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1. General Introduction: Aims, Scope, and Organization

A Handbook of Biblical Hebrew strives not to be just another handbook of biblical Hebrew. Its primary goal is to introduce students and the public to diverse vocalization traditions of biblical Hebrew in a way that is “easily accessible, reliable, and current” (x). This two-part volume is designed as a convenient resource for those interested in expanding the scope of their study of biblical Hebrew beyond the Masoretic Text. The handbook thus serves a dual purpose: it offers a diachronic history of Hebrew into the Second Temple period (chs. 1–7), and it introduces readers to diverse readings traditions of biblical Hebrew into the twenty-first century (chs. 8–16).

The handbook is organized into two volumes and includes online audio files. Volume 1 comprises articles that describe phases of ancient Hebrew and reading traditions of Biblical Hebrew; most of the chapters in the handbook provide Tiberian vocalizations as a point of reference. The main sections are: part 1: “Phases of Biblical Hebrew”; part 2: “Contemporary Hebrew Attestations”; part 3: “Ancient and Medieval Reading Traditions”; and part 4: “Essays.” Volume 2 contains corresponding sample texts, which are classified by subheadings to guide readers (e.g., 2 Kgs 25 as “Zedekiah, the Destroyed Temple, and the Second Babylonian Deportation”; Isa 59 as “Divine Response to Israel’s Confession of Sin”). The final chapter of the handbook (ch. 16) prompts an aural
engagement with Exod 14:30 as read by members of Jewish communities in Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, and India (see https://www.eisenbrauns.org/books/titles/978-1-57506-371-3.html). This venture into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries reflects the editors’ aim to anchor the study of Biblical Hebrew in the communities who preserved these traditions.

2. Chapter-by-Chapter Summary

The chapters in parts 1–3 follow roughly the same format. Each chapter begins with a general introduction to the reading tradition; there is short section entitled “Speech Community” that discusses the corpus, the history of transmission, and, in some cases, the individuals and/or communities creating these texts (see the discussion below). Each chapter then offers a longer and more technical overview of the orthography, phonetics and phonology, morphology, lexicon, and syntax of the reading tradition. Each chapter concludes with a bibliography of suggested readings. Part 4 (chs. 14–16) is a collection of essays that depart from this format.

Part 1, “Phases of Biblical Hebrew,” offers an introduction to Biblical Hebrew as it is typically taught, divided according to the traditional periodization: Standard/Classical, Archaic, Transitional, and Late Biblical Hebrew. Later chapters on the masoretes (ch. 14) and on Tannaitic Hebrew (ch. 15) round out this discussion.

Chapter 1, by J. Lam and D. Pardee, introduces readers to Standard/Classical Biblical Hebrew (SBH). This chapter provides short descriptions of the orthography, phonetics, and phonology as reflected in the MT. The description of Hebrew presented here assumes an Iron Age date for the composition of much of biblical literature. SBH is described as the Hebrew of the monarchical period, as reflected in the “‘primary history’ of Genesis-Kings” (2). Lam and Pardee briefly discuss the limitations of SBH as a designation and the challenges of situating poetic texts in this classification (2). The readings in volume 2 include narrative and poetic texts (Num 19, 1 Sam 1, Pss 29 and 23, and Prov 2).

Chapter 2, by A. Gianto, surveys Archaic Biblical Hebrew (ABH). There is a helpful discussion of Proto-Northwest Semitic. The sociopolitical context offered here adopts an older view that links ABH to a specific stage of Israelite evolution. Accordingly, Gianto describes ABH as an archaic body of poems used to coalesce political and cultural cohesion. He writes, “Early Israelite society cultivated traditions about its Divine Warrior, YHWH, while distancing itself from its Egyptian overlord and Canaanite society. These traditions reflect Israel’s religious awareness as the people of their national god YHWH” (20).
Chapter 3, by A. D. Hornkohl, on Transitional Biblical Hebrew (TBH), begins by addressing the limitations of the classification of a speech community. TBH “was not the language of a specific speech community” but was “a heterogeneous historical layer of the ancient Hebrew literary registers … representing various genres … writers of diverse vocations … and several regional contexts” (31). He goes on to problematize the adjective transitional. SBH tend to be described as a stable, normative phase of Hebrew, whereas exilic Hebrew is described as unstable and in “transition” (31–32). Hornkohl also discusses the linguistic dating of biblical corpora and the relationship between TBH, Late Biblical Hebrew (LBH), and that of successive periods (31–33).

