoenician, Aramaic) (Deut. 33.19 [Issachar-Zebulun]; 2 Kgs 9.17 [2x]; Ezek. 26.10 [Tyre]; Job 22.11; 38.34 [elsewhere only Isa. 60.6]); (d) ער״ב *ʿ-r-b* 'offer, sacrifice' (cf. Phoenician) (Hos. 9.4).

As noted above, MH plays a role in the identification of still other IH features (Rendsburg 2003b). Thus, for example, the following four *hapax legomena* (two nouns, two verbs) in

the Bible: (a) צְלֹחִית ṣəlōḥīṯ 'dish' (2 Kgs 2.20 [Elisha] + 58x in Tannaitic sources); (b) הַקַּב haq-qab 'qab' (unit of measurement) (2 Kgs 6.25 [Elisha] + 189x in Tannaitic sources); (c) טנ"ף ṭ-n-p 'soil, make dirty' (Song 5.3 [northern book] + 14x in Tannaitic sources); (d) צנ"ן ṣ-n-n 'be cold' (Prov. 25.13 [northern book]) + 71x in Tannaitic sources; cf. also the noun צִנָּה ṣinnā̊ 'cold' 13x in Tannaitic sources).

In addition to the internal biblical evidence (garnered via the assistance of cognate dialects, Aramaic, and MH), Hebrew inscriptions from the Iron Age permit us to identify still other distinctions between JH and IH. For example, both the Gezer Calendar and the Samaria Ostraca, from northern Israel, attest to the monophthongization of $ay > ē$, even in accented syllables (cf. קץ qṣ = qēṣ 'summer fruit' in the former, and יַן yn = yēn 'wine' in the latter) (→ Gezer Calendar; Samaria Ostraca). We possess more texts from the region of Judah, with the two largest corpora provided by the Arad letters and the Lachish letters. The language of these texts almost always conforms to SBH; thus, for example, one finds יין yyn = yayin (Arad 3.2), with the diphthong preserved (→ Arad Letters; Lachish Letters). Strikingly, one of the features identified above as an IH lexical trait, viz., כַּד kaḏ 'jug', occurs in a short epigraph inscribed on a pottery fragment from Tel Kinneret in northern Israel: כד השער kd h-šʿr 'jug of the gate'.

Yet another source for the northern dialect of ancient Hebrew is Samaritan Hebrew (SH). On the one hand, since the basic text for SH is essentially the same Torah as that possessed by the Jews, the number of potential items to distinguish SH (as part of the IH umbrella) from JH is, in theory at least, somewhat limited. On the other hand, the Samaritan Torah reflects hundreds of differences from the Jewish Torah (→ Samaritan Pentateuch), while the Samaritan pronunciation of Hebrew reveals still more (→ Samaritan Hebrew: Biblical). Thus, for example, we note that the 2fs personal pronoun is always written with *yod* on the end, viz., אתי *'ty*, pronounced /átti/ (Ben-Ḥayyim 2000:226). This form is also known from Aramaic, and it appears 7× in the Bible, always as the *ketiv*, with a distribution that points to a northern home (Judg. 17.2 *ketiv* [Micah of Ephraim]; 1 Kgs 14.2 *ketiv* [Jeroboam I]; 2 Kgs 4.16 *ketiv* [Elisha], 23 *ketiv* [husband of the Shunammite woman]; 8.1 *ketiv* [Elisha]; Jer. 4.30 *ketiv* [Benjaminite? Aramaism?]; Ezek. 36.13 *ketiv* [Aramaism?]).

Finally, at least one famous narrative, the Shibboleth incident of Judg. 12.6, allows us to reconstruct a phonological trait that distinguishes Gileadite Hebrew from Cisjordanian Hebrew (→ Shibboleth).

