

On Formal and Informal Spelling of Unpronounced Gutturals

Joseph Naveh

This note dedicated to the blessed memory of the late Professor Abraham Wasserstein was inspired by his study on the Jewish Aramaic transcription of Greek loanwords. Prof. Wasserstein realized that not only the *spiritus asper*, but also *epsilon* or other e-sounds in Greek were transliterated in Aramaic with *he*. He pointed out that even in original Aramaic and contemporary Hebrew words, *he* was used as *mater lectionis* for any e-sound.¹ This note touches upon the subject from the point of view of Aramaic and Hebrew epigraphy.

Epigraphic texts reflect everyday life and bear witness to the language and writing ability of people in the various social classes. These texts were written by professional scribes (in formal bookhand), by educated skilful writers, who were not scribes (in free cursive), and by persons whose writing ability was very limited (in vulgar cursive). The differences can be seen not only in the script, but also in the spelling. The “spelling errors” of the unprofessional writers, and especially of those who wrote in vulgar cursive, provide abundant evidence on the language of the people who wrote these texts.

Thus there were formal and informal spellings. The formal orthography was bound by tradition; the scribe was obliged to write in a conservative manner without innovations. Scribes who strictly obeyed the rules wrote in what we call historical spelling. On the other hand, the spelling of the unprofessional writers, who were not restricted by the rules that were incumbent upon the scribes, very often reflects the current pronunciation. Along with a formal orthography one may discern a phonetic spelling as well.

It is well known that in Jewish Palestinian Aramaic and in contemporary Hebrew the gutturals weakened. There is evidence that not only *alef*, but also *‘ayin*, *het* and *he* were not pronounced. Thus in a Hebrew deed of debt from the second year of the Bar Kokhba Revolt we read *שׂאפּרך בּכּל זמּן שׂתּוּמַר לּי* “that I should repay (it) to you at any time you [te]ll me”. In the word *שׂאפּרך* the *‘ayin* is missing; it should have been *שׂאפּרעך*.² In some synagogue inscriptions (5th-6th

¹ A. Wasserstein, “A Note on the Phonetic and Graphic Representation of Greek Vowels and the Spiritus Asper in Aramaic Transcription of Greek Loanwords”, *Scripta Classica Israelica* 12 (1993), *Ra’anana Meridor Volume*, pp. 200-208.

² M. Broshi and E. Qimron, “An I.O.U. Note from the Time of the Bar Kokhba Revolt”, *Eretz Israel* 20, 1989, 256-261 (in Hebrew); *idem*, “A Hebrew I.O.U.

century) we find interchanges of these letters as a result of the weakening of the gutturals: קרועה instead of קרוחה “bald”; קצע for קצח “black cumin”; מתאסרין for מתעשרין “(they) are to be tithed”; הרה עבידתה חרה אבידתה “this work”.³

On an ossuary from Hizmeh (a village north-east of Jerusalem) antedating 70 CE, the name שמוען בר הושע was inscribed;⁴ another ossuary inscription, from Kefar Shaul (in the western part of the Jerusalem municipal area), reads שמון.⁵ The spellings שמוען and שמון, beside the standard שמעון, remind one of the variations רואש, ראש, רוש, ראש or רוש, זוח, זוחא, זוחא, זוחא etc.⁶ The unstable position of the *waw*, either before or after the unpronounced guttural, also occurs in two jar inscriptions from Masada written by the same hand: טהור לקודש and טהור לקודש; both mean “clean for the hallowed things”. The variations in spelling טהור and טרהר indicate that the *he* was not pronounced, and *tahor* developed (presumably through **toor*) into **tor*.⁷

The last example, in which the *he* was written but not pronounced and medial -o- was spelled either -הו- or -ה- brings us to יהוסף, the common spelling of the name “Joseph” in the inscriptions and manuscripts of the Second Temple and Bar-Kokhba periods. Biblical יוסף does not contain a theophorous element; it is the *hif'il* jussive of the root יסף, meaning “may add”; see Gen. 30:24. The earliest epigraphic occurrence of יהוסף is in a late fourth-century BCE name-list on a papyrus found in a cave near Jericho.⁸ The spelling יהוסף also appears in a more or less contemporary biblical verse (Ps. 81:6).⁹ That the *he* in the name יהוסף was not pronounced is demonstrated by the “spelling error” in the signature of a

Note from the Second Year of the Bar Kokhba Revolt”, *Journal of Jewish Studies* 45, 1994, 286-294; J. Naveh, *On Sherd and Papyrus, Aramaic and Hebrew Inscriptions from the Second Temple, Mishnaic and Talmudic Periods*, 1992 [henceforth *OSP*], 86-89; *idem*, “Hebrew versus Aramaic in the Epigraphic Finds of the Second Temple — Bar-Kokhba Period”, *Leshonenu* 56, 1992, 310-312 (in Hebrew).