Chapter 4, by M. Morgenstern, on “Late Biblical Hebrew,” briefly describes the linguistic character and historical backdrop of the Second Temple period (43–44). It situates LBH in broader debates about the periodization of Hebrew (45) and the language of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The author discusses the pitfalls of overly trusting the graphemic inventory of a writing system to reconstruct phonology (46–47).

Part 2, “Contemporary Hebrew Attestations,” shifts to a more general description of the history of Hebrew. It introduces readers to inscriptions and texts deemed contemporary to the composition of biblical literature and its subsequent redaction.

Chapter 5, by W. Randall Garr, S. E. Fassberg, and S. Aḥituv, surveys Epigraphic Hebrew (EH). They connect the language of the inscriptions to Biblical Hebrew, as “epigraphic Hebrew is largely the same language as Biblical Hebrew of the same period” (55). This chapter discusses the issue of literacy and writing by nonprofessional scribes (56–57). It is also one of the more reflective chapters about the differences between speech and written language. The authors engage with the issue of northern versus southern Hebrew. The sample texts include “northern” texts (the Gezer Calendar, Kuntillet ‘Ajrud 3.1 and 3.6, and Samaria Ostraca 10 and 18) and those from the south (the Siloam Tunnel and Royal Steward inscriptions, Yavneh Yam ostracon, Ketef Hinnom Amulet 2, Arad Letters 4, 7, and 24, Lachish Letters 3, 4, and 6). There are no images or translations; readers are referred to S. Aḥituv, *Echoes from the Past: Hebrew and Cognate Inscriptions from the Biblical Period*, trans. A. F. Rainey (Jerusalem: Carta, 2008).

Chapter 6, by W. van Peursen, discusses the Hebrew text of Ben Sira. The authorship of Ben Sira is taken at face value; the speech community is identified as Ben Sira and later scribes contributing to this work (69). This chapter provides an accessible discussion of the relationship between the language in Ben Sira, postmonarchal Hebrew, and SBH (70–71). It sets up the chapters on the Dead Sea Scrolls (ch. 7) and Tanaanitic Hebrew (ch. 15).
Chapter 7, by J. Joosten, surveys the corpora, language, and debates about the origins of the Dead Sea Scrolls. This chapter outlines the nature of this community, those producing these texts, and how their ideologies informed their linguistic practice (84–85). Joosten engages with diverse scholarly viewpoints about the language of the scrolls. Volume 2 includes both sectarian and nonsectarian texts, including the Copper Scroll.

Part 3, “Ancient and Medieval Reading Traditions,” introduces readers to vocalization traditions by diverse religious communities; this is the main contribution of the handbook.

Chapter 8, by A. E. Yuditsky, surveys the Greek and Latin transcriptions in the works of Origen and Jerome. The author identifies the speech community as either Origen or his Jewish sources; later in the chapter there is a brief introduction to Jerome. The chapter offers a useful comparison of Origen’s and Jerome’s transcriptions. Volume 2 presents readers with the Greek transcription of Pss 30 and 46 from the Hexapla and the Latin text of Gen 14:18–20 and Isa 2:22.

Chapter 9, by M. Florentin, discusses the history of the Samaritans into the modern period and the Samaritan Pentateuch. This is one of the most user-friendly chapters. The author uses the MT as a point of comparison; unlike the other chapters, the corresponding sample texts in volume 2 include a transliteration in the Roman script.

Chapter 10, by S. Heijmans, examines the Jewish Babylonian community and the Geonim. The author compares the Babylonian and Tiberian vocalizations. This chapter offers one of the most developed descriptions of the text-community. The chapter also includes a helpful introduction to the history of scholarship.

