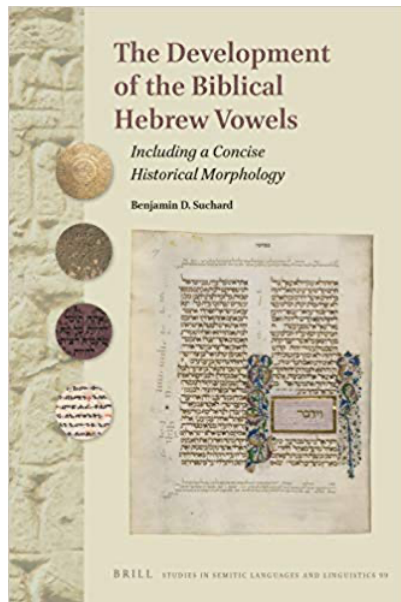




Benjamin D. Suchard

***The Development of the Biblical Hebrew Vowels:
Including a Concise Historical Morphology***

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For most of the ancient Semitic languages written in alphabetic script (Old Aramaic, Ancient North Arabian, Ancient South Arabian, etc.), we know precious little about the language's vowels.¹ By contrast, for Biblical Hebrew (BH) we know too much. Naturally I exaggerate, but the reader will apprehend my meaning here.

First, we have the Tiberian Masoretic Text (MT), which appears in written form only from the ninth century onward but whose reading tradition clearly goes back to Second Temple times. Second, we have the Babylonian reading tradition, which presents a different system of vocalization in some instances. Third, we have the transcriptions of proper names into Greek via the Septuagint and into Latin via the Vulgate (along with occasional other sources, including the New Testament, Jerome's notes, etc.). Fourth, we have Origen's Hexapla, with the Hebrew text transcribed into Greek characters in the second column (or *Secunda*), even if only about one-third of the book of Psalms is extant. Fifth, and finally, we have the Samaritan reading tradition, which differs from the Jewish one (especially the Masoretic system) in manifold ways.

How, then, to make sense of all this? Each of these sources has been analyzed by various scholars over the past century and a half, and individual issues have been treated across these sources—but

1. Somewhat ironically, for the oldest attested language, Ugaritic, we actually know a bit more, due to the use of the three 'aleph symbols and due to the transcription of Ugaritic words into syllabic cuneiform.

no one has attempted to collect all of the evidence and to reconstruct the trajectory of BH vowel transformations in their entirety in a single comprehensive fashion—until, that is, the present effort by Benjamin Suchard.

As such, the book under review here (based on Suchard’s 2016 Universiteit Leiden dissertation) is a welcome addition to the scholarly literature on the historical grammar of Biblical Hebrew. After two introductory chapters (chs. 1–2), Suchard devotes specific chapters (chs. 3–8) to the following issues: the Canaanite shift; stress, tonic, pretonic, and pausal lengthening; diphthongs and triphthongs; Philippi’s law; the law of attenuation; and word-final vowels. A concluding chapter (ch. 9) and a very important appendix (see below) complete the book.

From the outset, Suchard makes clear that he follows the Neogrammarian approach, which is to say, “all changes in the pronunciation of words not due to language contact or analogy [result] from *regular, phonetically conditioned sound changes or sound laws*” (1)—and he then spends the rest of the book to demonstrate the point. While he argues his points well, to my mind, Suchard follows this approach too slavishly. True, he allows for analogy, which is a major component of the quite different approach applied by Joshua Blau, for example, but other factors (such as lexical constraint) also may be at play. Then there are simply exceptions that may defy explanation. After all, while most of the exceptions to the Great Vowel Shift in English are patient of at least some explanation (the vowels in *break* and *great*, for example, are preceded by /r/ and are followed by a voiceless stop), the true exception is *steak*, whose nonshift has never been adequately explained.

The above notwithstanding, throughout the book Suchard does an excellent job both in presenting data sets and in analyzing them. Many of the issues are complex, but Suchard always writes in a clear and accessible manner. Herewith some examples of his conclusions.

The well-known Canaanite shift, $\bar{a} > \bar{o}$ (cf. Hebrew *šālōm* and Aramaic *šālām*, Arabic *salām*, Ge‘ez *salām*, etc.), occurs across the board, without exception. The shift is not based on stress (per Brockelmann), and apparent exceptions are to be explained otherwise. Thus, for example, the *nomen agentis qatṭāl* forms (e.g., מִשְׁפֵּט ‘judge’), which reveal long /a:/ in Arabic, for example, are determined to reflect short /a/ in Hebrew (cf. the construct form מִשְׁפָּט) and thus do not participate in the shift (per Huehnergard). Similarly, forms such as קָם ‘he stood’ (cf. Arabic *qāma*) are to be explained as derived from an earlier *qawama*, which contracted to *qām* after the Canaanite shift had ceased to operate (per Birkeland).

