Sound change in the Hebrew reading tradition

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1 Introduction

This paper is about the language of the Jewish canon: the Hebrew Bible. Also known as *tanaḵ*, an acronym for *tōrō* (Pentateuch), *nḇīʔīm* (Prophets) and *ḵtūḇīm* (Writings), it roughly corresponds to the Christian Old Testament. Like the Epic Greek texts that form the main topic of investigation in this volume, the Hebrew Bible is largely the result of Iron Age literary production in the Eastern Mediterranean; a more superficial resemblance is its division into 24 books, like the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. Most relevantly for present purposes, however, the Hebrew Bible as we know it is also the product of an oral tradition, albeit a different kind of oral tradition than the one underlying the works of Homer. This paper investigates to what degree this corpus retained its phonological independence from the vernacular forms of Hebrew and Aramaic spoken by the people who transmitted it.

2 Tiberian Biblical Hebrew as an Oral Tradition

The dating of the Biblical texts is controversial, but the *communis opinio* is that they were composed throughout the first millennium BCE.[1] A language similar to that preserved in most Biblical books is attested in epigraphic Hebrew texts from the first half of this millennium, especially those from the kingdom of Judah, where the largest part of the Hebrew Bible was presumably written (cf. Hendel and Joosten 2018, 60–72). From the sixth century onwards, Judah was incorporated into a succession of world empires: after being conquered by the Neo-Babylonian Empire, it was passed on to the Achaemenids, to Alexander and his successors, and after about a century of regained independence, to the Romans. During this period, the Judahite[2] vernacular underwent a number

1 For a more extensive overview of the linguistic situation in this region and period, cf. Lemaire (2006).

2 More properly 'Judean' from the Hellenistic period onwards due to the different names used to refer to the area: the pre-Hellenistic name 'Judah' (pre-exilic Hebrew **yahūdā*, Biblical

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of changes. Besides the introduction to the region of Hebrew's close relative Aramaic as a major spoken language, the vernacular Hebrew of the time seems to have been quite different from the language reflected in the earlier Biblical texts, which is often referred to as Classical Biblical Hebrew. Compared to the latter, it showcases both contact-induced similarities to Aramaic and some independent innovations; later, this language would surface in writing as Rabbinic Hebrew (also known as Mishnaic Hebrew). Biblical texts composed in this post-exilic period (referring to the sixth-century Babylonian Exile) tend to show some degree of interference from the vernacular, but Classical Biblical Hebrew was maintained as a literary norm.

The texts of the Hebrew Bible, produced throughout this period, are written in the Hebrew alphabet. Originally, this only expressed consonants; later on, it developed ways to indicate the presence of vowels, if not their exact quality, through the use of consonantal signs. Gemination, too, remained unexpressed. Thus, this consonantal text left out a large amount of phonological information. Someone who knew Hebrew could supply this information from their own knowledge of the language, but after the death of Hebrew as a spoken language in the second century CE, this became more difficult. The texts of the Hebrew Bible, which had now achieved a sanctified status in Judaism and played an important role in religious services, continued to be read. Instead of relying on their knowledge of Hebrew grammar, readers now passed on the correct pronunciation orally from teacher to student. After several centuries of this oral transmission, the prestigious reading tradition used in Tiberias, a major centre of Jewish learning in Galilee, was recorded in writing around the 8th–10th centuries CE. This was accomplished through the addition of supra- and sublinear dots, lines and other symbols, indicating the vowels, gemination, different realizations of consonants that were written with the same letter, and chanting instructions. But the oral tradition recorded in the Tiberian vocalization did more than just provide the phonological information that was absent from the consonantal text: to a certain degree, it was an oral corpus of its own, independent from the consonantal text. The reading could deviate from the written consonants, as illustrated by the following examples; in each case, (a) gives the consonantal text and (b) gives the text read according to the Tiberian reading tradition:

Hebrew *yhūḏ(ō)*) was replaced by 'Judea' (Greek 'Ιουδαία, probably a back formation from 'Ιουδαῖος 'Judean, Jewish' < Aramaic **yəhūdāy* 'idem').

