

The Ammonite Phoneme /ʔ/

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The presumed equation of b^clyš^c on a seventh century B.C. Ammonite seal with b^clys in Jer 40:14 reopens the complex question of sibilants and interdentalals in Canaanite dialects. This article proposes that Ammonite retained the phoneme /ʔ/, which was represented orthographically by š, but was articulated as [s] by Cisjordanian speakers who lacked this sound in their phonetic inventory. Two pieces of evidence bolster the conclusion that Ammonite retained /ʔ/. First, the adjacent dialect of Safaitic also possessed the phoneme /ʔ/. Second, the well-established contacts between Ammon and Arabia may have prevented the shift of /ʔ/ > /š/ attested in the other Canaanite dialects. This b^clyš^c ~ b^clys phenomenon is paralleled by the following interpretation of the shibboleth incident in Judg 12:6: the Gileadites also retained /ʔ/, spelled š, but it was realized as [s] by the Ephraimites.

The appearance of the name b^clyš^c on the seventh century B.C. Ammonite seal from Tell el-^cUmeiri has important ramifications for Semitic linguistics. Herr (1985b: 172) has correctly identified him with b^clys, "Baalīs," king of Ammon, according to Jer 40:14.¹ The discrepancy between the Ammonite spelling with š and the biblical spelling with s reopens the complex question of the sibilants in Canaanite dialects.²

Pardee (*apud* Herr 1985b: 172) has already offered an explanation for the difference between the two spellings: namely, that b^clys represents the way a Judean writer heard the Ammonite name b^clyš^c. In other words, the sound represented by the Ammonite grapheme š was not [š] rather [s].³

Before examining this suggestion further, we must first take note of the protosemitic (PS) phoneme involved in our crux. It is, in point of fact, not a sibilant at all, rather the voiceless interdental /ʔ/ (see Sawyer 1975). The root yš^c, "save," is a well-known verb in Hebrew (Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1906: 446–47; Koehler and Baumgartner 1958: 412–13) and Moabite (Mesha Stele, line 4). Various nouns derived from this root occur in Hebrew (Brown, Driver, and Briggs 1906: 447–48; Koehler and Baumgartner 1958: 411, 507, 1043), Phoenician (Tombach 1978: 131), and perhaps Moabite (Mesha Stele, lines 3–4, where y]š^c is usually restored). The root yš^c also

occurs in personal names in Amorite (Huffmon 1965: 215–16), Hebrew (Noth 1928: 175–76; Lawton 1984: 334, 337, 340), and Phoenician (Benz 1972: 327). Furthermore, it appears in the name of king Mesha of neighboring Moab (Lipiński 1971: 325–26); and yš^c is also represented elsewhere in the Ammonite onomasticon (Jackson 1983a: 510–13 [nos. 14, 25, 53, 54]). An Aramaic seal bears the name yš^c (Herr 1978: 19 [no. 21]), and with the spelling ys^c,⁴ the root appears in the Tell Fakhariyeh inscription in the name of king hdys^cy of Gozan (Abou Assaf 1981: 13). The PS root y^c is established through its use in Ugaritic (Gröndahl 1967: 147), Epigraphic South Arabian (ESA) (Conti Rossini 1935: 165a), and Lihyanic, Thamudic, and Safaitic names (Harding 1971: 73, 658–59; Littmann 1943: 320).

This being the case, if Pardee's assumption is correct we must posit a phonological development of /ʔ/ > /š/ > /s/ in Ammonite. This type of development is paralleled elsewhere in Semitic, namely in Ethiopic and Assyrian (Brockelmann 1908: 132, 136). But since, so far as we can determine, no Canaanite dialect exhibits this shift, we should be cautious in positing it for Ammonite. Moreover, the transcriptions of other Ammonite royal names suggest that /š/ remained and did not shift to /s/. Thus, the name of an earlier Ammonite king, from the 900s B.C.,

appears in the Bible as *nhš* “Nahash” (1 Sam 11:1 etc.). If the author of Jer 40:14 recorded an Ammonite *š* with *s*, we need to ask why the author of Samuel did not.