Diphthongs regularly contract in Hebrew, regardless of stress, in non-word-final position, hence $ay > \bar{e}$ and $aw > \bar{o}$. Apparent exceptions, such as מוֹת ‘death’ and מִתְּנָה ‘midst’, must be explained by the following voiceless plosive (before fricativization occurred); while the shift of $’aw > ’o$ (cf. Arabic *’aw*) even in word-final position is explained since the “proclitic conjunction ... cannot be said to be truly word-final” (130).

Philippi's Law, that is, the shift of $i > a$ in an originally closed accented syllable (e.g., *bint* > *bitt* > בַּת 'daughter'), is seen not as a single phenomenon but rather as "the telescoped effect of several distinct sound changes" that occurred over time (156; per Dolgopolsky). This will explain why some instances appear to have occurred in an early stage of the language, while others still are not reflected as late as the Hexapla.

The same holds true for the law of Attenuation, that is, $a > i$ in a closed unaccented syllable. Some instances are early, while some are late (e.g., *šamšon* > שָׁמְשׁוֹן 'Samson', still with /a/-vowel in the LXX and the Vulgate²).³ As Suchard observes (184 n. 16), one should note that the shift does not occur in the Babylonian tradition, hence, for example, *madbar* = מִדְבָּר 'steppe, wilderness'.

As is well recognized, "word-final unstressed short vowels were regularly lost in an early stage of Hebrew, whereas long vowels were preserved" (218). Period, full stop. There is no need, accordingly, for any "intermediate aneeps category" either in Proto-Semitic or in Proto-Hebrew. Forms such as אַתָּה 'you (m. sg.)' are explained through other means; for example, in this instance, the form goes back to 'antah (per Al-Jallad; on this point, see further below).

Every discussion is enhanced by clear tables (forty-five in all), with the data available at a glance. In addition, the secondary literature is exceptionally well covered, from Brockelmann to Bergsträsser to Birkeland to Brønno to Blau and beyond (and those are just the B's).

The aforementioned appendix is entitled "A Concise Historical Morphology of Biblical Hebrew" (231–53), which systematically proceeds through the categories of pronouns, nouns, numerals, and verbs. Most of the issues were covered in the main body of the work, but here they appear in the format of a traditional grammar. Some issues, for example, the derivation of מִי < **miya*, are raised here for the first time. The appendix will serve intermediate and advanced learners of Biblical Hebrew with a linguistic bent in fine fashion.

Naturally, in a book such as this, jam-packed with so many examples and so much information, one will find points of disagreement here and there.

As intimated above, Suchard's slavish devotion to the Neogrammarian approach impels him to engage in all manner of linguistic gymnastics in order to explain the form הָאָרֶץ 'the earth' (106), the only segolate noun that uses the pausal form even in nonpausal position when preceded by the definite article. It is much simpler, to my mind, to note that the commonest words in any language often display exceptional forms, including historically older forms (cf. English *oxen*, *children*). In

2. My example, which I use conveniently for teaching purposes to illustrate the point to students.

3. The same conclusion was reached by Aaron Koller, "Attenuation," *EHLL* 1:231–32. The entry is cited in this section, though only in *en passant* manner about a particular point.

this instance the older *ha-ʿareš* simply did not shift to the younger **ha-ʿereš*. Note that this retention does not occur in the phonetically similar form הָאֶרֶז ‘the cedar’ (8x).

Speaking of segolates, one is surprised to find so little about segolation in the book, especially given the wealth of information forthcoming from the sources. Hexapla forms such as γαβρ (= MT גִּבּוֹר), αβδ (= MT עֶבֶד), αασθ (= MT קֶשֶׁת), and so on inform us that segolation occurred relatively late in the history of the Hebrew language. The only really sustained discussion is in the appendix (233–34).