(1) a. *bʔwt* *npšw*
'in the desire of **his** soul' (Jeremiah 2:24)
b. *bʔawwaṯ* *napšɔ̄h*
'in the desire of **her** soul'

(2) a. *ʔšr tʔmry* *ʔʕśh*
'what you say, I will do' (Ruth 3:5)
b. *ʔăšɛr-tōmrī* ***ʔēlay*** *ʔɛʕĕśɛ*
'what you say **to me**, I will do'

(3) a. *ky* *ʔmnm* *ky* ***ʔm*** *gʔl* *ʔnky*
'although it is true **unless** I am a redeemer' (Ruth 3:12)
b. *kī* *ʔɔmnɔ̄m* *kī* *gōʔēl* *ʔɔ̄nōḵī*
'although it is true **that** I am a redeemer'

(4) a. *lʔkl* *ʔt* ***ḥryhm*** *wlštwt* *ʔt* ***šynyhm***
'eating **their shit** and drinking **their piss**' (2 Kings 18:27)
b. *lɛʔĕḵōl* *ʔɛṯ-ṣōʔɔ̄ṯɔ̄m* *wlištōṯ* *ʔɛṯ-mēmē raḡlēhɛm*
'eating **their excrement** and drinking **the water of their legs**'

As these examples show, vowels and consonants could be read that did not match the consonantal spelling (1); words that were lacking from the consonantal text could be added (2) or words present in the consonantal text could be left out of the reading (3); and in a few cases, the text was even radically altered for the sake of propriety (4). The consonantal text was left unaltered, but the vocalization reflected the traditional reading even where this disagreed with the consonants; where this disagreement was more pronounced, this resulted in oddities such as free-floating vowel signs with no accompanying consonantal text (as in 2) or completely unvocalized consonantal words (as in 3).[3]

Thus, the Tiberian vocalization reflects an orally transmitted text. This paper will consider to what degree the oral tradition underlying it had a phonological life of its own. As comparison with early transcriptions into Greek shows, the Tiberian reading tradition and its ancestors underwent sound changes. But did they simply participate in whatever sound changes happened to affect the vernacular of their transmitters, or were they independent enough to resist vernacular sound changes, perhaps even undergo sound changes that did not take place in the vernacular? In the following sections, we will identify two

3 See the discussion of all these phenomena in Khan (2020, 33–49).

examples of each type: first, two sound changes that were shared with the vernacular, then two sound changes that affected the Hebrew reading tradition differently from the vernacular. Interestingly, both of the shared sound changes postdate the death of Hebrew, while both of the non-shared sound changes antedate it. As I will propose in Section 5, this suggests that the change in the linguistic status of Biblical Hebrew that was brought on by the death of spoken Hebrew had implications for how it participated in vernacular sound changes.

Before we start, it may be useful to make explicit the terms used to refer to different forms of Hebrew throughout this paper. *Biblical Hebrew* is the language of the texts comprising the Hebrew Bible, minus the Aramaic sections; since the Hebrew Bible contains texts of varied origin, Biblical Hebrew is not strictly one language variety, but rather a collection of varieties. *Classical Biblical Hebrew* is the variety found in most pre-exilic Biblical books, which closely resembles pre-exilic Judahite Hebrew as attested in epigraphy. The *Hebrew reading tradition* is a cover term for the various forms of the pronunciation of the Hebrew Bible as handed down orally once readers no longer spoke Hebrew natively. Finally, *Tiberian Hebrew* is the early medieval version of the Hebrew reading tradition local to Tiberias, as fixed in the Tiberian vocalization.

3 Sound Changes Shared with the Vernacular

3.1 *Schwa Deletion*

In both Hebrew and Aramaic, unstressed short vowels in open syllables were reduced to schwa at a certain point. Given the consonantal nature of the Hebrew and Aramaic writing systems and the lack of a clear way to transcribe schwa in Greek or Latin, this change is somewhat hard to date. What we can see, however, is that a later sound change completely deleted the resulting schwa if this was preceded by an open syllable, as in **malaḵē* > **məlaḵē* > **məlḵē* > Tiberian Hebrew *malḵē* 'kings of'; **šōmerím* > **šōmarím* > Tiberian Hebrew *šōmrīm* 'keeping (m.pl.)'.