Chapter 11, by G. Khan, surveys the history of the Karaites. The chapter addresses their relationship to the Masoretes and the evolution of their transcription system. The section on orthography introduces readers to the Arabic script and Classical Arabic orthography, and the Karaite vocalization system. Volume 2 demonstrates the fusion of the Arabic script and Tiberian diacritics from several Karaite manuscripts.

Chapter 12, by J. Yahalom, introduces the Palestinian reading tradition. The discussion of the speech community focuses on the vocalization system rather than the sociolinguistic backdrop of this corpus. There are helpful charts that compare the Palestinian and Tiberian vocalizations. The readings in Volume 2 include an example of serugin writing.

Chapter 13, by H. Gzella, describes the Tiberian-Palestinian system, which combines aspects from both vocalization traditions. The section entitled “speech community” offers a description of this corpus and the relationship between its manuscripts. The author
combines the discussion of orthography, phonetics, and phonology into a single section that compares the Tiberian-Palestinian, Palestinian, and Tiberian reading traditions.


Chapter 14, by Y. Ofer, provides helpful introduction to the MT and its significance for the study of Hebrew and biblical literature. The author discusses the evolution of the Tiberian tradition and how it became the most well-known system of vocalization and the basis for most grammars of Biblical Hebrew. This chapter focuses upon the differences between the Leningrad and Aleppo codices; this corresponds to a reading of Isa 46:10–48:1 in volume 2.¹ The author also discusses the differences between the works of Ben Asher and Ben Naftali. Readers are introduced to the Masorah Magna and Parva and the distinctions between the qere and ketiv.

Chapter 15, by M. Bar-Asher, introduces Tannaitic Hebrew and its impact on the transmission of biblical Hebrew. The author focuses on examples where Tannaitic Hebrew elucidates the MT.

Chapter 16, by A. Maman, concludes the handbook with a discussion of the social spaces in which biblical texts are read and transmitted in diverse Jewish communities. Readers are then prompted to compare different readings of Exod 14:30 as read by members of the following communities: Lithuania, San’a, Georgia, Portugal, Cochin, Yzad, Baghdad, Aleppo, Constantine, Tafilat, and Djerba. The author also compares two modern Israeli Hebrew readings: Exod 14:30 read by Mr. Shlomo Bertonov in 1959 and Exod 14:30–15:27 read by Mr. Amikam Gurevitz.

3. Readership, Observations, and Suggestions

While handbooks of Hebrew abound, this collection of essays does not stop with a technical linguistic treatment but introduces readers to the communities using and preserving these texts. The authors collectively present a nuanced history of Biblical Hebrew that traces its evolution from a spoken and written Iron Age language to a language used in more specialized contexts. The handbook’s primary achievement is the inclusion of lesser-known religious and scholarly communities. Those who do not have access to the Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics edited by Geoffrey Khan et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2013) or who would like a convenient collection of articles and accompanying primary texts will find this a helpful resource. This broad perspective

¹ Note: the sample texts for this chapter are blurry and challenging to read. Readers may opt to read the pertinent passages online (e.g., the online Aleppo Codex).

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could fill a lacuna in the education of most students, especially those unfamiliar with the reading traditions of the Samaritans, Karaites, and modern Jewish communities.

I have some suggestions about the scope and organization for future editions. The introduction would benefit from a clearer discussion of what is meant by biblical and Biblical Hebrew and how the selected texts fit into this matrix. That is, it should be clearer how the editors and authors understand biblical as an adjective, how this informs what they consider to be Biblical Hebrew, and the criteria that they used to select the sample texts in volume 2. I would suggest that an instructor who wants to use this volume as a textbook (or the like) start with the introduction to the MT in chapter 14 and then progress to the material in part 1 of the handbook that delineates the strata of Hebrew reconstructed from this vocalization tradition.