Two of the exceptions to the hard-and-fast diphthong rule mentioned above are אֵוֶן ‘evil’ and עֵוֶל ‘injustice’, and thus once again Suchard must resort to (to my mind, at least) ad hoc explanations. Might not the simpler reason be lexical constraint: if the diphthong in the former had contracted, the word would be a homonym of אֵוֶן ‘power’, while if such had occurred in the latter, the word be a homonym of עֵוֶל ‘yoke’.⁴ The former pair especially might cause semantic confusion.⁵ In the same vein, perhaps מָוֶת ‘death’ did not shift to מוֹת,⁶ since this form would evoke the name of the Canaanite god of death Mot,⁷ while תֵּוֶן ‘midst’ (Gen 15:10, etc.) may remain to distinguish the noun from the much more common preposition, almost always conjoined as a complex preposition, בְּתוֹךְ, מִתּוֹךְ, אֶל-תּוֹךְ, and so on.⁸

Note the following comments (the specifics are not important): “The fact that Akkadian /ā/ was borrowed as *ō in these two cases shows that the speakers of Hebrew had some intuitive grasp of the correspondence of Akkadian /ā/ to Hebrew *ō” (62); and “First of all, the Gəṣəz and Arabic words are both probably loanwords going back to Aramaic, which might itself have borrowed it from Hebrew with a change of *ō to *ā based on an intuitive understanding of Hebrew–Aramaic sound correspondences” (68). Notwithstanding an attempt to justify these statements, including from Suchard’s personal experience in a Dutch–German context (62 n. 8), do we really think that speakers of a language have such intuitive grasps and understandings of sound correspondences?

More than a century and a quarter ago, Georg Kampffmeyer attempted to use this approach to explain the transfer of various toponyms from ancient Aramaic and Canaanite into medieval

4. The word is always spelled without *waw* because it derives from **ull-* (cf. *kull-* > כָּל ‘all’), but the pronunciation of the two forms would be **ōl* nonetheless, at least in Tiberian Hebrew.

5. For many English examples, see Robert J. Menner, “The Conflict of Homonyms in English,” *Language* 12 (1936): 229–44, even if the focus of this article is on “two words of different origin which become homonyms by regular sound-changes [and which therefore] interfere with one another to such an extent that one is ultimately excluded from the vocabulary of a given dialect” (229).

6. In the absolute form, that is, since obviously מוֹת appears as the construct form.

7. For a parallel, see Steven E. Fassberg, “Why Doesn’t *melex* Appear as *ma:lex* in Pause in Tiberian Hebrew?” [Hebrew], *Lešonenu* 44 (2002): 207–19.

8. Suchard considers the view set forth here but is wont not to accept this approach, since “homophony avoidance ... does not fit the Neogrammarian framework adopted in this work” (128 n. 8).

Arabic,⁹ but his method and his findings have been refuted by Yoel Elitzur.¹⁰ “I believe that the overall logic of the theory is artificial, and the linguistic acumen that Kampffmeyer sometimes ascribes to those ancient *fellāhin* who, he supposes, ‘reshaped’ the names is exaggerated.”¹¹

Speaking of Elitzur: here lies yet another body of evidence, albeit untapped by Suchard, namely, the data forthcoming from toponyms. Elitzur includes a fine summation of the phonological evidence,¹² with special attention to the vowels, including phenomena covered by Suchard (Canaanite shift, diphthongs, attenuation, etc.).¹³

I highly doubt that *תָּאַ* ‘you (m. sg.)’ goes back to *’antah* (see above). Since the endings on *’anta* > *’attā* and *’anti* > *’atti* are both not needed to preserve the gender distinction, the latter was dropped, resulting in *תָּאַ*, while the latter was preserved, to wit, *תָּאַתָּ*. The trend toward morphological economy more elegantly explains these forms. Note that in some Aramaic dialects the opposite occurred, with *’anta* > *תָּאַ* (m.) and *’anti* > *תָּאַתָּ* (f.)

Suchard reconstructs the Proto-Northwest-Semitic (PNWS) numeral 5 as **ḥamisatum* (m.) and **ḥamisum* (f.) (243), but cognate evidence suggests otherwise. Based on Arabic *ḥamsa*, Aramaic *ḥamša*, Akkadian *ḥamšat*, and so on (to cite the masculine forms), one should reconstruct PNWS as *ḥamšat(um)*.¹⁴ Suchard seems to prefer /s/ for /š/ throughout the numeral paradigm, which is debatable, but my focus here is on the vowels. The Hebrew pattern *חֲמִשָּׁה* ‘five’ is based on analogy with the following form *שֵׁשֶׁשׁ* ‘six’. Suchard is familiar with the phenomenon of “contamination in rows of numbers” (58 n. 4), and he uses this approach to explain the gemination of /š/ in *ḥamišša*, anticipating *šišša*, but the analogy, as I have indicated, extends to the vowel pattern as well. Hence his PNWS form **ḥamisatum* (m.) and by extension **ḥamisum* (f.) are incorrect. The PNWS forms most likely align with the Arabic forms, *ḥamsa* (m.), *ḥams* (f.), save for /š/ in place of /s/.