³ J. Naveh, *On Stone and Mosaic, The Aramaic and Hebrew Inscriptions from Ancient Synagogues*, 1978, nos. 35, 47, 49.

⁴ N. Avigad, “Jewish Rock-Cut Tombs in Jerusalem and in the Judean Hill-Country”, *Eretz Israel* 8, 1967, 138, Pl. 23:6 (in Hebrew).

⁵ A. Klöner and E. Eisenberg, “A Burial Cave of the Second Temple Period at Kefar Shaul, Jerusalem”, *Atiqot* 21, 1992, 52*-53* (Engl. Summ. on p. 177).

⁶ See E.Y. Kutscher, *The Language and Linguistic Background of the Isaiah Scroll (IQ Isa^a)*, 1974, 20, 166-171.

⁷ Y. Yadin and J. Naveh, “Aramaic and Hebrew Ostraca and Jar Inscriptions”, *Masada I*, 1989, 36; Naveh, *OSP*, 78-79; *Leshonenu* 56, 1992, 304.

⁸ H. Eshel and H. Misgav, “A Fourth Century B.C.E. Document from Ketef Yeriho”, *Israel Exploration Journal* 38, 1988, 164, 171.

⁹ See S.C. Layton, “Joseph in Ps 81:6”, *Biblica* 69, 1988, 406-411.

witness recurring quite frequently in the Babatha deeds: this witness signed in a clumsy hand *בר חנניה*.¹⁰ The variations *יהוסף* and *יהוסף*, beside the original biblical spelling *יוסף* occurring in some contemporary texts, and the fact that in later texts *יוסף* prevailed, corroborate the following assumption.

The spelling *יהוסף* was the result of a hyper-correction based on the analogy with *יהועזר*, *יהונתן*, *יהוחנן*, etc. These and similar names were spelled, as in most pre-exilic Hebrew epigraphical texts from Judah¹¹ and in the majority of biblical texts, with *he*. However, at least from the fourth century BCE on this was a historical spelling. The names were pronounced *יוזר*, *יונתן*,¹² but the formal orthography retained the old *יהו-* spelling, whereas informal spelling reflected the pronunciation, i.e. *-יו*. The spelling *בהו*, instead of *בו*, “in it” in the Hebrew deed of debt mentioned above, is analogous with *טהור*, *יהוסף*, *יהונתן*.¹³

There are other epigraphical indications that *he* was not pronounced. For example, the Hebrew article *ה-* was quite often omitted after the accusative particle *את*, which was reduced to *-ה*, e.g. *השמים* (Murabba‘at, No. 43), *תמקום*, *השבה* (Mur. 44, transliterated below), etc.¹⁴

Since *he* was not pronounced it was sometimes used as initial and medial *mater lectionis*, generally designating an e-sound. In the following examples it replaced initial *alef*: *הלעזר* “Eleazar” on an ossuary;¹⁵ *המה ד-* “the mother of ...” in an Aramaic ossuary inscription from Jericho;¹⁶ *הליא* “Elijah” in Dura Europus.¹⁷ *שהצלכם* (instead of *שאצלכם*) “that (is) with you” in a Bar Kokhba letter from Wadi Murabba‘at (No. 43).

He as *mater lectionis* in medial position occurs in a Bar Kokhba letter from Nahal Hever: *שהתשלחו* “that you should send”; *שהלרבי* “of Rabbi ...” in a lintel

¹⁰ N. Lewis, Y. Yadin and J.C. Greenfield, *The Documents from the Bar-Kokhba Period in the Cave of Letters — Greek Papyri*, 1989.

¹¹ J.H. Tigay, *You Shall Have No Other Gods, Israelite Religion in the Light of Hebrew Inscriptions*, 1986, 53-55.

¹² A fourth-century BCE *Yehud* coin bears the legend *יהוחנן הכהן*; see D. Barag, “A Silver Coin of Yohanan the High Priest and the Coinage of Judea in the Fourth Century B.C.”, *Israel Numismatic Journal* 9, 1986-1987, 4-21.

¹³ *OSP*, 87 nn. 16 and 17; *Leshonenu* 56, 1992, 304.

¹⁴ P. Benoit, J.T. Milik and R. de Vaux, *Les grottes de Murabba‘at (Discoveries in the Judaean Desert, II)*, 1961.