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## Biblical Hebrew: Pronunciation Traditions

Hebrew is generally thought to have ceased to be a spoken vernacular around the beginning of the 3rd century C.E. This coincides with the end of the Tannaitic period in rabbinic tradition. The surviving Hebrew texts that are datable to before this date would, therefore, have been written when Hebrew was still spoken. This includes the books of the Hebrew Bible, Qumran literature, Tannaitic rabbinic literature, documents, and epigraphy. There are references to the use of Hebrew as a vernacular in the 2nd century C.E., for example, the anecdote of the maidservant of Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi who is said to have known the meanings of some Hebrew words with which the scholars of the time were not familiar (Babylonian Talmud Megilla 18a; Palestinian Talmud Megilla 2.2, 73a). The → Bar Kochba Documents from the first half of the 2nd century C.E. also contain a number of features that appear to reflect the spoken language (e.g., the object marker ת *t* < את *ʾt*).

Although use of Hebrew as a vernacular language is thought to have ceased by the 3rd century C.E., it remained alive in later periods in oral as well as written form. The oral recitation of the Hebrew Bible has continued in a variety of traditions down to modern times. The Hebrew rabbinic material of not only the Tannaitic period but also of the Amoraic period (220–500 C.E.) was composed orally. Furthermore, after rabbinic literature was committed to writing, the oral dimension continued in reading traditions that have survived down to the present. There is a reference also to the use of Hebrew for speech (עברי לדיבור *ʿivri le-dibbur*) in a saying attributed to R. Yonathan of Bet-Guvrin (Palestine, 3rd century C.E.) (Palestinian Talmud Megilla 71.2) (→ Amoraic Hebrew). Even as late as the 10th century one finds in a Masoretic treatise attributed to ʿEli ben Yehudah ha-Nazir (Allony 1973) a description of how the author undertook fieldwork in the streets of Tiberias to verify his analysis of the *resh* in Tiberian biblical reading, on the grounds that the Hebrew *resh* could still be heard in the local speech of the (Jewish) inhabitants of Tiberias (→ Masoretic Treaties). It should be noted, however, that these references are unlikely to refer to vernacular speech. Hebrew continued to be used as a form of learned discourse among scholars after it had ceased to serve as a vernacular. It was, moreover, promoted as a language of everyday speech by the Karaite scholar Benjamin al-Nahāwendī (mid-9th century C.E.) on ideological grounds (Qirqisānī 1939:VI 25.3; Khan 1992:157). Hebrew words and phrases as well as Biblical Hebrew quotations continued in the so-called 'Hebrew component' of the vernacular languages spoken by the Jews down to modern times, which, it seems, is what ʿEli ben Yehudah ha-Nazir was listening to on the streets of medieval Tiberias. A particularly large Hebrew component existed in Jewish secret languages, spoken especially by merchants (→ Secret Languages, Hebrew in).

When Hebrew was a spoken vernacular language before the 3rd century C.E. it existed in a diversity of dialects that differed on various linguistic levels (→ Biblical Hebrew: Dialects and Linguistic Variation). This dialectal diversity existed synchronically at particular periods and there was also diachronic change in the various spoken forms of the language. Both the synchronic and diachronic differences in the spoken language were disguised to a large extent by the written form of the language, which was considerably standardized in its orthography and linguistic form (→ Diglossia: Biblical Hebrew). Several differences are, nevertheless, identifiable from the surviving written evidence. On the level of pronunciation, which is the principle concern of this entry, some regional differences can be detected. We know from epigraphic evidence from the biblical period that diphthongs tended to be contracted in the northern (Israelian) dialects, whereas they tended to be preserved uncontracted in the southern (Judahite) form of Hebrew, which is the basis of the standardized Biblical Hebrew language. In the Samaria ostraca, for example, one finds the orthography ין *yn* 'wine', reflecting the pronunciation *yēn*, whereas the Arad ostraca from the south have the orthography יין *yyn*, corresponding to Masoretic Hebrew form יַיִן *yayin* (→ Diphthongs: Pre-Modern Hebrew). The *shibboleth* incident described in Judg. 12.1–6 is clear evidence of differences in