THE BIBLICAL LEXICON IN LIGHT OF THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS*

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The Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) contain linguistic evidence shedding new light on biblical Hebrew. The scrolls present an ancient dialect with roots in the biblical period, and were written by authors intimately familiar with the books of the Bible. Some of these scribes were competent interpreters of Scripture, and their own concepts were often close to those of the authors of the biblical books. It also stands to reason that the scrolls preserve living traditions of the pronunciation and interpretation of the Bible, going back to biblical times. The significance of the DSS for understanding biblical Hebrew is, therefore, inestimable. Scholars have

* This is an enlarged version of an article written in Hebrew which appeared in Tarbiz 58 (1989) 297-315. The following abbreviations are employed:


Ben Yehuda - E. Ben Yehuda, A Complete Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Hebrew (Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv: La'amon 1911-49).


Gesenius (1815) - W. Gesenius, Hebräisch-deutsches Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament (Leipzig: Vogel, 1815).

Menahem - Menaham ben Saruq, Mahbereth (ed. Z. Philipovski; London: הַמָּכֶרֶת, 1854).

Parhon - Shelomo Parhon, Mahbereth He’arukh (ed. U. Rappaport; Prisburg: Antonii Nobilis de Schmid, 1844).


already noted various contributions the DSS make to our knowledge of both the grammar and lexicon of biblical Hebrew.

The present article concerns another aspect in which the non-biblical DSS can advance our knowledge of biblical Hebrew, namely the interpretation of certain words in specific biblical passages. By this I do not mean using the DSS to help us in our own understanding of unclear biblical words, but, rather, how such words were understood by the DSS themselves. Sometimes it is difficult to determine whether the suggested interpretation of the word in question is based on its living usage in the dialect known to the authors of the DSS. In each instance, however, a clear allusion to a specific biblical passage is evident, and the meaning given in the scrolls corresponds with the plain sense of the biblical text.

A. lv'7r 71v nonn R5, “You shall not muzzle an ox while it is threshing” (Deut. 25:4).

The word הַיְּרִישׁ in this verse is grammatically equivocal. Most ancient authorities took it as a verbal noun (בְּרִיָּה), while the majority of modern scholars opt for an infinitive of the qal theme. Qimhi has suggested, alternatively, to analyze it as an infinitive of the hif'il, contracted from ברִיָּה. In fact, none of these suggestions is free of difficulties. If הַיְּרִישׁ is taken as a noun, the expected form would be בְּרִיָּה since the original diphthong ay generally becomes e in the MT when unaccentuated. Only rarely does it become i. If הַיְּרִישׁ is taken to be an infinitive qal, the expected form would be בְּרִיָּה (cf. Amos 1:3), since forms with i, although found in a few verbs, never occur with the verb שֵׁם.

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2 See the Targumim, Parhon, Rashi; the Samaritan tradition (Z. Ben-Hayyim, The Literary and Oral Tradition of Hebrew and Aramaic Amongst the Samaritans, IV [Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1977] 74). Even some more recent Jewish scholars hold this view, e.g. Ben Yehuda s.v.
3 BDB s.v. גָּבֹר; Baumgartner s.v.; P. Joüon S.J., Grammaire de l'hébreu biblique (Rome: Institut Biblique Pontifical, 1923) 174; Bergsträsser, II, para. 28t; Qimhi, 70.
4 Ibid., and in his commentary, ad loc.
5 As בְּרִיָּה (from בָּרֵי) — Bergsträsser, I, para. 17h.
6 Bergsträsser, II, para. 28t; Th. Nöldeke, Beiträge zur semitischen Sprachwissenschaft (Strassburg: Karl J. Trübner, 1904) 44. Forms with i in the infinitive qal of medial waw roots are very rare. The form with u predominates even in verbs which have i in the imperfect or the imperative. Note, for example, בַּשַּׁלָּח in contrast to בָּשַׁלָּח (see concordance; but cf. גָּבֹר). With the root שֵׁי all imperfect, imperative, and infinitive forms have ī rather than i (see Bersträsser, ibid.).