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Citation
Suchard, B. D. (2020). The origins of the Biblical Aramaic reading tradition. *Vetus Testamentum*, *71*(1), 105-119. doi:10.1163/15685330-12341443

Version:	Publisher's Version
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Downloaded from:	https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3250003

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

BRILL

VETUS TESTAMENTUM (2020) 1-15

Vetus Testamentum
brill.com/vt

The Origins of the Biblical Aramaic Reading Tradition

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Abstract

The many *qere* notes in the Aramaic passages of the Hebrew Bible show that the Biblical Aramaic reading tradition goes back to a different variety of Aramaic than the consonantal texts. While this *qere* dialect differs in important respects from every well-attested dialect of Aramaic, it closely resembles a small number of documents from first- and second-century CE Palestine. This suggests that this was the time and place at which the reading tradition was fixed, not just of the Biblical Aramaic portions of the Hebrew Bible, but of the Hebrew Bible in its entirety.

Keywords

Biblical Aramaic – *ketiv* – *qere* – Biblical reading tradition – Aramaic dialectology

1 Introduction

The question of the linguistic background of Biblical Aramaic has received much attention.[1] Due to the setting and contents of Ezra and Daniel, the two books that make up practically all of the Biblical Aramaic corpus, this question is not just of linguistic significance. A large part of the Aramaic text of Ezra consists of supposed quotations of Achaemenid imperial correspondence, which could provide us with much information about Persian administration

1 E.g., Driver, "Aramaic"; Baumgartner, "Aramäische"; Rowley, *Aramaic*; Kutscher, "הארמית"; Kitchen, "Aramaic."

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in general and the history of Judah in the Persian period in particular, if authentic. Daniel, on the other hand, is set in the Babylonian and early Persian period, but contains some prophecies that are particularly relevant to political developments of the second century BCE. Conservative scholars have tried to show that Daniel's Aramaic matches its setting, supporting the idea that the book contains accurate prophecies that antedate the events they describe, while scholars who are more critical of this dating have pointed out the late features that would date the book's composition to the Hellenistic period. The debate continues, but the majority opinion seems to be that the Aramaic parts of Ezra contain some authentic Persian-period material, which has been (heavily) edited and linguistically updated,[2] while the Aramaic of Daniel completely postdates the Persian period.[3] The language of both books is strongly rooted in Achaemenid Imperial Aramaic, with innovative features mixed in, possibly drawn from one or more Palestinian vernaculars. Linguistically, it occupies an intermediary position between Imperial Aramaic and the Aramaic of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

As is the case for Biblical Hebrew, the Masoretic Text of the Biblical Aramaic corpus occasionally notes a discrepancy between what is known as the *ketiv* ("written") and the *qere* ("read"). In these cases, the vocalization indicated by the Masoretes belongs to a different form, the *qere*, than that indicated by the consonantal text, the *ketiv*. For example, in Dan 2:22, we find the form וּנְהֹורָא, seemingly with *yod* as a *mater lectionis* for *holem*.[4] The marginal note ק ונהורא indicates the *qere* (abbreviated as ק), with the expected *waw*; this is the form that the vowel signs actually belong to, not to the *ketiv* ונהירא. Scholars have disagreed over the origin and purpose of these notes. The most recent discussion is that by Michael Fox,[5] who convincingly argues that the marginal notes were aimed at copyists and alerted them to likely misspellings of the consonantal text. Fox does not believe that the *qere* results from oral transmission, pointing out that in some cases, the *ketiv* and the *qere* are homophonous, e.g., (Hebrew) *ketiv* לא "not," *qere* לו "to him," both pronounced as *lo*; here, an unremarked upon vocalized form לֹא would simply have yielded the correct pronunciation. But it seems clear that the reading tradition of the Hebrew Bible recorded by the Masoretes was the result of oral transmission; the alternatives, e.g., that it was invented by the Masoretes themselves, do not stand up

2 E.g., Grabbe, "Persian 'Documents'"; less skeptically Williamson, "Aramaic Documents."

3 As was already convincingly demonstrated by Driver, "Aramaic," and Baumgartner, "Aramäische."

4 The so-called *circellus masoreticus* above the *he* directs the reader or copyist to the marginal notes, much like an asterisk or a footnote mark in English texts.

