

Correspondence: Those Hebrew Vowel Points again.

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Editor's explanatory note: Whilst reviewing Dr. Stephen Westcott's first ever translation and publication of John Owen's "*Theologumena Pantadapa*" (Biblical Theology) in BRJ No.16 (Oct. - Dec 1996) the editor drew attention favourably to John Owen's thesis therein which claimed that the Hebrew text of the Old Testament was written with vowels and not only consonants right from the time at least of Ezra the Scribe in the 5th Cent. BC. At Owen's time, the School of Saumur in France was putting forward the theory that the ancient Hebrew text consisted only of consonants, that the vowel signs were late, and invented by the Masoretic scribes of the period 600 - 1000 AD, and that consequently these vowel signs were not inspired by God. This logically led on to raising serious doubts about the meaning and veracity of the Hebrew text. Owen, along with the Buxtorff's, the Continental printers of the Hebrew text, held that the vowels were there from antiquity, and that the ancient scribes from the time at least of Ezra were guided by God in their transmission of the Hebrew text.

Today's modern critical scholarship almost completely reflects the view promulgated by Saumur, and Owen's view is effectively laughed out of court even in many Calvinist circles..

Subsequent to our review of "*Theologoumena Pantadapa*", Dr. Ella wrote enthusiasti-ally endorsing Owen in BRJ No.17 (Jan- March 1997). Against this, BRF Committee mem-ber Mr. Michael Kimmitt put in a counter argument based on modern scholarship, with a view to eliciting more detailed comments and data on this matter.

Dr Ella has responded to Mr. Kimmitt, and herewith we print that response.

The issue is important, as it deals with the veracity of the Old Testament Hebrew text, the providential preservation of the same, and the matter of establishing firmly its meaning.

For the uninitiated reader, the following line of print is in Hebrew. The main letters are the consonants, and the various vowel points are the tiny marks seen underneath them.

וַיְהִי־עָרֵב וַיְהִי־בְּקָר יוֹם שְׁנִי

Dr. Ella.

The editor invited readers to respond to Mr Kimmitt's correspondence in the July-Sept. 1997 edition of the BRJ as my previous letter had prompted Mr Kimmitt's response. Like Owen, whom Mr Kimmitt should re-read to thorough-ly ascertain the facts, I would agree that Hebrew pointing is older than Ezra but reached its full seven vowel representation in Ezra's day. I would certainly deny out-right with Owen and Gill, for the strongest reasons, that the Masoretes invented Hebrew pointing. Nor did the Masoretes themselves claim such an honour. The word 'Masorete,' of course, means 'transmitter' not 'inventor'. Nor would I, in

keeping with Owen, be foolish enough to deny the existence of un-pointed texts as I have struggled with them often enough as did Owen, Gill, Hervey etc.. Gill's evidence was submitted solely to prove the antiquity of pre-Masoretic pointing and the validity of Christ's words. As Mr Kimmitt has rejected such strong evidence and as this will undoubtedly confuse, indeed dismay, a number of readers, I must press with more evidence, this time my own. I am not in my element here as I am an amateur like Mr. Kimmitt, but I shall strive to keep to historical fact backed by circumstantial evidence.

Mr Kimmitt states that when Aramaic replaced Hebrew as the spoken language, it was the vowel letters which assisted pronunciation, as they, of course, assisted the meaning. He dates this move around the seventh century a.d., thus pre-dating the supposed Masorete period by several centuries (cf. Rowley). As Biblical Aramaic is just as old, or even older, than Biblical Hebrew, as witnessed by Gen. 31 :47; Ezra 4:8-6: 18, 7: 12-26; Jer. 10: 11 and Dan 2:4-7:28, this linguistic clash must have taken place up to 2,000 years b.c.

Thus however 'conservative' Mr Kimmitt is in dating the Masoretes, he is still some 2,500 years and more out in his dating of the Hebrew-Aramaic shift. The need for such a pointed text would have been all the more apparent during the Exile and especially during the inter-testamental period where Greek had completely taken over from Hebrew-Aramaic.

Actually, Mr. Kimmitt is defeating his own Masorete theory here as Ben Asher and Ben Naphtali, who are supposed to have been the brains behind the Masorete vowels, wrote around the year 1037 and so were not around to do their work according to Mr. Kimmitt's dating. So what he is effectively saying, is that vocalisation was pre-Masorete after all!

