During the past 15 years I have published two monographs and more than a dozen articles on the subject of the northern dialect of ancient Hebrew, more properly termed "Israelian Hebrew" (IH).\(^1\) Israelian Hebrew stands in contrast to the standard dialect in which most of the Bible was written, namely, the dialect of Judah in general or of Jerusalem in particular. This latter dialect should be called Judahite Hebrew (JH), which in turn equals Standard Biblical Hebrew (SBH). Most likely IH is an umbrella term, for within IH there probably were several main subdialects, such as Ephraimite, Galilean, and Gileadite, along with even more localized varieties. The continuation of IH in post-biblical times is evident in Mishnaic Hebrew (MH) – one should keep in mind that the Mishna and related texts were redacted in Sepphoris and Tiberias – notwithstanding important differences between IH and MH.

Among the sections of the Bible treated in my studies are the Israelian material in the book of Kings, several dozen northern psalms, "The Last Words of David" in 2 Sam 23:1–7, the blessings to the northern tribes in Genesis 49, and Nehemiah 9. In addition, two of my doctoral students, Yoon Jong Yoo and Yiyi Chen, wrote dissertations on two other northern compositions, Hosea and Proverbs, respectively.\(^2\) Other scholars have

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treated still other biblical texts; see, for example, James Davila’s study of Qohelet.³

Throughout my studies and those of my students, one will find constant reference to Song of Songs. In my estimation, this exquisite poem is another example of an Israeliian composition. Until now, however, I have not published a comprehensive listing of the IH features to be found in the book. The present article attempts to fill that gap. I hasten to add, though, that the material below appears only in outline form. Scott Noegel and I have completed a major study on the language of Song of Songs, which will appear in the years ahead, as a chapter in our planned co-authored book with the working title Studies in the Song of Songs.⁴ That study will include the full documentation in support of the identification of the grammatical and lexical features listed below as IH traits. But since said monograph is still years in the offing, I welcome the opportunity to provide the scholarly community with the current contribution. I trust that the reader will understand that limitations of space permit only the outline form. I equally hope that the schematic presentation will be beneficial to interested scholars, in advance of the full publication described above. I also should mention that I have presented the argument for the northern origin of Song of Songs at several scholarly gatherings in the past, most recently at the Institute for Advanced Studies of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, in December 2001; this will explain the inclusion of this study in the present volume.

I begin with a few basic points of introduction. A northern origin for Song of Songs was proposed by several scholars in the 19th Century on the basis of the northern toponyms mentioned therein (Lebanon, Hermon, Senir, Amanah, Gilead, Tirzah, Damascus, etc.). As far as I am aware, S. R. Driver was the first to bring the linguistic evidence into the picture, in his classic book An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament: “The diction of the poem exhibits several peculiarities, especially in the uniform use of the relative -ψ (except in the title 1:1) for υγ, and in the recurrence of many words found never or rarely besides in Biblical Hebrew, but common in Aramaic, which show either that it must be a late work (post-exilic), or, if early, that it belongs to North Israel, where there is reason to suppose that the language spoken differed dialectically from that of Judah.”⁵ Driver, of

⁴ Accordingly, I here express my thanks to Prof. Scott Noegel of the University of Washington (Seattle) for his contributions to the current line of research.
⁵ S. R. Driver, An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament (New York, 1906), 448–49. I cite here the 12th edition of Driver’s book. I have not been able to consult each previous edition, so I am unsure as to the earliest date of Driver’s statement.
course, had far less Northwest Semitic material to work with than we possess today, and yet his general insight is, in my opinion, correct. Since Driver's day, with the steady increase of Phoenician, Ugaritic, Old Aramaic, and other texts at our disposal, other scholars have posited the northern origin of Song of Songs. Here I mention three Israeli scholars in particular: Shelomo Morag, Avi Hurvitz, and most importantly Yitzhak Avishur.  

Notwithstanding the work of these scholars, recent commentaries on the Song of Songs still do not regard the book as a northern composition. For example, in his 700-page classic Marvin Pope raises only a few points related to the question of the language of Song of Songs, and devotes only two or three lines to the issue of northern dialect, without even citing Driver or later scholars. Michael Fox, by contrast, enters into a lengthy discussion on the language of the Song of Songs. I agree with much of what he says, except for his conclusion: "What dialect, then, is it? There is no reason to identify it as a northern dialect (which, in any case, is not known to us)." Obviously I disagree with his statement that the northern dialect is not known to us. More pertinent to the present enterprise, I believe that quite clearly Song of Songs is written in the northern dialect, or as I prefer to call it Israeli Hebrew.

The reader familiar with my previous publications should be able to follow the argument from the outline alone. One immediately will be struck as to how often I appeal to Aramaic cognate material. Indeed, the presence of so many so-called Aramaisms serves as the basis for the oft-mentioned post-exilic date for Song of Songs (see already the one option noted by Driver in the quotation above). In truth, however, the presence of these Aramaic-like features in the book – or in any biblical book – is much more complicated. A conglomeration of Aramaic-like features (I prefer this term to "Aramaisms" when discussing IH issues) can just as easily signal a northern provenance.