5 Fox, "Qeré."

to scrutiny.[6] Thus, the most likely interpretation is that the *qere* notes did not warn against just any copying error, but specifically warned the copyist against correcting the *ketiv* to the form he would expect based on the reading tradition (as the name *qere* suggests). We may then interpret a note such as that in Dan 2:22 as meaning "ונהירא, sic, do not write ונהורא even though that is what you expect based on the reading tradition." The same goes for the homophonous cases, where a copyist might, in the example given, be inclined to write *lo*—known to him from the reading tradition—as לו in a verse where it meant "to him"; the *qere* note serves to highlight the written text's divergence from the orally transmitted text here as elsewhere. *Pace* Fox, then, where the *qere* and the *ketiv* are not homophonous, the *qere* preserves the form as passed down in oral transmission.[7]

In the example of Dan 2:22, the *qere* ונהורא probably preserves the older form, attested in other forms of Aramaic, while the *ketiv* ונהירא, with *yod* for expected *waw*, is probably due to scribal error; the two letters are easy to confuse. A large proportion of the *ketiv-qere* cases in Biblical Hebrew are like this: often, one of the two readings makes better sense, and the other is secondary. In Biblical Aramaic, however, we find a large number of *qere* notes of a different type. A striking class of examples involves the grammatical suffixes and pronouns of the third person feminine plural. In the consonantal text, these are not distinguished from the third person masculine plural forms, but in many cases, the *qere* does have a separate, feminine form. This occurs in the perfect, e.g., אתעקרו, *qere* אֶתְעֲקַרָה "they (f.) were uprooted" (Dan 7:8); the imperfect, e.g., ידורון, *qere* יְדוּרָן "they (f.) will dwell" (Dan 4:9); and the pronominal suffixes, e.g., כלהון, *qere* כֻּלְּהֵין "all of them (f.)" (Dan 7:19). In all these cases, we see that the *ketiv* is identical to the masculine forms (for these examples, יְדוּרוּן, אֶתְעֲקַרוּ, and כֻּלְּהוֹן), while the form preserved in the oral transmission of the reading is not. The discrepancy between the *ketiv* and the *qere* in these examples is too consistent to be attributed to scribal error. Other attempts to explain it away as secondary are also problematic. Given the generally conservative nature of the Jewish reading tradition, it seems unlikely that a grammatical distinction was introduced to the oral text if it was not originally present there. Another option would be that the consonantal text was systematically altered to merge the third person feminine and masculine plural forms. But besides the questionable motivation for such a change, especially given the sacrosanct status of the consonantal text, this is made highly unlikely by the

6 As was definitively established by Gesenius, *Geschichte*; see Schorch, "Gesenius' Evaluation." Cf. Levin, "Qeri."

7 Cf. Morrow, "Kethib and qere."

fact that this merger is attested in Imperial Aramaic,[8] but not in later forms of Aramaic. It is implausible that copyists systematically differentiated the consonantal text from the reading tradition by introducing an old, most likely extinct feature; it is much more probable that the consonantal text never distinguished the third person masculine and feminine forms to begin with. Like a number of other systematic differences between the *ketiv* and the *qere*, which we will examine later on, it cannot have arisen through sound change during the oral transmission of the biblical reading tradition either.[9] Thus, the masculine–feminine distinction is original to the reading tradition, while the lack of such a distinction is original to the consonantal text. This leads us to a surprising conclusion: the Biblical Aramaic reading tradition is not directly based on the consonantal text. Given the nature of the discrepancies we find, it rather seems that they reflect two different forms of Aramaic, two different dialects.[10]