Finally, I note the use of forms such as *nsīgā* (95), with no indication of the vocalic *šawa’*. I realize that this usage reflects the time-honored Leiden tradition based on the practice of the *grootmeester* T. Muraoka, but, with all due respect, I must demur. This practice is based on the recognition that

9. Georg Kampffmeyer, “Alte Namen im heutigen Palästina und Syrien,” *ZDPV* 15 (1892): 1–33, 65–116; 16 (1893): 1–71.

10. Yoel Elitzur, *Ancient Place Names in the Holy Land: Preservation and History* (Jerusalem: Magnes; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 367–68.

11. Elitzur, *Ancient Place Names in the Holy Land*, 368.

12. Elitzur, *Ancient Place Names in the Holy Land*, 310–28.

13. At one point Suchard states that “proper nouns are rightfully excluded from the investigation, as they can be shown to behave irregularly (pp. 33–34)” (175); unless I missed something on 33–34 or elsewhere, I have not found an explicit statement to this effect. I am not saying that Suchard is wrong, for he is correct that proper nouns often “go their own way,” especially by not participating in regular sound shifts, but the evidence garnered by Elitzur is noteworthy nonetheless.

14. Even if the Arabic and Akkadian take us beyond PNWS.

vocalic *šawa* equals zero at a deeper phonological level (and hence the Masoretes created only a single *šawa* sign), but clearly vocalic *šawa* constitutes a vowel on the phonetic level.¹⁵

The following represents an observation, not a point of disagreement. In his discussion of the Canaanite shift, Suchard nicely lays out the distinctive categories of *qaṭāl* nouns, on the one hand, and *qiṭāl/quṭāl* nouns, on the other, all of which undergo the expected /ā/ > /ō/ shift. As the charts indicate, in the former group the initial /a/-vowel remains (e.g., אֶתוֹן ‘jenny’, שְׁלוֹם ‘peace’, etc.), while in the latter group the initial vowel reduces (e.g., בְּרוֹשׁ ‘cypress’, חֲמוֹר ‘donkey’, תְּהוֹם ‘primeval ocean’, etc.). To the best of my knowledge, the distinction has not been explicitly noted, but clearly the open /a/-vowel of the former group is more stable than the back /i/- and /u/-vowels of the latter group(s).¹⁶ Suchard implies this, for while he includes גְּרוֹן ‘throat’ and לְשׁוֹן ‘tongue’ in the latter category (based on Semitic cognates [Akkadian *burāšu*, Arabic *lisān*]), at the same time he recognizes their status as *qaṭāl* nouns (with, for the latter, a nod to the Ugaritic form in syllabic transcription *la-ša-nu*¹⁷)¹⁸ (60).

Suchard rightly includes in the discussion the series of agent nouns displaying the *qātōl* pattern (59), for example, בֹּחֵן ‘assayer’, עֹשֹׂק ‘oppressor’, בִּגְדוּדָה ‘traitress’, to which may be added צָרוּף ‘metal-founder’, all of which appear in Jeremiah. Any discussion of these terms should cite the foundational study by Moshe Bar-Asher, with attention to Mishnaic Hebrew, wherein this pattern becomes very common (e.g., טָחוּן ‘miller’, סְרוּק ‘wool comber’).¹⁹ While not strictly relevant to Suchard’s project, the occurrence of these words in Jeremiah circa eight hundred years before the Mishnah was compiled is an important key to understanding the origins of Mishnaic Hebrew, with its roots not only in Second Temple period Hebrew but even in late First Temple period Hebrew, presumably in certain (spoken and/or regional) dialects.

As indicated above, Suchard’s book is a welcome addition to the scholarly literature on the historical grammar of Biblical Hebrew. The occasional issues of disagreement discussed here in no way diminish my appreciation for all that Suchard has accomplished. The book will serve as the *status quaestionis* on many issues for years to come.

15. Geoffrey Khan, “Shewa: Pre-Modern Hebrew,” *EHLL* 3:544.

16. Compare Geʿez, in which Proto-Semitic *a is preserved, realized as [ä], whereas Proto-Semitic *u and *i are reduced, realized as [i], conventionally transcribed as ə. My gratitude to Aaron M. Butts (Catholic University) for his assistance on this issue (email communication, 28 May 2020).

17. John Huehnergard, *Ugaritic Vocabulary in Syllabic Transcription*, rev. ed., HSS 32 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 143.

18. See also Coptic ⲗⲁⲥ ‘tongue’.

19. Moshe Bar-Asher, “Mishnaic Hebrew: An Introductory Survey,” *Hebrew Studies* 40 (1999): 118 = Moshe Bar-Asher, *Studies in Classical Hebrew*, ed. Aaron Koller, *Studia Judaica* 71 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 231–32.