7 M. H. Pope, Song of Songs (AB 7C; Garden City, 1977), 33–34, 362.

8 M. V. Fox, The Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs (Madison, 1985), 188–89.

This is especially the case when one finds, as one does in Song of Songs, a large number of Ugaritic and Phoenician parallels.

In actuality, the only piece of linguistic evidence which serves the scholar to date the book to the post-exilic period is the presence of the Persian loanword פְּרֵד “orchard, garden” in 4:13, assuming, with most scholars, that such a word could not have entered Hebrew prior to the late 6th century B.C.E., more likely the 5th century B.C.E. Though even here it is worth noting that several prominent scholars, Driver among them, were open to the suggestion that such a word “might have reached Israel through Solomon’s connexions with the East.”10 Though without concrete evidence in support of this latter position, one will accede to the Persian-period dating for Song of Songs. At any rate, in general the date of Song of Songs is an issue independent of the question of the book’s geographical provenance.

Accordingly, my research at this point focuses only on the language of Song of Songs as evidence for a northern origin, regardless of the period of composition. The strongest point in favor of this conclusion is, to repeat what I stated above, the presence of a large number of features with parallels in Ugaritic and Phoenician, alongside those with parallels in Aramaic. One should conclude, then, at least preliminarily, that Song of Songs is both late and northern (on a par, therefore, with a text such as Nehemiah 9).

With the preceding as introduction, we turn now to the specific evidence at hand. I present first the grammatical traits, proceeding from phonology to morphology to syntax, in usual manner, after which I turn to the lexical features. Within each division, I present the evidence in verse order.11

10 Driver, Introduction, 449. See also C. Rabin, “The Song of Songs and Tamil Poetry,” Studies in Religion: Sciences Religieuses 3 (1973–74): 215. Unfortunately, Rabin stated about פְּרֵד only the following: “It seems to me, however, that this word, to which also Greek paradeisos belongs, may be of different [i.e., non-Persian] origin.” But he provided no further information, neither here nor in a much more philologically detailed article: C. Rabin, “Millim ba-‘Ivrit ha-Miqra’it mi-Lshon ha-‘Indo-‘Arim she-be-Mizraḥ ha-Qarov,” in Sefer Shmuel Yeivin (eds. S. Abramsky et al., Jerusalem, 1970), 462–96.

11 In most cases, all of the attestations of a given usage or lexeme occur in other IH texts. In a few instances, as noted throughout my research into IH, occasional attestations of a given feature occur in JH texts as well. They are marked in the outline by a smaller font and are tagged with the term “elsewhere” or with similar designation. One must expect such sporadic examples, as interdialectal penetration occurs in all languages from time to time.
1. Phonology

1. PS /z/ > /t/: ‘guard’ (=standard Hebrew נזר) Song 1:6, 8:11, 8:12. Cf. Aramaic. See also below 4.3, 4.33.


4. /q/ > /t/: ‘desire’ Song 1:7 (as Janus word, parallel to רשא הנש). Cf. Aramaic; various IH attestations.

2. Morphology

1. Relative pronoun -ש: passim in Song. Cf. Song of Deborah (Judg 5:7 [2x]), Gideon cycle (Judg 6:17, 7:12, 8:26); MH; cognate איש in Phoenician and Ammonite.

2. Independent possessive pronoun -ל: Song 1:6, 8:12 ‘שלימ’ ‘of mine’ Song 3:7, שלושה ‘of Solomon’. Cf. 2 Kgs 6:11 (Elisha cycle), Qoh 8:17, MH.

3. ‘where’: Song 1:7 (2x). Cf.AIL ‘where’ 2 Kgs 6:13 in Elisha cycle; MH; Aramaic ליאבנה (212x); Peshitta ליאבנה rendering in Gen 3:9. (See also Judg 20:3, according to Chaim Rabin.12)


6. 2fsg pronominal suffix -כ: Song 2:13K ידיCrear. Cf. Elisha cycle (2 Kgs 4:2K, 4:3K, 4:7K [2x]), Psalm 116 (vv. 7 [2x], 19). [Elsewhere (Jer 11:15, Ps 103:3 [2x], 103:4 [2x], 103:5, 135:9, 137:6) due to Anathoth dialect (?), as true Aramaisms (?), or due to the reunion in the exile (?).]


8. Feminine plural ending -ן: ‘blossoms’ Song 2:12. Cf. Aramaic nominal feminine plural ending -ן. Note the following similar forms with

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nun, albeit with masculine plural nouns: קמשותים ‘weeds’ Prov 24:31 (plural of קמש). Cf. MH ‘spices’ (plural of כמון); Phoenician ‘gods’.

3. Syntax

1. Double plural construction: Song 1:17 קרוות בנהן ‘beams of our houses’ = ‘beams of our house’. Cf. the following examples: Ps 29:1 בני אלהים ‘sons of the gods’ (=deities); Ps 45:10 בני מלכים ‘daughters of the kings’ (=princesses); Ps 77:6 נגウィ עולמים ‘years of eternities’, Ps 78:49 מאלכים אדמים ‘messengers of evils’; 2 Kgs 15:25 בני גהלים ‘sons of the Gileadites’.