One of the sources for the Hebrew reading tradition preceding the Tiberian vocalization is the Second Column of the Hexapla, a six-column edition of the Hebrew Bible featuring the Hebrew consonantal text, the Hebrew text written with the Greek alphabet, and four different Greek translations. The Second Column, containing the transcribed Hebrew text, dates to the third century CE, at the latest (Sáenz-Badillos 1993, 81–82); a linguistic study of a number of reliable textual fragments was made by Brønno (1943). While we cannot be sure that the reading tradition reflected in the Hexapla is the direct ancestor of the Tiberian reading tradition, the two traditions are clearly closely related. Considering the

attestation of schwa deletion in Hexaplaric forms like **dəḇərē* > δαβρη (Tiberian *diḇrē*) 'words of', **bərəṣōnṓ* > βαρσωνω (Tiberian *birṣōnō*) 'at his pleasure', and **bəṣəḏəqāṯáḵ* > βσεδκαθαχ (Tiberian *bṣiḏqōṯḵō*) 'in your (m.sg.) righteousness', we may tentatively date this sound change as having taken place by the third century CE in the ancestor of Tiberian Hebrew, too.

In Aramaic, the vernacular of the time, this change is first attested in the third century CE as well. Beyer (1984, 133) lists **gəḇənín* > γοβνιν 'humps' (Dura-Europos, before 256), **ḥərəšá́* > αρσα 'mute (PN)' (Palmyra, 258) and **zəʕērá́* > ζηρα 'small (PN)' (Galilee, 3rd–4th c.) as datable examples, among others, while earlier inscriptions retain vowels in these positions. Thus, this sound change, which affected the entire Aramaic speech area, may have been operative in the Hebrew reading tradition at the same time as it took place in the vernacular.[4]

3.2 *Rounding of* *ā

Unlike in some Hebrew reading traditions, which preserve its original quality, Proto-Hebrew **ā* appears in Tiberian Hebrew as a back rounded vowel, [ɔː]. For this reason, it is written with the same vowel sign as [ɔ] deriving from Proto-Hebrew **o*. Thus, e.g. **hārāmáṯā* 'to Ramah (place name)' appears in the Tiberian vocalization as *hārōmṓṯō*, pronounced [hɔːʀɔˈmɔːθɔː] (cf. Khan 2020, 608–612). Since this change does not affect all Hebrew reading traditions, it would appear to be rather late, which is confirmed by its non-operation in Hexaplaric Hebrew: here, we mostly find **ā* transcribed with alpha, as in **ʔāḏám* > αδαμ 'man' (Tiberian *ʔōḏōm*), **rāʔəṯá́* > ρααθα 'she saw' (Tiberian *rōʔăṯō*), **lámmā* > λαμα 'why' (Tiberian *lṓmmō*), etc.; it is never transcribed with a rounded vowel (Brønno 1943, 352–355).

Long **ā* was also rounded in geographically western dialects of Aramaic. This change is still reflected in modern Aramaic languages such as Ṭuroyo (< **Ṭūrāyā*; Jastrow 2011, 699) and the Aramaic of Maaloula (Arnold 2011, 687). The oldest attestation of this change in Aramaic is in the western vocalization of Classical Syriac, which uses a vowel sign derived from Greek omikron to write the reflex of **ā*, as in **sūryāyā* > *suryoyo* 'Syriac' (Harviainen 1977, 107–108); as in Tiberian Hebrew, the reflex of **ā* is kept distinct from older **ō* and **o*, which merge with *u* in West Syriac. This provides the rounding of **ā* with a *terminus ante quem* of the 8th century CE, shortly before the fixing of the Tiberian vocalization. The 7th-century transcription of Syriac **lā* 'not' as λα attested once in the area where this change would later take place (Nöldeke 1966, 317) makes it

4 The reading tradition of Biblical Aramaic was affected in the same way (Suchard 2019).

likely that it was not much earlier than this, either. This fits the late date posited for this change in the Hebrew reading tradition, suggesting that this is another instance of a sound change carried over from the Aramaic vernacular.[5]