The linguistic background of the Biblical Aramaic reading tradition, then, must be investigated separately from that of the consonantal text. An overwhelming majority of the scholarship focuses only on the latter. While the linguistic differences between the *ketiv* and the *qere* are often acknowledged in passing, I found only two papers that look into the origin of the *qere* in its own right: an article by William Morrow and Ernest Clarke and a reply by Steven Fassberg.[11] Morrow & Clarke are largely concerned with the *ketiv-qere* phenomenon in general. Based on a comparison with epigraphic sources, they trace the Biblical Aramaic reading tradition back to a Palestinian dialect spoken sometime between the second and sixth centuries CE. They leave non-epigraphic sources such as the Targums out of consideration, since their provenance is less certain than that of epigraphic texts. Fassberg points out that this excludes some of the most relevant data, particularly those from Targum Onqelos and the Second Column of the Hexapla. As we shall see, especially the Aramaic of Targum Onqelos shares a number of morphological features with that of the Biblical Aramaic *qere*. Although we do not know exactly when and where Onqelos and the Second Column were composed, the justified assumption that they originated in the first centuries of the Common Era motivates Fassberg to place the *qere* dialect in the Middle Aramaic period as well, one or several centuries before the date proposed by Morrow & Clarke.

8 Ben-Ḥayyim, "Third Person Plur. Fem."; Muraoka and Porten, *Egyptian Aramaic*, 101–104.

9 Suchard, "Sound Changes."

10 I will use the term *dialect* to refer to different varieties of Aramaic. This is not meant to imply anything about their sociolinguistic status or mutual intelligibility.

11 Morrow and Clarke, "*Ketib*/*Qere*"; Fassberg, "Origin."

Both Morrow & Clarke and Fassberg leave room for further investigation. The periods in which they situate the *qere* dialect are characterized by an enormous diversity in Aramaic dialects; the lack of a unified standard language, like Imperial Aramaic in the Achaemenid period, allowed many of these dialects to surface in writing, together with various mixtures of vernaculars and older writing traditions.[12] A careful consideration of all these sources may allow us to pinpoint the *qere* dialect and its linguistic and social background with more precision. Besides enhancing our understanding of Biblical Aramaic, this would shed new light on a host of related issues. The linguistic landscape of Roman Palestine, the interaction between vernacular speech and orally transmitted reading traditions, the mutual influence between Biblical Aramaic and Biblical Hebrew, and the status of Daniel and Ezra in the Jewish canon, for instance, all tie into the question of the origin of the Biblical Aramaic *qere*; new insights into the latter will certainly affect our appreciation of these topics. Most excitingly, a better understanding of the Biblical Aramaic *qere* can tell us something about how, why, when and where the reading tradition of the Hebrew Bible came to be fixed in the first place, a question that remains far from settled.

In this article, we will try to pinpoint the time and place in which the *qere* dialect was used. The main features of Biblical Aramaic that indicate characteristic features of the *qere* dialect are the following:

1. The retained gender distinction in the third person plural already mentioned;
2. the *ketiv* with *yod* vs. *qere* with *aleph* in the adjectivizing "nisbe" suffix, as in *ketiv* כסדיא, *qere* כַּסְדָּאֶה "the Chaldean" (Ezra 5:12);
3. the *ketiv* with *aleph* vs. *qere* with *yod* in the plural of participles of hollow verbs like *ketiv* קאמין, *qere* קָיְמִין "standing (m.pl.)" (Dan 3:3);
4. the merger of possessive suffixes used with plural nouns and after some prepositions with those used with singular nouns, as in *ketiv* רגליה, *qere* רַגְלֵהּ "its (f.) feet" (Dan 7:7);
5. the form of the second person masculine singular independent pronoun: *ketiv* אנתה vs. *qere* אַנְתְּ;
6. the vocalization of the preposition כלקבל "according to," etymologically כְּ- "as" + לָקֳבֵל "before," as כָּל־קֳבֵל, indicating the absence of this preposition from the *qere* dialect;[13] and

