VOCALIZATION AND THE ANALYSIS OF HEBREW AMONG
THE ANCIENT TRANSLATORS

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What do we mean when we say that the LXX (or other ancient version) ‘vocalized’ the written Hebrew text in a certain way? It could mean two quite different things. It could mean that the translator knew of a vocalization which was then already general, and which therefore provided external information additional to the written text and, because it seemed to be authoritative, dictated that the text be translated in a certain way and not in another. It could also mean, however, that the translator factually rendered in a certain way, so that we, translating the rendering back into Hebrew, say that it implies a certain vocalization. This latter position still leaves it open whether this vocalization really acted as an influence guiding the translator in a particular way.

In the conditions of antiquity, and before the full registration of the form of the text by the Massoretes, two quite different modes of operation were theoretically available to translators of the Hebrew Bible:

Method A. The translator might conclude from the written form of the Hebrew straight to the variety of meanings which this might have in Greek (or Latin, Syriac or other language). From the variety of such possible meanings, the context would decide which should be chosen. The process works from the written form in Hebrew to the semantic content conceivable for this form, selected by the context and expressed in the receptor language. The full vocalization of the form is not a necessary stage in the process.

(Note: I say ‘full vocalization’ because some vowels were partially indicated by matres lectionis; such vowels were, within the limits of the system of matres lectionis, then part of the written form as the consonants were. Henceforth ‘vocalization’ means the oral production of the full form of the Hebrew word, including (a) all vowels which were not marked in writing at all, and (b) discrimination of
the ambiguities involved in all indications through *matres lectionis*).

**Method B.** Having the written form in Hebrew, the translator might proceed to ask what is the fully vocalized form in Hebrew. Only after this had been obtained would he consider the variety of possible meanings, and the number of these would be greatly reduced by this procedure. The context would still play a part in decision, but only between forms which were homophonous when vocalized, and not between writings which were alike only in the written form unvocalized.

The two methods can be set out schematically as follows, using the example הָלַּכָּא (Tiberian writings of vocalization are used, anachronistically, because of their familiarity):

**Method A:** הָלַּכָּא = וֹפָאָכִי (fem. subj.) or וֹפָאָכִי or וֹפָאָכִי or וֹפָאָכִי •.ʁ.א. • (by context) וֹפָאָכִי.

**Method B:** הָלַּכָּא = (reading supplied) הָלַּכָּא = וֹפָאָכִי.

In method A, it does not make very much difference whether the translator did or did not pronounce to himself the word with the vocalization implied; e.g., in taking הָלַּכָּא as וֹפָאָכִי, he may or may not have said to himself ‘this is הָלַּכָּא.’ In either case, this vocalization is not information fed in from a source other than the written form; it is only information deduced or divined from the written form plus context. It is a stage in the process of translation, or even only an implication of the result of that process; it is not an independent piece of evidence, fed into the work of translation as evidence additional to the graphic evidence of the written text. In method B, on the other hand, the vocalization is independent evidence, drawn upon to provide authoritative guidance in the reading, and therefore in the selection of the meaning. The familiar term ‘vocalization’ is therefore, when applied to the time of the ancient translators, ambiguous. If method A was used, a vocalization deduced from a rendering may be no more than a statement of what the rendering implies for itself; if method B was used, it is evidence for the way in which the text was generally read, independently of the special process of translation.

It is not unlikely, indeed, that the two methods were considerably mixed in actual operation, and that one translator used now one, now another. Nevertheless the distinction seems a useful one, and

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1) So for הָלַּכָּא at Num. xvi 21.