4 Sound Changes Not Shared with the Vernacular

4.1 *Anaptyxis in Word-Final Clusters*

Due to the loss of word-final short vowels, a large number of Hebrew and Aramaic words ended in a consonant cluster at some point. These were resolved through anaptyxis, insertion of an epenthetic vowel, in the Hebrew names preserved in the Septuagint, the oldest Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (3rd century BCE; Sáenz-Badillos 1993, 80–81). If the preceding vowel was **a* or **e*, we generally find epsilon inserted, as in **hábl* > αβελ 'Abel (PN)', **ʕébr* > εβερ 'Eber (PN)'; if it was **o*, the epenthetic vowel is omikron, as in **mólk* > μολοχ 'Moloch (DN)', **yótr* > ιοθορ 'Jethro (PN)' (Lisowsky 1940).[6] The same epenthesis is occasionally visible in the Dead Sea Scrolls (first centuries (B)CE), where spellings like **qodš* > *q*(*w*)*dwš* 'holiness of' show the use of *w* to spell an epenthetic vowel /u/ or /o/ (Reymond 2014, 181–188). In Late Aramaic dialects like Syriac, the same change has taken place and the epenthetic vowel has attracted the stress; after reduction of the now unstressed first vowel, this results in forms like **kásp* > **kásep* > **kasép* > *ksep̄* 'silver', **qódš* > **qódoš* > **qodóš* > *qḏoš* 'holiness' (Nöldeke 1966, 61).

Although the Hexapla is centuries younger than the Septuagint, it does not attest this anaptyxis. Word-final clusters are simply preserved, e.g. **gaḇr* > γαβρ 'man', **seṯr* > σεθρ 'secret', **qoḏš* > κοδς 'holiness'. One might think that this is just due to different standards in transcription; perhaps the transcribers of the Second Column simply did not indicate epenthetic vowels as a rule, while the translators of the Septuagint did. This divergent behaviour is paralleled, however, by that of the Tiberian reading tradition. Here, most word-final clusters are resolved, but we find two key differences compared to the earlier cases of vowel epenthesis. First, unlike in Aramaic, the epenthetic vowel remains unstressed and the original vowel is preserved, e.g. **kásp* > **kā́sep̄* > *késep̄* (with assimilation of **ā́* to the following **ε*) 'silver', not ***ksep̄* or similar. And second, words containing **o* insert the same vowel as those with **a* or **e*, e.g. **qóḏš* > *qṓḏeš*,

5 Again, the Tiberian tradition of Biblical Aramaic behaves like Tiberian Hebrew in this regard (Suchard 2019).

6 The reconstruction of an original word-final cluster in these names is based on the structurally identical **$C_1aC_2C_3$*, **$C_1eC_2C_3$* and **$C_1oC_2C_3$* nouns (Suchard 2016, 254–256).

not ***qṓḏɔš* or similar. The anaptyctic change that affected the Tiberian reading tradition thus seems to be distinct from that found in the earlier Hebrew and Aramaic sources. It seems possible that like the Hebrew of the Hexapla, the ancestor of the Tiberian reading tradition preserved word-final clusters longer than the vernacular, only inserting epenthetic vowels at a much later date.[7]

4.2 *Word-Final *m > n*

In several forms of ancient Hebrew and Aramaic, we find that the distinction between word-final *m* and *n* is neutralized, since words with etymological **m* are spelled with *n* and vice versa. Most probably, this indicates a change of word-final **m* to *n*, although it is also possible that both nasals merged into another sound, e.g. nasalization of the preceding vowel. Although Greek, which had undergone a change of word-final **m* to *n* at a much earlier point in time, was present in the region, it seems unnecessary to attribute this change to Greek influence.

The first indications we have of this change are found in the Hebrew onomasticon of the Septuagint. While most names are written with their etymological final nasal, we find changes like **ʔatārṓm* > αθαρειν (Tiberian *ʔăṯārīm*) 'Atharim (TN)', **hēmā́m* > αιμαν (Tiberian *hēmɔ̄m*) 'Hemam (PN)', and **rapīḏṓm* > ραφιδειν (Tiberian *rpīḏīm*) 'Rephidim (TN)'. However, many of these names end in the Hebrew plural ending **-ṓm*. In Aramaic, which was well known to the Septuagint translators (Joosten 2010), the corresponding ending is *-ṓn*. Therefore, Septuagint forms such as ραφιδειν may have substituted the Aramaic ending for the Hebrew one. In some other cases, the name is a *hapax legomenon* and of uncertain etymology, raising doubts about whether the Septuagint has changed word-final **m* to *n* or preserves a more original form, in which case the *m*-final forms in the consonantal Hebrew text are secondary. However, the occasional occurrence of hypercorrections, e.g. **ʔēlṓn* > αιλωμ (Tiberian *ʔēlōn*) 'Elon (PN)', **madyā́n* > μαδιαμ (besides μαδιαν; Tiberian *miḏyɔ̄n*) 'Midian (TN)', support some degree of neutralization of word-final nasals, if they are not due to scribal errors. The same situation, with some indications for word-final **m* > *n* but no hard proof, obtains in the Dead Sea Scrolls (Reymond 2014, 66–67).