The Assyrian transcriptions of two Ammonite royal names from the ninth and eighth centuries B.C. also reflect the pronunciation of [š] for *š*. The first of these is king *ba⁻²-sa*, mentioned in Shalmaneser III’s annals ca. 853 B.C. (Schrader 1889: 172–73; Pritchard 1969: 279), presumably corresponding to alphabetic *b^cš^c*. This is the same name as that of an earlier Israelite king *b^cš^o* “Baasha” (1 Kgs 15:16, for example), of two neo-Punic individuals attested in *KAI* 145:37, 166:2,⁵ and of an Ammonite dignitary *b^cš^[?]* mentioned in Heshbon ostrakon 4, line 6 (Cross 1975: 2).⁶ The second king is *sa-ni-pu*, occurring in Tiglath-pileser III’s annals ca. 735 B.C. (Rost 1893: 72; Pritchard 1969: 282), apparently to be equated with alphabetic *šnb* inscribed on the pedestal of a statue found in Amman (Zayadine 1974: 134–35). At first glance these Assyrian transcriptions might suggest an Ammonite pronunciation of *š* as [s], but we must recall the well-known rule whereby Assyrian *s* signs consistently represent West Semitic /š/ (Tadmor 1958: 39–40; Page 1968: 148; Millard 1976: 4). Notable examples are *pa-la-as-tu* for *plšt*, *sa-me-ri-na-a-a* or *sa-mir-i-na* for *šmrn*, *ur-sa-li-im-mu* for *ywšlm*, and *me-na-si-i* for *mnšh* (Pritchard 1969: 281–91; the above citations carry additional illustrations).

Consequently, the Assyrian spellings of *ba⁻²-sa* and *sa-ni-pu* point to the Ammonite realization of the grapheme *š* as [š]. Of course, it is still possible to argue that sometime after 735 B.C., but before ca. 600 B.C.—that is, after *nhš*, *ba⁻²-sa*, and *sa-ni-pu*, but before *b^clyš^c*—the /š/ > /s/ shift occurred in Ammonite. But this would be an *ad hoc* assumption for which there is no actual proof.

Accordingly, I incline towards another explanation of the discrepancy between *b^clyš^c* and *b^clys*. If the biblical spelling of *b^clys* does not represent the manner in which the Judean writer heard the Ammonite name, then it must represent the way he pronounced it. If Ammonite *š* was articulated as either [š] or [ś], an Israelite would have had no difficulty in duplicating the sound, for both these phonemes were present in ancient Hebrew. Therefore, I propose that the *š* grapheme in the Ammonite spelling *b^clyš^c* represents a phoneme foreign to the phonetic inventory of a Judean. That sound, by process of elimination, is PS /t̥/,

which remained in Ammonite unmerged with /š/. This would be unique among Canaanite dialects, but two pieces of evidence converge to bolster this conclusion.

First, in a dialect used adjacent to Ammonite territory only several centuries after the reign of *b^clyš^c*, the phoneme /t̥/ is still preserved. The dialect is Safaitic, attested in eastern Jordan from the first century B.C. to the fourth century A.D. (Oxtoby 1968: 1–8). Most of these inscriptions are from the *harra*, about 80–90 miles from Amman, but a sizeable number come from areas closer to Amman, including a large horde from Umm al-Jimāl about 33 miles to the east (Littmann 1943: vii–viii).⁷ The script includes an unmistakable t̥, in form the same as ESA t̥ (Oxtoby 1968: 9). Spatially and temporally it is a slight jump from Safaitic to Ammonite. And although languages used in adjoining regions need not *a priori* be similar, they often share important isoglosses.