12 For an overview, see Gzella, *Cultural History*, 212–281.

13 But note that the *ketiv* also writes this as two separate words, making the analysis of this feature more complicated. Perhaps a word space was inserted during the transmission of the consonantal text; alternatively, the presumably artificial form **kull qubil* may already

7. the absence of a vowel between the second and third radical in all forms of the geminate verb עַל "to enter," as in *ketiv* עללין, *qere* עָלִין "entering (m.pl.)" (Dan 4:4; 5:8) and *ketiv* עללת, *qere* עַלַת "she entered" (Dan 5:10).

Items 1–4 will be of most use in identifying the origin of the *qere* dialect. There are also some points where the *ketiv* and the *qere* systematically agree where it would have been easy to mark a discrepancy,[14] indicating that the *qere* dialect matched that of the consonantal text here. Two such features that are relevant for classification are the reading of the third person masculine suffix on plural nouns as *-ohi* and the non-assimilation of *nun* preceding another consonant, both of which are illustrated by the form אַנְפּוֹהִי "his face." We will first consider how well these features match the forms of Aramaic that *prima facie* have the highest chance of being closely associated with the *qere* dialect.

2 The Likely Suspects: Aramaic Varieties of Palestine

Some basic facts about the Biblical Aramaic reading tradition allow us to narrow down the search for its ancestral dialect. From a certain point onwards, Aramaic can be divided into Eastern and Western dialects.[15] The Eastern group is characterized by a number of shared innovations, such as the use of the masculine plural emphatic state ending *-ē* for older *-ayyā*, the formation of derived stem infinitives like *qaṭṭōlē* rather than older *qaṭṭālā*, the use of the emphatic state for indefinite nouns, and the incipient use of personal pronouns as a copula.[16] As the Biblical Aramaic *qere* contains none of these typically Eastern features, we may safely restrict our search to the western part of the Aramaic language continuum. Furthermore, as we are concerned with a part of the reading tradition of the Hebrew Bible as preserved by Jews, it stands to reason that we are looking for a variety of Aramaic used by Jews, which excludes Christian Palestinian and Samaritan Aramaic. Temporally, we are looking for a dialect in use between the time of the composition of the Biblical Aramaic texts—so from the Persian period onwards, to be generous—and the fixing of the Masoretic vocalization from the eighth century CE onwards.[17] This delimitation gives us three prime suspects: first, Imperial Aramaic or a late offshoot

have been current in the literary variety in which the Biblical Aramaic texts were composed, in which case this is not a case of *ketiv-qere* discrepancy.

14 Cf. Muraoka and Porten, *Egyptian Aramaic*, 15–16.

15 Cf. Fitzmyer, "Phases"; Breuer, "Aramaic," 617.

16 Cf. Nöldeke, *Kurzgefasste Syrische Grammatik*; Levias, *Grammar*. Note that Syriac does not form derived stem infinitives like *qaṭṭōlē*, but rather like *mqaṭṭālū*.

17 For this dating, cf. Khan, *Short Introduction*, 43–44.

thereof; second, the dialect attested in documents from the Judean Desert and other epigraphic sources from Roman Judea termed "Old Judean" by Beyer;[18] and third, the later stage of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic, occurring in several distinct varieties.

The Biblical Aramaic consonantal text is close enough to Imperial Aramaic that we should not expect an Imperial Aramaic reading of the texts to result in the attested discrepancies. Yet we do find these discrepancies, and in most cases, Imperial Aramaic sides with the Biblical Aramaic consonantal text against the reading tradition. The merger of the third person plural, a typical feature of Imperial Aramaic not attested in the reading tradition,[19] has already been mentioned, as has the shift of *yod* to *aleph*, which did not affect Imperial Aramaic.[20] The contraction of the diphthong **ay* in suffixes is not attested in Imperial Aramaic, either.[21] The Biblical Aramaic reading tradition, then, is not directly descended from Imperial Aramaic. Similar considerations apply to the language of most of the Aramaic texts from Qumran. While these have eliminated some of the typical features of Imperial Aramaic, such as the merger of the third person plural, they do not share most of the innovative features found in the Biblical Aramaic reading tradition.