Mr Kimmitt well illustrates my point that linguistic research has slept since Owen's and Gill's days as, following modern scholars, (such as Weingreen: "A Practical Grammar for Classical Hebrew" Oxford Univ. Press 1959) he refuses to follow linguistic rules (lexicology, lexicography, sound shifts etc.,) historical written evidence and archaeological findings apart from a brief look at "one or two sections" of a text of unsure date used by the Qumran sects who were neither Christian nor traditional rabbinic in their culture.

The argument that no written vowels were found in such a small specimen therefore no vowel signs ever existed in Hebrew is like arguing that the presence of the much used abbreviation "cntd." in English proves that the word spelt "continued" was unknown.

Furthermore, Mr Kimmitt appeals to both the Masoretic texts and the Dead Sea Scrolls for authority. This is like keeping one's cake and eating it as their orthographical traditions are different. If Mr. Kimmitt were to study closely the scroll sections he cites, he will find that he has not even quoted all the consonantal vow-

els then extant and, contrary to his explanation concerning their length, they obviously signify vowel quality not quantity. In retracing the development of Hebrew pointing, one notes that languages move from the analytical to the synthetic (more complicated to less complicated, cf. Anglo-Saxon and Modern English) so that simpler forms of spelling, syntax and grammar take over from more complex forms. One feature of this is that vowel characters (but also consonants dependent on vowels) become redundant.

One only need compare English with the Slavic languages, German, Swedish and Italian to observe this. Indeed the irregularity of English orthography as compared with Italian is almost solely traceable to its redundant vowel letters and diacritical marks. Now, Mr Kimmitt speaks of only 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet. He reaches this number by discarding all vowel letters and older consonants. However, the Old Semitic language Ugaritic (cf. Ras Shamra) of 1,400 years b.c., has at least 30 letters, including vowels. If Mr. Kimmitt adds the seven Masoretic vowel signs to his 22 consonants (actually there are 23), we reach the old total of 30. We need not go as far back as Ugarit as Babylonian texts from the Exile onwards boast seven clearly defined vowel signs representing eleven vowels of various length and quality (See Rosenthal).

We must also take into consideration that the vowelised consonants Mr Kimmitt mentions, used primarily as matres lectionis, diphthongs etc. developed alongside pure vowel characters as soon as Hebrew began to leave the Sinaitic picture language, their various usages being determined by locality, customs, traditions, conditions, outside influence, pronunciation and, of course, the material written on. This is exactly the same with non-Semitic languages (cf. the distinctions of pronunciation between the 'W' in William and the 'W' in Wilhelm, and the 'y' in yellow with the 'y' in baby). Nor, again, has Mr Kimmitt taken into account that both liturgical and Biblical texts with pointing have been used in worship alongside Torah texts without pointing since way back in history.

My own personal theory here, which I admit, I have never seen documented, but I shall give it for what it is worth, is that Hebrew went through a two-fold development from a picture language into dialects using either an alphabetic language or a syllable language, the non vocalised texts being a direct development of the syllabic script, each consonant carrying a certain vowel value as in modern Guess/Sequoia Cherokee. The full alphabet script tradition was carried on in the Palestinian, Babylonian and Tiberian forms, with the former two placing the vowel letters over the consonants and the Tiberian method placing them below the consonants (exception Cholem, the long 'o' vowel).

Indeed, Arabic, which is a very old language has perhaps vestiges of both these forms as dots are present even in their alphabetic consonants. Evidence suggests, in fact, that the Masoretes used Koran-School Arabic as a basis for their own method

of vocalisation. This would perhaps help to explain the existence of both plene scriptum (Mr. Kimmitt's vowelised consonants [now silent] with vowel signs) and defective scriptum (vowel signs and sounds standing in their own right). If Mr Kimmitt's private research has brought to light non-pointed texts demonstrably older than the oldest known vocalised texts, and if he has real proof that the latter developed from the former, he must publish his findings at once as they will be sensational! Bodmer, for instance, argues that the hitherto supposed oldest part-MS is the Prophet Codex (Kairo). This is not only a pointed text but is covered in an embarrassment of diacritical signs. Dating such MSS has become mere guess work however, as so-called modern experts date vocalised Hebrew automatically late as they say it must be post-Masoretic. This reminds one of the argument-in-a-circle dating methods used in palaeontology.