Second, as is well known, the Ammonite onomasticon includes a large percentage of Arabian⁸ elements (Garbini 1970; 1974; Oded 1971: 855; Jackson 1983a: 508). Garbini (1970; 1972: 97–108; 1974) has gone too far in labeling Ammonite a North Arabic dialect,⁹ for recent studies have all correctly placed Ammonite squarely in the Canaanite group (Israel 1979; Sivan 1982; Jackson 1983b: 107; Garr 1985: 205–35). But the Arabian influence over Ammonite is still noteworthy. Non-linguistic evidence is also pertinent in this regard, for not only the language of the Ammonites exhibits Arabian affinities, but the material culture of Ammon does too (Landes 1961). Most likely, the contact between Ammonites and Arabians is what prevented the merger of /t̥/ and /š/ attested in the other Canaanite dialects.¹⁰

If we assume that this second explanation of the discrepancy between the spellings *b^clys* and *b^clyš^c* is the correct one, we must posit as follows: PS /t̥/ remained in the Ammonite language. Because the Canaanite alphabet did not include a grapheme for /t̥/, the letter *š* was adopted for polyphonous use.¹¹ When a Judean tried to pronounce this sound it was articulated as [s], so when he wrote the word he spelled it with the letter *s*.

This conclusion is novel in Ammonite studies, but it is not new altogether. Indeed it is only appropriate that in this journal we revive Speiser’s theory concerning the famous shibboleth incident in Judg 12:6. Most authorities have seen in this

passage proof that the Ephraimites merged /š/ and /s/ (Kautzsch 1910: 17; Bauer and Leander 1922: 28; Blau 1977: 108–9). Speiser (1942), reviving but revising the older theory of Marquart (1888), believed that it was the Gileadite dialect which was distinctive. Speiser argued that in Gilead /ṭ/ was preserved. When the retreating Ephraimites were stopped at the fords of the Jordan and asked to pronounce the password, they said [sibbōlet] in place of [ṭibbōlet] (or, according to Speiser's reconstruction of Iron Age Hebrew, [subbult^u] in place of [ṭubbult^u]). As analogies, Speiser noted the attempt by German speakers to pronounce an English *th* or that of Turks and Persians to pronounce an Arabic *ṭ*. In both cases the result is [s]. For Speiser's proposal to be correct, the root of Hebrew *šblt* must be *ṭbl* and he pointed to Aramaic *tublâ* as proof of this.

Subsequently, Marcus (1942) and Kutscher (1967: 173–74) noted that *tublâ* is a ghost-word, a doctored Aramaic form occurring only in Jerusalem Targum Gen 41:6 and nowhere else (see Fraenkel 1905). The other Semitic cognates of Hebrew *šblt* are Ugaritic *šblt*, Akkadian *šubultu*, Aramaic *šubbaltâ*, Arabic *sunbulat*, and Ethiopic *sabele*, all pointing to *šbl* as the PS root. But these words all mean "ear of grain." Hebrew *šblt* has a second meaning, namely "stream, torrent," attested in Ps 69:3, 16. In a story about crossing the Jordan River, this connotation of *šblt* fits much better (Swiggers 1981). And although we have no cognates for *šblt*, "stream," anywhere in Semitic (Koehler and Baumgartner 1958: 942), there is no reason not to assume a root *ṭbl* for this vocable, distinct from the widespread root *šbl* "ear of grain."¹² In Cisjordanian Hebrew the two merged, but in the Transjordanian dialect the two remained distinct.

Accordingly, I would like to revive Speiser's theory,¹³ and see the shibboleth incident as the exact parallel to the discrepancy between *b^clys^c* and *b^clys*. In both cases we have a Transjordanian

retention of PS /ṭ/, expressed in the script by *š*. When Cisjordanian speakers tried to pronounce this phoneme they articulated an [s]; when they transcribed this sound they naturally used the letter *s*. Thus, when the retreating Ephraimites were asked to say [ṭibbōlet] they said [sibbōlet] and when the author of Jer 40:14 wrote the name of the Ammonite king he used *b^clys*. When a Cisjordanian writer wanted to reproduce /š/, there was no problem, because this was part of his phonetic inventory. Thus *nḥš* occurs in 1 Sam 11:1 etc. Whether his name derives from the word for "snake" (Blau 1982: 55), "copper" (Wevers 1970: 105), or "fortune" (see Eissfeldt 1963) is irrelevant because in all three instances the PS phoneme is /š/ (see Ugaritic *nḥš* "snake," Arabic *nuḥās* "copper," Arabic *naḥs* "[bad] fortune")