¹⁵ J.B. Frey, *Corpus Inscriptionum Judaicarum* [henceforth *CIJ*], II, 1952, No. 1288, E. Puech, “Inscriptions funéraires palestiniennes: Tombeau de Jason et ossuaires”, *Revue Biblique* 90, 1983, 504, No. 7.

¹⁶ Rachel Hachlili, “The Goliath Family in Jericho”, *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 235, 1979, 42.

¹⁷ *CIJ*, No. 840; Naveh (n. 3), No. 94; Puech (n. 15), 504.

inscription from Dabbura and on a sarcophagus from Beth She'arim.¹⁸ The latter examples were mentioned in Wasserstein's study.¹⁹

Original *het* was very often written as *he*. Cf. in Masada: the nickname בנהנתחמ (instead of בן הנחם "Son of the baker"); the spelling הלקי (instead of חלקי) is a shortened form of חלקיה (Hilkiah).²⁰

The writer of Papyrus No. 44 from Wadi Murabba'at did not distinguish between *he* and *het*; this is not only a graphical matter, but also a reflection of the pronunciation; both original *he* and *het* were mostly written as *he*. The transliterations of Mur. 44 generally distinguish between *he* and *het* according to the alleged meaning of each word in the context.²¹ In the following transliteration there is an attempt to reproduce these letters as they are written:²²

- | | |
|------------------------------|-----|
| [מ]שמעון לישוע בן גלגולה | .1 |
| שלום שתשלה חבי המשת | .2 |
| כי[ר]ין ה[ט]ין [...] ש לביתי | .3 |
| אצלך בדעת ותתקן להן | .4 |
| מקום פניו יהו בו אצלך | .5 |
| חשבת הוּו אים יהפצו לכו | .6 |
| והתחזק והזק תמקום | .7 |
| הוא שלום ופקדתי תמי | .8 |
| שיתן לך [תה]טין שלה אחר | .9 |
| השבת ישלון | .10 |

1. [From] Shimon to Yeshua' son of Galgula,
2. Greetings! You should send and bring five
3. *ko[r]*s of w[he]at [by men] of my house
4. who are known to you. Prepare for them
5. an empty place. They will be with you
6. this Sabbath, if they wish to come.
7. Be strong and strengthen the place.
8. Be well. I have appointed the person
9. who is to give you his [wh]eat. They should
10. take it after the Sabbath.

The unpronounced but written *alef*, *he* and *het* might cause curious confusions. Incantations against abortion quote Ps. 116:6, שומר פתאים

¹⁸ J. Naveh, "Varia Epigraphica Judaica", *Israel Oriental Studies* 9, 1979, 30-31.

¹⁹ See above (n. 1). To Wasserstein's examples of Greek *ai* (pronounced *e*) transcribed by *he*, one may add the spelling קהי (for *kai* > *kei*); see J. Naveh, "A Greek Dedication in Samaritan Letters", *Israel Exploration Journal* 31, 1981, 220-222.

²⁰ Yadin and Naveh, *Masada I* (n. 7), Nos. 420, 429.

²¹ See, e.g., D. Pardee, *Handbook of Ancient Hebrew Letters*, 1982, 132.

²² Naveh, *Leshonenu* 56, 314.

יהוה דלוחי ולי יהושיע “The Lord preserves the simple-minded (pl.), I was brought low and he saved me”.²³ The writer of an amulet in Late Antiquity, who presumably did not understand the occurrence of this verse in a magic text written for a pregnant woman against losing her foetus, wrote “שומר פתחים יי”י”.²⁴ He might have understood the verse as meaning that the Lord is “שומר *פתחים” “he who preserves the openings (of pregnant women)”.²⁵

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

²³ In Tosephta Niddah II:6, this verse occurs in connection with קטנה, מעוברת ומניקה, i.e. “young, pregnant and women giving suck” (my thanks are due to Dr. M. Mishor for drawing my attention to this reference). In a parallel text, in a *beraita* in BT Yebamoth 12b, שומר פתחים ה' is presumably related to קטנה “the young, 12-year-old unexperienced girl”.

²⁴ J. Naveh and S. Shaked, *Magic Spells and Formulae: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity* [hereafter *MSF*], 1993, Amulet 30:4 (p. 101).

²⁵ In BT Ketubbot 9a, פתח פתוח designates absence of virginity. The scribe of a medieval Geniza magic book, who also did not understand the verse in the context, found another solution; he wrote “שומר פתחים יי”י” “The Lord preserves the simple-minded (pregnant) woman (sing.)”; see *MSF*, Geniza 18, p. 17:8 (p. 196).