The non-Qumranic epigraphic sources from Roman Judea seem like a promising candidate. Like Imperial Aramaic and Qumranic Aramaic, however, most of them are too dissimilar from the Biblical Aramaic reading tradition to reflect the dialect we are looking for. There is little in these fragmentary texts to go by, but there is one attestation, at least, of a third person masculine singular suffix showing the more innovative form *-oy* rather than Biblical Aramaic *-ohi*;[22] the form is עלוי "on him" in a letter of Shimon bar Kosiba.[23] Another letter attests the lack of *yod* to *aleph* shift in the form רֹהומיֹה "the Romans."[24] In the roughly contemporary ossuary inscriptions, we also find the more progressive spelling of an *n*-cluster in אתת "wife of," although more conservative אנתת also occurs.[25] No innovations found in the Biblical Aramaic reading tradition are attested, so there is no reason to assume any particular affinity between these dialects.

18 "Altjudäisch"; Beyer, *Aramäischen Texte,* 50.

19 Muraoka and Porten, *Egyptian Aramaic*, 101–104.

20 Muraoka and Porten, *Egyptian Aramaic*, 25.

21 Beyer, *Aramäischen Texte*, 451–452.

22 A similar loss of **h* is already attested once at Qumran in the form אחוי < **ʔaḥūhī* "his brother" (1QapGen 21:34), but this is taken as a scribal error by Cook, "Aramaic," 366. I thank the anonymous reviewer of this article for pointing this out to me.

23 NḤ 54:16.

24 NḤ 56:5.

25 Beyer, *Aramäischen Texte*, 518.

Finally, it would not be surprising to find a match with Jewish Palestinian Aramaic, attested both epigraphically and in important Jewish texts such as the Palestinian Talmud and various Targumim and Midrashim. But the dialects reflected in these texts are far too linguistically advanced to have served as the basis for the Biblical Aramaic reading tradition. Like the Bar Kosiba letter just mentioned, Jewish Palestinian Aramaic usually has *-oy* for the third person masculine singular suffix on plural nouns.[26] The other suffixes do not match the Biblical Aramaic forms either, e.g., third person feminine singular *-eh* on plural nouns instead of Biblical Aramaic *-ah*.[27] The typically Western Aramaic third person feminine plural perfect ending *-e* is not reflected in Biblical Aramaic either, although it could easily have been indicated in the vocalization. Furthermore, Jewish Palestinian Aramaic regularly assimilates all *n*-clusters[28] and retains the *y* in contexts like those of the *nisbe* ending.[29] Here too, then, we are dealing with a different variety of Aramaic than reflected in the Biblical Aramaic reading tradition.

3 An Unexpected Match: Texts From the Tannaitic Period

None of the epigraphically attested dialects of Aramaic we have examined so far has the right set of isoglosses to be the precursor of the Biblical Aramaic reading tradition. While frustrating, this is not necessarily a great surprise. Given the large dialectal variation we may suppose for the linguistic landscape of ancient Palestine, there must have been many varieties of Aramaic that have not reached us in writing. But in fact, there is some more evidence to consider: a small number of texts originating in Pharisaic and early Rabbinic circles of first-century CE Palestine.[30] Since these texts are not epigraphically preserved but were transmitted by copyists, we must be more critical when interpreting

26 Also attested in the phrase כפתוי דשמשון "the binding of Samson," occurring in a Masoretic note on Gen 42:24. This clearly shows that the *qere* dialect was distinct from the Aramaic used by the Masoretes, contradicting the frequent assertions made about the influence of the Masoretes' vernacular on the Biblical Aramaic vocalization.