To sum up, the proposal that *b^clys* in Jer 40:14 is the way the Judean writer *heard* the royal Ammonite name spelled *b^clys^c* remains a possibility. But since both biblical and Assyrian transcriptions of Ammonite names from the tenth to the eighth centuries B.C. point to the pronunciation of *š* as /š/, we would have to posit a shift of /š/ > /s/ sometime in the seventh century B.C. Our other option is to interpret *b^clys* as the way the Judean writer *pronounced* the Ammonite name. In light of the derivation of *yš^c* from PS *yṭ^c*, we would posit the retention of /ṭ/ in Ammonite at least as late as the sixth century B.C. This approach is bolstered by the use of *ṭ* in Safaitic, attested as close as 33 miles from Amman, and by reviving Speiser's analysis of the shibboleth incident. I favor this second approach. As our knowledge of Ammonite and other Transjordanian dialects continues to increase, we should be able to settle the issue more directly.¹⁵

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I thank W. Randall Garr and Jonas C. Greenfield for their comments on an earlier version of this article.

NOTES

¹This being the case, we may set aside Gordon's proposal (1956: 130; 1967: 375) that *b^clys* in Jer 40:14 should be equated with *b^cls* in *UT* 150:3 and *ba^cli-si* in *PRU* III 16.262:6. For a possible interpretation of these Ugaritic names see Gröndahl (1967: 102, 115–16). Although I disagree with Professor Gordon's sugges-

tion, I am grateful to him for bringing the Ugaritic evidence to my attention.

²I assume, of course, that the different spellings are due to phonological reasons. Shea (1985: 111–15) has suggested that the spelling in Jeremiah is a deliberate mutilation of the Ammonite spelling, to deny the

notion that salvation could come from Ba^cal. But Herr (1985a: 187–91) has countered his argument. Also doubtful is Cross's suggestion (1973: 15, n. 23) that "evidently the *s* is a dittograph of the following *m*" so that we should read Jer 40:14 as *b^cly* "a characteristic Canaanite hypocoristicon."

³The difference between the two sibilants is only one of the discrepancies in the spellings of *b^clyš^c* and *b^clys*. The other is the absence of the final ^c in the latter. The biblical orthography may indicate a weakened /^c/, perhaps only in final position, either in the idiolect of the Judean author of Jer 40:14 or in that of his Ammonite source. On the other hand, the LXX reads *belisa* "with the final 'a' no doubt reflecting the presence of final ^c*ayin*, which could not be written in Greek" (Herr 1985b: 172). Regardless of how this issue is to be resolved, it does not bear on the subject of this paper.

⁴On the issue of this spelling see note 15.

⁵Only the latter is spelled *b^cš^c*; the former is spelled *b^cs^c*. But I would not make too much of this variant and I certainly would not relate it to the problem addressed in this paper. Neo-Punic orthography is extremely fluid, especially where sibilants are involved. Indeed this is not the only instance of an interchange involving *š* and *s* (Friedrich and Röllig 1970: 19–20). Incidentally, in light of good Northwest Semitic parallels, Donner and Röllig (1962–1964: II, 155; III, 46) are incorrect in interpreting these names as Latin *Bassus*. I am indebted to Samuel M. Paley for bringing these neo-Punic names to my attention.

⁶The fact that *b^cš^c* occurs in the Ammonite onomasticon militates against the view of Tadmor (1961: 245), Mazar (1965), and others that *ba⁻²-sa mār ru-ḥu-bi KUR a-ma-na-a-a* (Shalmaneser III, Monolith Inscription, Column II, line 95) means Ba³sha son of Ruhubi of (the land of) Amana = the mountainous region of southern Syria. I will return to this issue in greater detail in a forthcoming article.