The change of word-final **m* to *n* is more securely attested in Galilean Aramaic, the language of a number of early Rabbinic literary works (Kutscher 1976, 58–67). In fact, many of these texts are a patchwork of Aramaic and Hebrew,

7 Biblical Aramaic is mixed in this regard, showing both Tiberian Hebrew-like and Aramaic-like forms, sometimes in different attestations of the same word, e.g. **ṣalm* > *ṣélɛm* ~ *ṣlēm* 'image', **ʔalp* > *ʔélɛp̄* ~ *ʔălap̄* 'one thousand'.

both Biblical and Rabbinic; the **m* to *n* shift is also attested in the Hebrew material, but this may be secondarily due to its transmission in a Galilean Aramaic environment. Thus, we find both Hebrew forms like **ʔāḏā́m* > *ʔdn* 'man', **rēqā́m* > *ryqn* 'in vain', and Aramaic forms like **ḥakkī́m* > *ḥkyn* 'wise (m.sg.)', **ḥammī́m* > *ḥmyn* 'hot (m.sg.)'. Here, too, hypercorrections occur, as in Hebrew **lāšṓn* > *lšm* 'language'. Kutscher (1976) also mentions attestations in epigraphic texts from the Jerusalem area, e.g. the personal name **šālṓm* 'peace (PN)' being written as *šlwn* in Hebrew script and as σαλων in Greek, and even finds traces of this shift as far south as Gaza, where we find a city gate called *Bāb al-Dārūn*, interpreted as 'the Southern Gate' based on Rabbinic Hebrew **dārṓm* 'south'.

This sound change simply does not occur in Tiberian Hebrew, nor in the Hebrew of the Hexapla. One might argue that the etymologically correct nasal could easily have been restored based on the consonantal text and that the change might thus have occurred and been reversed. But as we have seen, the reading tradition is relatively independent from the consonantal text; this independence is not limited to the morphological and lexical levels, as in examples (1–4), but extends to the phonology as well. For instance, take the consonantal sign *š*, which was originally used to spell at least two different sounds: a voiceless postalveolar sibilant, [ʃ], and a voiceless alveolar lateral fricative, [ɬ]. This second sound merged with [s] at a certain point, but in the Biblical consonantal text, it is still usually spelled with *š*, not *s*. In the Tiberian vocalization, the two different realizations of *š* are indicated by the addition of a dot to the consonantal sign: if the dot is at the top right, the letter is read as [ʃ], and if it is at the top left, it is read as [s]. In the same way, if word-final **m* had merged with *n*, this could have been indicated in the vocalization without altering the consonantal text. Since no such effort has been made, and since we find little to no vacillation between word-final *m* and *n*—unlike the occasional interchange between consonantal *s* and *š*—it seems that this sound change did not affect the Hebrew reading tradition at all, not even to the limited degree in which we find it attested in the Septuagint and the Dead Sea Scrolls.[8]

8 The incidental cases of final *n* for expected *m* and vice versa may reflect non-phonological processes that were active in the living language, e.g. the occurrence of the masculine plural ending *-īn* for usual *-īm*, normally attributed to contact with Aramaic, where **-īn* is the regular form; or the variation between *gēršōn* 'Gershon (PN)' (a son of Levi) and *gēršōm* 'Gershom (PN)' (normally a son of Moses but mentioned as a son of Levi in 1 Chronicles 6:1), which may reflect different dialectal forms of the same name or the confusion of originally distinct names that happened to sound similar.