27 Fassberg, *Palestinian Targum Fragments*, 115.

28 Fassberg, *Palestinian Targum Fragments*, 68.

29 Fassberg, *Palestinian Targum Fragments*, 159, 188.

30 The Aramaic phrases in the Mishnah will not be discussed. In the few cases where they attest diagnostic features, they often do not match the *qere* dialect, e.g., מטיפיך "those (m.) that drowned you (m.sg.)" (m. Avot 2:6), with preserved *yod* in the suffix. While these features may have been introduced in transmission, the texts give us no indication of a more original stage that more closely resembled the *qere* dialect.

their linguistic form, but as we shall see, they contain some remarkable features when compared to the Biblical Aramaic reading tradition.

First, there is the language of Targum Onqelos and Targum Jonathan, the Aramaic translations of the Pentateuch and Prophets, respectively, that were officially endorsed by Babylonian Jewish authorities. Considering the features of the *qere* dialect identified in the Introduction, we find that Targum Onqelos and Jonathan match all of the features on which the Biblical Aramaic *qere* disagrees with the *ketiv*. Indeed, the close resemblance of the Biblical Aramaic *qere* to the language of Targum Onqelos was already noted by Fassberg.[31] Further comparison shows that it is not exactly the same dialect, however: for instance, the third person feminine possessive suffix is *-hå* as in *bənáhå* "her children," not *-h* as in the Biblical Aramaic *qere*, and **n* is consistently assimilated to a following consonant. Given the closeness of these two varieties of Aramaic, it remains likely that they originated in a similar time and place. The origins of Targum Onqelos and Targum Jonathan are still debated, however; the consensus places their oldest layers in Roman Palestine of the first centuries CE,[32] but this remains conjectural.[33]

A closer match appears in the language of the Fast Scroll, *mḡillaṯ taʿănîṯ*, a document listing thirty-five days in the Jewish calendar on which it was forbidden to fast, mentioning joyous events (from a nationalist Judean, Pharisaic point of view) that took place on those dates. Based on the historical events that can be identified, the Fast Scroll was probably composed between the years 41 and 70 CE.[34] While it is more laconic than we might like, the Fast Scroll shows multiple attestations of a feature that is also characteristic of both the Biblical Aramaic reading tradition and Targum Onqelos: the change of intervocalic *yod* to *aleph* before stressed vowels. Following the text of the Parma manuscript,[35] we find this sound change attested in לאתענאה "to fast" (line 2), דימוסנאי "the publicans" (11), רומאי "the Romans" (16), לאיתאה "to bring" (28), and in ליהודאי "to the Judeans" (37). Two shared retentions are also attested. The older form of the first person plural perfect and possessive suffix is preserved in תבנא לדיננא "we returned to our law" (12). This may be contrasted with the innovative forms like *-an* attested in later dialects.[36] And the old form of the third person masculine singular suffix is preserved in the form עלוהי "upon himself"

31 Fassberg, "Origin"

32 Cf. Kutscher, "Language"; Breuer, "Aramaic"; and Gzella, *Cultural History*, 308–310 and sources cited there.

33 For other recent proposals, cf. Cook, "New Perspective"; Müller-Kessler, "Earliest Evidence."

34 Noam, "Megillat Taanit."

35 As presented in Noam, "Megillat Taanit."

36 Fassberg, *Palestinian Targum Fragments*, 116.

in the last line. Thus, while we have little to go on, the Fast Scroll matches the Biblical Aramaic reading tradition in every visible isogloss.

