

## NOTES AND COMMENTS

### MORE ON HEBREW ŠIBBÖLET

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The shibboleth incident continues to attract the attention of scholars, including two contributors to the pages of this journal in recent years. A. F. L. Beeston's solution rests on two points: (a) correlating the MSA, Arabic, and Ephraimite forms with *s*-, thereby presuming a PS \**sblt* "ear of grain"; and (b) positing a confusion in non-Ephraimite Hebrew between this word and *šibbōlet* "watercourse", *šēbīl* "road, way", and *šōbel*, supposedly meaning "well".<sup>1</sup> P. Swiggers has already demonstrated the weakness of this second postulate.<sup>2</sup> It remains, then, to point out the errancy of the first one.

The common solution to our crux is to assume that in Ephraimite PS *š* and *s* (and perhaps *š*) had all merged into *s*.<sup>3</sup> Beeston responds as follows: "Though the biblical story is capable of a simple solution, the wider problem within comparative Semitics remains difficult. The real crux is that the MSA languages uniformly show an initial *s* (Mehri *seblit*, etc.) in the word for 'ear of corn'; on general principles this ought to point to \**sblt* in both PS and Hebrew".<sup>4</sup>

I am not quite sure exactly what Beeston means by "general principles", but his interpretation of the data is surely one-

\* Abbreviations: PS = Proto-Semitic, MSA = Modern South Arabian, M = Mehri, H = Harsūsi, J = Jibbāli (= Šhauri), and S = Soqotri.

<sup>1</sup> A. F. L. Beeston, "Hebrew *šibbōlet* and *šōbel*", *JSS* 24 (1979) 175-7.

<sup>2</sup> P. Swiggers, "The Word Šibbōlet in Jud. xii.6", *JSS* 26 (1981) 205-7.

<sup>3</sup> Thus, e.g., *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, trans. A. E. Cowley (Oxford 1910), 17; H. Bauer and P. Leander, *Historische Grammatik der hebräischen Sprache des Alten Testaments* (Halle 1922), 28; J. Blau, "'Weak' Phonetic Change and the Hebrew Šin", *HAR* 1 (1977) 108-9; and many others.

<sup>4</sup> Beeston, *op. cit.*, 175.

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sided. It is true that MSA *s* corresponds to Hebrew and PS *s* quite regularly,<sup>5</sup> e.g.:

M	<i>sebēb</i> “reason”	=	Hebrew <i>sibbāb</i>
M	<i>skayn</i> “knife”	=	Hebrew <i>sakkīn</i>
M	<i>ksewēt</i> “clothes”	=	Hebrew <i>kēsūt</i>
H	<i>bēser</i> “unripe dates, grapes”	=	Hebrew <i>boser</i>

But MSA *s* is also the regular correspondance to Hebrew *š*,<sup>6</sup> e.g.:

M H	<i>selōm</i> “peace”	=	Hebrew <i>šālōm</i>
M H	<i>sekōn</i> “to dwell”	=	Hebrew <i>škn</i>
M	<i>senēt</i> “year”	=	Hebrew <i>šānāh</i>
M	<i>sebū</i> “week”	=	Hebrew <i>šābūa’</i> <i>šābūa’</i>
J	<i>sēkar</i> “to be drunk”	=	Hebrew <i>škr</i>
J	<i>sell</i> “to prey”	=	Hebrew <i>šll</i>

Since MSA *s* can correspond to either Hebrew *s* or *š*, the way to determine the PS phoneme involved in a particular word is to expand the discussion to include Aramaic, Akkadian, and Ugaritic. If any of these three languages has the cognate with *s*, the PS phoneme is /s/. If, on the other hand, these languages have cognates with *š*, the PS phoneme is /š/. We expand the correspondences of some of the above examples to include Aramaic, Akkadian, and Ugaritic:

M	<i>ksewēt</i>	Heb. <i>kēsūt</i>	Aram. <i>kēsūtā’</i>	Akk. <i>kesītu</i>	Ug. <i>kest</i>
H	<i>bēser</i>	Heb. <i>boser</i>	Aram. <i>busrā’</i>	...	...
M H	<i>selōm</i>	Heb. <i>šālōm</i>	Aram. <i>šēlām</i>	Akk. <i>šalāmu</i>	Ug. <i>šlm</i>

<sup>5</sup> MSA forms are cited from T. M. Johnstone, *Harsūsi Lexicon* (London 1977), and T. M. Johnstone, *Jibbāli Lexicon* (London 1981). In most cases, cognates exist in all the various dialects.