5 The Changing Status of Biblical Hebrew

We have identified four vernacular sound changes that could potentially have affected the Hebrew reading tradition. Roughly dated, they are:

- schwa deletion: 3rd century CE in the vernacular (evidence from Aramaic epigraphy), possibly simultaneously in the Hebrew reading tradition (evidence from the Hexapla);
- rounding of **ā*: 8th century CE in the vernacular (evidence from western vocalization of Syriac), probably simultaneously in the Hebrew reading tradition (evidence from Tiberian vocalization);
- anaptyxis in word-final clusters: first centuries BCE in the vernacular (evidence from the Septuagint, Dead Sea Scrolls), later than the 3rd century CE in the Hebrew reading tradition (evidence from the Hexapla);
- word-final **m* > *n*: first centuries BCE (evidence from the Septuagint, Dead Sea Scrolls), more securely before the 3rd century CE (Galilean Aramaic) in the vernacular, not attested in the Hebrew reading tradition.

Although this is only a small number of sound changes, it is striking that the two earlier vernacular sound changes, anaptyxis and word-final **m* > *n*, were not shared by the Hebrew reading tradition, while the two later ones were. The cut-off point seems to lie around the 3rd century CE. This is close to what is often seen as the extinction date of Hebrew as a spoken language, linked to the large-scale expulsion of Jews from Judea following the Bar Kokhba revolt (132–136 CE); for a compelling overview of the arguments for the survival of Hebrew to this date, if not later, see Fassberg (2012).[9]

Besides complicating the transmission of the pronunciation of Biblical Hebrew, the death of Hebrew would also have affected the linguistic status of the Hebrew Bible. As discussed above, a large part of the Hebrew Bible seems to reflect the Hebrew of pre-exilic Judah. After the Babylonian Exile and the concomitant social upheaval, a different variant of Hebrew, the ancestor of Rabbinic Hebrew, seems to have taken over as a vernacular, but the Classical variety continued to form a literary model that was imitated by writers in this period. Typical features of Classical Biblical Hebrew such as the so-called narrative *wayyiqṭōl* tense, which completely disappeared from Rabbinic Hebrew, continued to be used in post-exilic Biblical books like Chronicles, but also in

9 More recently, Gzella (2015, 226–229) has maintained the older position that Hebrew already fell out of everyday use in the Achaemenid period. While he makes a strong case that Hebrew was not the dominant language in post-exilic Palestine, the possibility remains that it stayed alive as a minority language; given the evidence for its continued vivacity until the 2nd century CE adduced by Fassberg, I find this the most convincing scenario.

the sectarian documents among the Dead Sea Scrolls (Abegg 1998, 337–338). In both of these corpora, this and other Classical features occur with lower frequency than in genuinely pre-exilic texts, presumably due to the influence of the vernacular.

Thus, until the first centuries (B)CE at least, the Classical style of Biblical Hebrew remained somewhat accessible to writers as a literary register. Experts in Biblical Hebrew in this period would not only have been trained to read Biblical Hebrew texts, but also to produce texts in the appropriate language. This implies some level of awareness of how the literary register differed in lexicon, syntax, and morphology from the register used for everyday speech. In this context, it seems plausible that readers and writers could take differences in phonology into account, too. Sound changes in the vernacular need not automatically have spread to the literary register.

The death of Hebrew would have severed this connection between Biblical language and everyday speech. Moreover, around the same time, the Jewish canon became fixed.[10] Together, these two developments would have radically changed the nature of expertise in Biblical Hebrew. Previously, an expert in Biblical Hebrew had both passive and active command of what he felt to be a higher register of his own language. Now, only passive command of Biblical Hebrew was necessary, since the closing of the canon made it impossible by definition to produce any new Biblical Hebrew texts; additionally, this was passive knowledge of a fixed corpus in another language, not of a variant grammar of one's own language. That the two sound changes in the Hebrew reading tradition datable to this period are shared with the Aramaic of the time suggests that this new situation made Biblical Hebrew more susceptible to changes in the vernacular. We may conclude that the Hebrew reading tradition largely lost the independent status of its phonology precisely by becoming a reading tradition, when the role of its experts shifted from one somewhat similar to that of an Ancient Greek ἀοιδός to something more like a ῥαψῳδός: as the active command of Biblical Hebrew declined, so did its resistance to sound changes taking place in the everyday language of its readers.

10 Based on the kind of Aramaic that provided the basis for the Biblical Aramaic reading tradition, I have argued that the reading of the Hebrew Bible more generally was stabilized in the late first or early second century CE (Suchard 2021).

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