This is enticing, but perhaps not entirely convincing. Some support comes from an even shorter document, or rather three documents: three letters from Rabban Gamliel quoted in the Tosefta and the Talmud.[37] It is debated whether the texts mean to attribute these letters to Rabban Gamliel I, a contemporary of Jesus of Nazareth and his apostles, or his grandson, Rabban Gamliel II, the leader of the academy at Yavneh around the year 100 CE.[38] Significantly, all three letters start with the formula לאח(א)נא בני "to our brothers, the inhabitants of," followed by the name of one or more areas. Right away, this presents us with one of the most characteristic isoglosses shared by the Biblical Aramaic reading tradition and Targum Onqelos: the loss of *yod* in suffixed plural nouns—a feature that we might now also wish to identify in the Fast Scroll's phrase תבנא לדיננא, which we may then interpret as "we returned to our laws," plural, a reading which is supported by the use of plural דיני "laws of" in the Hebrew commentaries appended to the Fast Scroll.[39] The first letter, which is addressed לאחאנא בני גלילא עילאה ובני גלילא ארעאה "to our brothers, the inhabitants of the Upper Galilee and the inhabitants of the Lower Galilee," furnishes us with two examples of the *yod* to *aleph* shift. And where visible, the letters retain conservative features also preserved in the Biblical Aramaic reading tradition, viz. the first person plural suffix נא- and the non-assimilation of *n*- clusters, as in ושפר באנפאי ובאנפי חבראי "and it seemed good to me and to my colleagues."

Given the many different combinations of conservative and innovative features that might happily coexist in any variety of Aramaic, the presence in these texts of exactly the same innovations also found in the Biblical Aramaic reading tradition, and no others, can hardly be due to chance. But could it be due to secondary scribal activity? The Talmudic versions of the Gamliel letters, for instance, contain some clear Babylonianisms, such as the Eastern Aramaic infinitive לאפרושי "to separate" and, in some manuscripts, the verbalized participle מהודענא "I am informing." These features do not tell us anything about the Aramaic originally underlying the passage. In the case of the Tosefta passage and the Fast Scroll, however, such later corruptions are less evident. With the exception of a partially Babylonianized infinitive לאפוקא "to take out" in the

37 T. Sanh. 2:6; b. Sanh. 11b; y. Sanh 18d; y. Ma'as. Sh. 56c. The version in the Vienna manuscript of the Tosefta seems to have undergone the least influence from Jewish Babylonian Aramaic; hence, this text will be cited in the present paper.

38 Pardee, *Handbook*, 195.

39 Noam, מגילת תענית, 86–87.

Vienna manuscript of the Tosefta, no characteristically Eastern Aramaic features occur. Influence from Jewish Palestinian Aramaic does not explain much, either; none of the features these documents share with the Biblical Aramaic reading tradition are characteristic of that dialect. On the other hand, the *yod* to *aleph* shift in the *nisbe* also occurs in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, and while the shape of the suffixes נא- and והי- is not productive in either Western or Eastern post-Imperial Aramaic, these forms could have been introduced from the Biblical Aramaic consonantal text, as could the writing of *n*-clusters.

The potential authenticity of these features is attested by some epigraphic material we have not yet considered: the corpus of legal documents from the Roman period found in the Judean Desert. While these texts are mostly fragmentary, they show a striking resemblance to the dialect underlying the Biblical Aramaic reading tradition on the one hand and the language of the Gamliel letters in the Tosefta and the Fast Scroll on the other. The largest cluster of relevant features occurs in Babatha's ketubbah (NḤ 10): here, we find the shift of *yod* to *aleph* in ויה[ו]דאי "and the Judeans" (5), the writing of *n*-clusters in e.g., אנתה "you" (8), and the loss of **y* in a suffix in קדמך "before you" (15). Other documents attest the preservation of the והי- suffix.[40] These documents therefore show that the typical features that the Fast Scroll and the Gamliel letters share with the Biblical Aramaic reading tradition would not be out of place in Roman Palestine, supporting their originality.