<sup>6</sup> This is not to deny the presence of a substantial number of irregular correspondences. There are plenty of instances of J *š* = Hebrew *š*, e.g., J *šamnūn* “fat” = Hebrew *šāmēn*, J *šum* “name” = Hebrew *šēm*, etc.; several cases of M H *š* = Hebrew *š*, e.g., M H *šenēt* “sleep” = Hebrew *šēnāh*; and isolated instances of S *š* = Hebrew *š*, e.g., S *šem* “name” = Hebrew *šēm*. Moreover, M H S frequently have *b* corresponding to Hebrew *š*, e.g., M *hēma*, H *hōma*, S *hēma’* “to hear” = Hebrew *šm’*; M *hebbōl*, H *abbōl*, S *ebhel* “to cook” = Hebrew *bšl*; etc. But none of these divergences affects our present discussion. It should be noted, however, that a complete survey of this question of MSA and Hebrew (or on a wider basis: Semitic) sibilant correspondences remains a desideratum. For the present, see W. Leslau, *Lexique Soqotri* (Paris 1938), 31-6; and T. M. Johnstone, “The Modern South Arabian Languages”, *AAL* 1/5 (1975) 10.

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M	<i>senēt</i>	Heb. <i>šānāh</i>	Aram. <i>šattā'</i>	Akk. <i>šattu</i>	Ug. <i>šnt</i>
J	<i>sékar</i>	Heb. <i>škr</i>	Aram. <i>škr</i>	Akk. <i>šakāru</i>	Ug. <i>škr</i>

It is abundantly clear that the other cognate languages allow us to decide between what is otherwise an ambiguous relationship between MSA and Hebrew. Most important for the word under discussion in this article is the recognition of Aramaic *šubbaltā'*, Akkadian *šubultu*, and Ugaritic *šblt*. Unquestionably, these words denote PS *š* as the first root letter of *šblt* "ear of grain". Accordingly, the first pillar of Beeston's proposal topples. Ironically, it is Beeston's own words about treating "the wider problem within comparative Semitics" that he did not heed.

It is, of course, easy to show the failings of another's theory; it is somewhat more difficult to replace it with one's own. Fortunately, we are now in the position to offer some new information. Swiggers has taken a major step in the right direction by dissociating the two meanings of *šblt*, "ear of grain" and "torrent, stream", and by assigning the former to the root *šbl* (see my comments above) and the latter to an otherwise unattested root *šbl*. Clearly, the meaning "torrent, stream" fits the context of Jud. 12:6 better than "ear of grain". Swiggers also is correct in following E. A. Speiser's suggestion that the Gileadites retained the PS pronunciation of the phoneme /t/.<sup>7</sup> Swiggers is wrong, in my estimation, only on the issue of the Ephraimite realization of this sound when asked to duplicate Gileadite /t̪ibbōlet/. Here Speiser is correct in arguing that when forced to articulate /t̪/, the Ephraimites said /s/.

The new information alluded to above is the Ammonite royal name *b'lyš'* on the seventh-century BC seal recently excavated at Tell el-'Umeiri. This individual is to be equated with *b'lyš* in Jer. 40:14.<sup>8</sup> The Judaeen author of this passage wrote the name the way he pronounced it. The Ammonites, like their Gileadite neighbours, must have retained /t̪/.<sup>9</sup> Since

<sup>7</sup> E. A. Speiser, "The Shibboleth Incident (Judges 12:6)", *BASOR* 85 (1942) 10-13 (reprinted in E. A. Speiser, *Oriental and Biblical Studies* (Philadelphia 1967), 143-50).