⁷See also the excellent map in Butler, Norris, and Stoeber (1930: foldout between 108–9).

⁸By "Arabian" I mean Arabic, ESA, and the Lihyanic-Thamudic-Safaitic group.

⁹Israel (1979: 144, n. 3) informs us that Garbini now accepts the Northwest Semitic character of Ammonite.

¹⁰In actuality /*t*/ > /*š*/ is known with certainty only for Hebrew and Phoenician. (On the latter see especially Friedrich [1923: 2–4] contra Bauer and Leander [1922: 35]). Garr (1985: 29–30) is correct that the evidence for Moabite, Edomite, Deir ^cAlla, etc., is ambiguous. As throughout Canaanite, these dialects use the grapheme *š* to represent PS /*t*/, regardless of the exact phonetic realization of this sound.

¹¹See the Hebrew analogies of ^c representing both /^c/ and /*š*/ and of *ḥ* representing both /*h*/ and /*ḥ*/ (Blau 1982).

¹²Oddly, Diem (1974: 242–43) accepted Speiser's hypothesis that the root for "ear of grain" is *tbl*, but clearly this is impossible. Diem's article contains much useful information, but its conclusions are unacceptable. On this point see Faber (1981: 247) and in general see Blau (1977). A root *tbl* is possible, but only for the meaning "stream, torrent."

¹³Albright (*apud* Marcus 1942) ended the discussion between Speiser and Marcus in the pages of this journal with the statement, "The debate is now closed, since it does not properly belong in the pages of the Bulletin." Almost a half century later I am happy to be able to reopen the discussion due to a new find, namely the Tell el-^cUmeiri seal, uncovered at an ASOR sponsored excavation.

¹⁴The Ammonite name *šby* "Shobi" occurs in 2 Sam 17:27, but we cannot be sure of the root of this word and thus I have excluded it from discussion.

¹⁵I have limited myself in this paper to the reflexes of PS /*t*/ in the dialects of Canaan. This may or may not bear on two other sets of data, depending on one's interpretation of the material.

The first language that is pertinent in this regard is Amorite, known to us almost exclusively from the spelling of West Semitic names in the cuneiform syllabary. When PS /*t*/ appears in these vocables, it is represented sometimes by the *š* signs and sometimes by the *s* signs (Gelb 1958: 151). This has led Lipiński (1981: 280) to argue that Amorite preserved PS /*t*/ but that "Akkadian scribes also occasionally realised the Amorite *t* as a mere [s]." In fact, he forwarded the same parallel that Speiser did, namely, that of non-Arab Muslims who reproduce Arabic *t* as [s]. The Amorite analogy would be further proof, albeit indirect, of the conclusion reached in this article.

Second, I have already referred to the spelling of the royal name *hdys^cy* in the Aramaic version of the Tell Fakhariyeh bilingual. Consistent with this orthography is the graphic reflex of every PS /*t*/ as *s*, e.g., *ysb* "resident" in line 5 (PS root *y^tb*). Kaufman (1982: 146–47) is of the opinion that this peculiarity "is only an orthographic rather than phonological difference," perhaps under the influence of Assyrian where /*t*/ > /*s*/. He states that Old Aramaic preserved the voiceless interdental /*t*/ throughout, represented in most scribal traditions by the letter *š*, but at Tell Fakhariyeh by *s*. If the parallels of the Cisjordanian and Akkadian pronunciations of Transjordanian and Amorite *t* as [s] are germane here, this may imply that the scribe responsible for the Aramaic version spoke a language or dialect that did not preserve the phoneme /*t*/. This would be tacit confirmation of Kaufman's (1982: 139) observation on the primacy of the Assyrian version.

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NOTE ADDED IN PROOF

After this article was submitted for publication, two additional articles came to my attention. Both Emerton (1985) and Lemaire (1985) touch on points raised in this article. For more on the shibboleth incident, see also Rendsburg (in press):

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