The Fast Scroll, the Gamliel letters and the Judean legal documents thus all seem to reflect a variety of Aramaic that matches the one underlying the Biblical Aramaic reading tradition in all important features. It is not too far a leap to assume that this was, in fact, the same kind of Aramaic: the Biblical Aramaic reading tradition was originally fixed in the dialect reflected in these documents from the transitional period between late Second Temple Judaism and the beginning of Rabbinic Judaism.

4 Conclusion

The closest match to the Aramaic dialects underlying the Biblical Aramaic reading tradition is thus found in documents from the generations that witnessed the destruction of the Second Temple and the birth of Rabbinic Judaism. Moreover, this dialect survives in texts with a clear Pharisaic or early Rabbinic slant (unlike, e.g., the texts from Qumran, although most of these are probably a bit older). It is striking that we find the best evidence for the dialect

40 E.g., P. Yadin 47:19.

underlying the Biblical Aramaic reading tradition in the three letters from Rabban Gamliel, especially if he is to be identified as Gamliel II. According to later traditions, this head of the academy at Yavneh played an essential role in the preservation and reformulation of Judaism after the end of the Second Temple period.[41] An anecdote related in the Mishnah (Rosh Hash. 2:8–9) shows Gamliel exercising his authority to enforce the uniformity of the Jewish calendar, an issue which also seems to be a driving force behind the letters to various communities in the Land of Israel and the Diaspora that we are concerned with; similar incidents portraying Gamliel II as an authoritative voice promoting uniformity and quashing dissent are narrated in the Talmud.[42]

While we should be hesitant to base far-reaching conclusions on limited linguistic evidence, this social backdrop nicely complements the dialectological reasons for positing a first-century CE Palestinian origin for the Biblical Aramaic reading tradition. The reorganization of Jewish religious life after the loss of the Temple required many decisions to be made, and if the later traditions about Rabban Gamliel are reliable, Jewish authorities of the time were intent on establishing hard and fast rules and eliminating ambiguity. The correct pronunciation in the reading of Scripture would be one area in which no disagreement could be tolerated. Ancient reading traditions of especially the Hebrew part of the Hebrew Bible must previously have existed, but given both the great diversity of Second Temple Period Judaism and the continued existence of Hebrew as a spoken language, we should expect there to have been many different ways of reading the Biblical texts; the aberrant Hebrew of the Great Isaiah Scroll found at Qumran may provide evidence for this. The minor Aramaic sections, on the other hand, may well have been read in whatever dialect a reader was most comfortable or familiar with. That precisely the variety of Aramaic attested in the late Pharisaic texts we have seen would provide the authoritative reading of the Biblical Aramaic corpus and would go on to result in the Masoretic vocalization of that corpus suggests that this permissive attitude to the reading of Scripture was given up. From now on, there was to be only one acceptable way to read the Hebrew Bible, which had to be passed on orally. While we have reached this conclusion on the basis of the Biblical Aramaic reading tradition, the fact that the latest sound changes to have affected Biblical Hebrew were equally operative in Biblical Aramaic strongly suggests that the Biblical Hebrew reading tradition was fixed at the same time.[43]

41 Cf. Alon, *Jews*, 119–131, 253–287.

42 E.g., b. Ber. 27b–28a.

43 Suchard, "Sound change." Cf. the reduction of unstressed short vowels in open syllables, *bgdkpt* spirantization, or phonetic changes like the assimilation of vocal *sheva*,

Acknowledgment

The research presented in this paper was funded by a grant from the Stichting Studiecentrum voor Judaïca en Hebraïca L. Fuks. Parts of its contents were first presented at the Hochschule für Jüdische Studien Heidelberg, the 13. Mainz International Colloquium on Ancient Hebrew, and the 2018 Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. I am grateful to the attending audiences for their comments. I would also like to thank Ian Young, Marijn van Putten, and an anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments on earlier drafts; all remaining erros are my own.

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all of which affect Biblical Hebrew and Biblical Aramaic in exactly the same way, while other dialects of Aramaic that share in these developments often show a subtly different conditioning.

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