However, even the most ardent Tiberian enthusiasts accept that the Masoretic pointing is based on older pointing (cf. Babylonian, Syrian, Palestinian, Samaritan etc.) and was in no way a sudden development. Indeed, the fact that the Masoretes have left so much vocalisation as it was and merely expressed their different opinion in the margin (the so-called Masora, e.g. the circellus, qere, qere perpetuum, kitib, puncta extraordinaria, etc.), show that they indeed wished to transmit and not alter.

Even if Mr Kimmitt were correct in his theory, better proof is needed than his and he needs to examine the vast evidence against him rather than place the onus of proof and hard study on others.

With reference to Mr Kimmitt's 'nib' theory (See BRJ No. 19 page 48) based on modern printer's Aramaic block fonts, it is almost unnecessary to state that Hebrew writing from Sinaitic days to Christ's was vastly different to modern printing. Even today, there are many Hebrew fonts which are almost nibless, with different letters sometimes carrying nibs and sometimes not. The older the script, the less 'square' the letters and the less nibbed. Even a Yod has nibs in some later scripts. If we look at Mr Kimmitt's Dead Sea Scrolls again, we see how they contradict his presentation of Daleth and Resh as neither have nibs, which, by the way, can be used to show an ancient date, the nibs being most likely developed later to help in letter recognition (see the difficulty the LXX translators had in distinguishing the two letters in old Hebrew texts). To prove his point Mr Kimmitt will have to show that Jesus had neither a Proto-Sinaitic, Sinaitic, Byblian (Abibaal), Canaanite, Chaldee etc. etc. alphabet in mind. Indeed, we have extant nibless texts dating almost 2,000 years b.c.. Nehemiah and his contemporaries certainly used a non block non-nibbed form.

However, the whole discussion is hypothetical as Christ clearly refers to the Yod and the Chirek, i.e. the smallest consonant and the smallest vowel respectively. That Mr Kimmitt should claim that this argument is irrelevant (with an exclamation mark to boot!) is unfortunate. Rather than take Christ's words at their face value, he would transcribe them as "Neither the smallest consonant will disappear, or, at least,

not the nibs on it, nor the nibs on the larger ones either,” which would logically mean that the majority of characters, with or without nibs, including Mr Kimmitt’s Resh, will all vanish, thus contradicting the obvious meaning of Christ’s words that nothing will disappear.

Gill argued that Christ’s mention of Chirek or the dot is linguistically exact as all Hebrew vowels were originally expressed in dots. I have seen old MSS myself in which even Patach and Kamets (formed by lines) are presented in dots. This, too, is a widespread linguistic ‘law’ - see modern Swedish ä = å and perfectly feasible. Pointing, of course, is not restricted to Hebrew; dots, dashes, diacritical signs and accents being used to represent vowels, breathings, nasalisation, spirantisation, etc. in a host of other languages and language families since earliest times, becoming less and less as languages become more synthetic. Again, use of the ASCII code in modern computer programming is robbing our languages of further diacritical signs.

With the development of the mass-copying of texts in hand-writing and printing, many of these vowel and diacritical signs disappeared as they were time-consuming, most difficult to form and cut out and eye-straining to set. Remember Jerome (c. 340-420) complaining that he could not read the vowel signs by candle-light - Mr Kimmitt would say, “Because they were not there!”

The Hebrew Old Testament was one of the first books to be printed, one page to a block being carved out. The tiny pointing must have been a headache indeed to cut out and readily abandoned. This was hundreds of years before type setting was invented.

I must mention in concluding an amusing story here concerning that learned Hebraist Ivan Engnell to illustrate the point made above. After failing utterly to comprehend Weingreen, I was blessed with Engnell’s *Grammatik i Gamaltestamentlig Hebreiska* whilst studying at Uppsala. Engnell loved to take snuff. He took it in the usual Swedish way, thickly ground, moist, taken up with all five fingers and stuffed behind the upper lip and top teeth, then sucked in with a violent intake of breath through the teeth. Then a passionate sneeze. After such an intake of snuff, Engnell went to the printers with his MS of the above-mentioned book under his arm. On collecting the proofs, he had to reach for more ‘snus’ (Swedish for snuff) to steady his nerves. The printer, having no knowledge of Hebrew, had taken all the sneezed-out snuff spots for vowels and diacritical signs and had type-set and printed the lot. It was no wonder that after this experience, Prof. Engnell started to teach Hebrew reading from radicals (consonants) alone, dispensing with vowel signs.

I admit that the last word has not been spoken but as long as we have the Word of Christ and pre-Incarnation data to back up ancient vocalisation, all the good arguments are on the side of those who plead for the antiquity of pointing in the Hebrew language.