<sup>8</sup> L. G. Herr, "The Servant of Baalis", *BA* 48 (1985) 169-72.

<sup>9</sup> Tangential evidence which supports this conclusion is the preservation of /t̪/ in Safaitic. This dialect was used in territory adjacent to ancient Ammon and is attested from the first century BC to the fourth century CE. Languages used in adjoining regions need not a priori be similar, but they often share important isoglosses. Also, the Arabian influence over Ammon

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the root  $y\dot{s}^{\text{'}}$  derives from  $y\dot{t}^{\text{'}}$ ,<sup>10</sup> their pronunciation of this name must have been /ba<sup>'</sup>alyita<sup>'</sup>/ or the like. The author of Jer. 40:14, however, said /ba<sup>'</sup>alyis/ or the like, and thus wrote  $b^{\text{'}}lys$ .<sup>11</sup>

In both the shibboleth incident and in the  $b^{\text{'}}lys^{\text{'}} \sim b^{\text{'}}lys$  variation, we have a Transjordanian retention of / $\underline{t}$ / and a Cisjordanian attempt to reproduce this sound as /s/. The following chart depicts the analogies conveniently:

	Transjordanian	Transjordanian	Cisjordanian
PS root	orthography	pronunciation	duplication
$y\dot{t}^{\text{'}}$	$b^{\text{'}}lys^{\text{'}}$	/ba <sup>'</sup> alyita <sup>'</sup> /	/ba <sup>'</sup> alyis/ = $b^{\text{'}}lys$
$\underline{t}bl$	$\underline{s}blt$	/ $\underline{t}$ ibbōlet/	/sibbōlet/ = $\underline{s}blt$

An additional example of this phenomenon, incidentally, has been put forward by E. Lipiński in this journal. Commenting on the use of both cuneiform  $\dot{s}$ -signs and  $s$ -signs to represent PS / $\underline{t}$ / in Amorite, he concluded that Amorite retained this phoneme but the “Akkadian scribes also occasionally realized the Amorite  $\underline{t}$  as a mere [s]”.<sup>12</sup> Still another analogy may be the use of the grapheme  $s$  to represent the voiceless interdental in the Aramaic version of the Tell Fakhariyeh inscription. This may imply that the scribe responsible for the Aramaic version spoke a language or dialect which did not preserve the phoneme / $\underline{t}$ /. This would be tacit confirmation of S. Kaufman’s observation on the primacy of the Assyrian version.<sup>13</sup>

was considerable, observable in both the onomasticon and the material culture. The contact between Ammonites and Arabians may have prevented the merger of / $\underline{t}$ / and / $\dot{s}$ / attested in Hebrew and Phoenician.

<sup>10</sup> This is established through Ugaritic, Epigraphic South Arabian, and Thamudic-Lihyanic-Safaitic names. See the important article of J. F. A. Sawyer, “A Historical Description of the Hebrew Root  $Y\dot{S}$ ” in J. and T. Bynon, eds, *Hamito-Semitic* (The Hague 1975), 75-84.

<sup>11</sup> The difference between the two sibilants is only one of the discrepancies in the spellings of  $b^{\text{'}}lys^{\text{'}}$  and  $b^{\text{'}}lys$ . The other is the absence of the final  $\text{'}$  in the latter. The biblical orthography may indicate a weakened / $\text{'}$ /, perhaps only in final position, either in the idiolect of the Judaeen author of Jer. 40:14 or in that of his Ammonite source. On the other hand, the LXX reads *belisa* apparently reflecting the presence of final  $\text{'}$ . Regardless of how this issue is to be resolved, it does not bear on the subject of this paper.

<sup>12</sup> E. Lipiński, review of I. J. Gelb, *Computer-aided Analysis of Amorite*, *JSS* 26 (1981) 280.

<sup>13</sup> S. Kaufman, “Reflections on the Assyrian-Aramaic Bilingual from Tell Fakhariyeh”, *Maarav* 3 (1982) 139.