Future editions may benefit from greater coordination between the various chapters. For example, the authors of the chapters on SBH and LBH might consider showcasing complementary readings in Kings and Chronicles. In chapter 5, the Gezer Calendar is cited as an early Hebrew inscription; however, this classification is debated. Part 3 would benefit from a section that situates the Septuagint in the history of Hebrew and textual criticism. It would be helpful (when possible) to have a shared sample text, used by all authors in part 3. Chapter 16, for example, presents Exod 14:30 as read in multiple reading traditions. A similar sample text used by all authors in volume 2 would offer readers a quick means of comparing the vocalization systems. This could also be achieved with a chart at the end of volume 2 featuring the same passage in diverse vocalization systems.

The sample texts in volume 2 are a useful point of departure, but their overall presentation could be more accessible to nonspecialists. The readings corresponding to the chapters on SBH, ABH, TBH, and LBH (part 1) are not needed in the handbook. These are accessible texts that are available in print and online. Instead, volume 2 would benefit from more commentary, transliterations, translations, and images of the lesser-known inscriptions and manuscripts. This would obviate the need for students to purchase other versions of these texts; this would have the added benefit of making the handbook a more comprehensive and cost-effective resource.

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2. For example, the designation biblical has been problematized recently in E. Mroczek, The Literary Imagination in Jewish Antiquity (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).
Perhaps due to the narrowed scope of the handbook, some chapters offer minimal engagement with scholarly debates. Those using this handbook in a classroom setting may consider supplementing it with a fuller discussion of the dating of biblical texts and how this informs scholarly reconstructions of the history of Hebrew and the political history of this region more broadly. Part 1 of the handbook can also be buttressed with readings on the issue of Hebrew dialects. I would also suggest supplementing the handbook with a general overview of the history of textual criticism to introduce students to key terminology and method. In more advanced courses, I would recommend some engagement with recent scholarship on the complex relationship between speech and writing. This is a growing subfield at the crossroads of sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, and visual design that may enrich the study of the vocalization systems introduced in the handbook.

I have a final suggestion about the scope of the individual chapters. Chapters 1–13 include a short introductory section entitled “speech community,” which is an important and needed contribution. Framing the language of these texts in sociolinguistic terms reminds readers of the people using and transmitting these inscriptions, scrolls, and manuscripts. This focus on the sociolinguistic backdrop of these text traditions is commendable. However, the individual authors appear to have different understandings about what the term speech community means and how to apply it to their respective corpora. This lack of consensus is not surprising; there is ongoing debate among sociolinguists about how to define this term and its overall usefulness as a subject of study.

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consider the “community of practice” as an alternative unit of study.⁹ The community of practice articulates the ways in which linguistic practices are conditioned by shared practices and the social spaces in which they are performed.¹⁰ The understanding is that participation in activities and the transmission of those practices will inform a group’s linguistic practice and sociolinguistic competence.¹¹

Using the community of practice as a locus for the production and transmission of Biblical Hebrew may better address the complexity of this process. The transmission of these texts and reading traditions involved diverse people who participated in a shared scholastic, intellectual, and religious enterprise. In many cases, the Hebrew reflected in these texts was not used outside of very narrow religious and scholastic contexts. The transmission of these reading traditions and their respective corpora involved much more than linguistic training; it entailed technical skills and sociolinguistic competence about the appropriate use of the text and its transmission to subsequent generations. For the above reasons, rather than limit these texts to indices of speech communities of biblical Hebrew, the editors and authors may find the community of practice to be a helpful means of addressing its diverse and complex history. This may also better facilitate discussion of the literacy practices that informed the production and use of these texts and the complex matrix spoken and written and performed Hebrews reflected in the handbook.

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9. A community of practice is defined as “an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations…. a CoP is different from the traditional community, primarily because it is defined simultaneously by its membership and by the practice in which that membership engages” (P. Eckert and S. McConnell-Ginet, “Think Practically and Look Locally: Language and Gender as Community-Based Practice,” Annual Review of Anthropology 21 [1992]: 464). This concept was first developed to explain learning processes (see J. Lave and E. Wenger, Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991]).