7. Demonstrative pronoun with irregular syntax: הזה כמותך ‘this stature of yours’ (or ‘this your stature’) Song 7:8. Cf. IH (1 Kgs 14:14, 2 Kgs 6:33), MH, Aramaic (and probably Phoenician, e.g., смגנה כמר שמ عبرת; Umm el-‘Amed 10:1–2).

4. Lexicon


13 The MH syntagma is slightly different, since the pronoun form serving as copula comes at the end of the phrase, e.g., m. Roš Haš 1:11 באחרות שנה שנה ‘there are four new years.” As Prof. Jan Joosten (Université des Sciences Humaines de Strasbourg, Faculté de Théologie Protestante) kindly informs me, the Syriac syntagma bears closer resemblance to the usage in Song 6:8. Details will be presented in our more comprehensive study forthcoming.

Note, for example, מַעְנֵּךְ in Tg. Onqelos to Exod 7:28 and Tg. Jonathan to 2 Sam 3:31, both times rendering מַעְנֵּךְ; in Tg. Neofiti to Gen 50:1; and Lev. Rab. 105:5 translating Amos 6:4.

3. 'beams': Song 1:17Q. Derived from Aramaic root 'run', thus 'runners' = 'beams'.

4. צַעֵד 'thistle': Song 2:2. Cf. 5 of 6 other attestations in BH in northern contexts: 2 Kgs 14:9 = 2 Chr 25:18 (in the mouth of the Israeli king Jehoash, with reference to Lebanon), Hos 9:6, Prov 26:9, Job 31:40; Aramaic. [Elsewhere Isa 34:13.]


14. דָּלִּשׁ 'flow': Song 4:1, 6:5. Cf. Ugaritic glt, plus one attestation in MH², namely, b. Pes. 37b (‘boil’).

15. חָצָה 'cut, shear': Song 4:2. Cf. 2 Kgs 6:6; MH; Phoenician; Aramaic. Note, e.g., Samaritan Tg. to Gen 15:10 rendering Hebrew בָּרָה (2x).

16. שָׁוָא 'leap, bound': Song 4:8. Cf. Syriac שָׁוָא 'leap, bound, spring, jump'.


20. 'locks': Song 5:2, 5:11. Cf. MH (2x); Syriac, e.g., *Peshitta* to Ezek 44:20 translating Hebrew רֵשִׁית 'long hair'.

21. 'droplets': Song 5:2, 5:11. Cf. MH (2x); Syriac, e.g., *Peshitta* to Ezek 44:20 translating Hebrew רִיבֹֹּל 'long hair'.

22. 'soil': Song 5:3. Cf. MH (14x); Aramaic. Note, e.g., *Tg. Pseudo-Jonathan* to Numb 35:33 to render Hebrew רְזָע (2x), Deut 21:23 to render רְזָא, *Targum* to Lam 4:14 to render Hebrew רְזָא. 32x in MH, 1x in Ben Sira, 1x in QH.


24. 'moon': Song 6:10. (Other BH examples are Isa 24:23, 30:26, which do not appear to aid our project.) Cf. MH (55x), to the exclusion of רְעֶה (4x in Ben Sira, 1x in QH).

25. 'sun': Song 6:10. Cf. Ps 19:7, Job 30:28. (Again, other BH examples are Isa 24:23, 30:26, which do not appear to aid our project.) Cf. post-biblical Hebrew data: רְעֶה 207x in MH, 1x in Ben Sira; שם 12x in Ben Sira, 22x in QH, 114x in MH.


29. 'jewels': Song 7:2. Cf. slightly variant forms in Hos 2:15, Prov 15:12.


31. 'mixed wine': Song 7:3. Cf. MH, Aramaic. (The related root מַסֶּק also may be northern; cf. Ps 75:9 [Asaph psalm], Prov 23:30, Isa 65:11; Ugaritic *msk*.)

32. 'fence': Song 7:3. Cf. MH יְשָׁב (18x), Aramaic יֵשָׁב. See, e.g., *Tg.*

33. 'tresses': Song 7:6. Derived from Aramaic root רדס 'run', thus 'runners' = 'tresses'.

The accumulation of data, nineteen grammatical features and thirty-three lexical items, demonstrates that the book of Song of Songs is a northern composition. I obviously recognize that the poem nevertheless deals with Jerusalemite characters, in particular King Solomon and the daughters of Jerusalem. How and why this is can only be theorized, and this question remains fertile ground for further discussion. But from the objective treatment afforded by linguistic analysis, there seems to be little room for debate. The great master of Hebrew studies, S. R. Driver, was correct in assigning the origins of Song of Songs to northern Israel. 15

Biblical Hebrew in Its Northwest Semitic Setting
Typological and Historical Perspectives

EDITED BY
Steven E. Fassberg and Avi Hûrvitz

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