

Fundamental Issues in the Study of *Tanakh*
By Rav Amnon Bazak

Shiur #7h: *Nussach Ha-mikra*: Accuracy of the Biblical Text

h. Linguistic Phenomena in the Biblical Text

We often find classical commentators raising different exegetical possibilities that seem to resemble proposals for emending the text. Yet the difference is that they do so within the framework of commentary on the existing text, with an awareness of the various linguistic phenomena that characterize Biblical literature rather than proposing emendations to a text they view as corrupt. Their suggestions once again raise the possibility that even the textual version reflected in the translations was not necessarily written with knowledge of a different version of the text or as a suggested emendation of it, but rather quite simply as commentary on the existing version, based on linguistic phenomena that are prevalent in the Bible. Let us examine two such phenomena.

a. Exchangeability of similar letters

There are many instances in which the commentators note the existence of "exchangeable letters," and explain words in the text on the basis of this principle. Rashi sets forth the rule that letters belonging to the same phonetic group are interchangeable:

"I therefore say that the term '*rakhi*' (gossiper) is related to the idea of going about gathering information (*meragel*), for the letter *kaf* replaces the letter *gimmel*. **The letters that share the same place of articulation are interchangeable:** *bet*, *peh*, and *vav*; *gimmel*, *kaf* and *kuf*; *nun* and *lamed*; *resh*, *zayin* and *tzadi*." (Rashi, *Vayikra* 19:16).

Another example is Ramban's commentary on the verse, "You exhaled (*nashafta*) with Your wind; the sea covered them" (*Shemot* 15:10), where he relates to the exchange of *bet* and *peh*:

"I also maintain that the meaning of this word is as though it were spelled with a *bet* – i.e., *nashavta*, in the same sense as 'when God's spirit blew (*nashva*) upon it' (*Yishayahu* 40:7)... **For these two letters can be used interchangeably**... Likewise in the case of names: Shovakh (II *Shmuel* 10:16) and Shofakh (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 19:16).

The medieval commentators also point out exchanges of the letters *alef*, *heh*, *vav*, and *yud*. For example, in the story of the nation's request that Shmuel anoint a king of them, we read: "But the people refused to listen to Shmuel, and they said, **No** ('*lo*' – *lamed alef*), but let there be a king over us" (I *Shmuel* 8:19). When Shaul is coronated, Shmuel seemingly repeats the nation's words, but here we find,

"And you, today, have despised your God Who Himself saves you from all your evils and troubles, and you have said **to Him** ('*lo*' – *lamed vav*), 'For You shall place a king over us'" (ibid. 10:19).

Radak raises the possibility that in the latter verse, the word "*lo*" is actually meant to reflect the negative connotation of the people's original statement, "**for the letters *alef*, *heh*, *vav* and *yud* are interchangeable.**" It is on the basis of the same principle that Radak explains the exchange of names Peniel and Penuel in *Bereishit* 32:31-32. Rabbenu Bechaye ben Asher, too, invokes the principle of the exchangeability of letters; as an example, he explains the cry of "*avrekh*" (*Bereishit* 41:43), proclaimed before Yosef's chariot, in the sense of "*havrekh*" ("bend the knee"), since "the letters *alef*, *heh*, *vav* and *yud* are interchangeable."

Sometimes we encounter this phenomenon in places where the similarity between the letters is not phonetic but rather graphic. We have already discussed the *dalet* / *resh* equivocation in instances of *keri u-khetiv*. Similar discrepancies are to be found among different manuscripts of the Masoretic text. For instance, in the story of the Giv'onim in *Yehoshua* (9:4), we read: "And they, too, acted with cunning, and they went and took provisions (*va-yitztayar*), and took old sacks upon their donkeys..." The word "*va-yitztayar*" is difficult to understand. Rashi comments: "They pretended to be journeying on a mission; the word recalls the phrase 'an emissary (*ve-tzir*) has been sent among the nations' (*Ovadia* 1:1)," and most commentators follow his lead. However, Targum Yonatan translates this word in the sense of "taking provisions," as though it was written '*va-yitztayadu*,' with a *dalet* replacing the *resh*. Although Radak questions the interpretation of the word in the sense of "provisions," this actually makes sense in view of the continuation of the chapter, where the word "*tzeida*" (provisions) appears several times, and especially the words of the Giv'onim themselves:

"This, our bread, we took for ourselves [still] hot as provisions (*hitztayadnu*) from our houses on the day we set out." (ibid. 12)

For this reason, R. Yosef Kara writes:

"There are some books in which the word appears in the form '*va-yitztayadu*'... Both approaches cite support for their view... But I tend to side with those books which say '*va-yitztayadu*,' based on the mention

further on....”

It should be noted that the version preferred by R. Yosef Kara is also reflected in the Septuagint. In any event, the exchange of *daled* and *resh* in the various manuscripts appears in many other places, too.¹

Sometimes the commentators themselves raise the possibility of explaining a verse on the basis of such exchangeability of letters, even without explicitly citing different versions.² Thus, for example, on the verse, "Trouble and anguish make him afraid; they prevail against him as a king ready to the battle (*la-kidor*)" (*Iyov* 15:24), Rashi proposes:

"I have found no similar word; it should be understood as an interchange of the letters *resh* and *dalet*. Similar examples include 'Ashkenaz and Rifat' in the Torah (*Bereishit* 10:3), vs. 'Ashkenaz and Difat' (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 6). Likewise, we find 'Kittim and Rudanim' (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 1:7);³ here, too, '*la-kidor*' should be understood as the same as '*la-kidod*,' the same king who will eventually burn (*liykod*) in the fire of Gehennom – and that is Sancheriv."

¹ For instance, the author of *Minchat Shai* notes several instances of interchanged *dalet* and *resh* in various manuscripts: *Yehoshua* 15:42 – "...and Duma..." (and accordingly in the Koren edition), while some manuscripts feature "...and Rumah..." (as in R. Breueur's edition; for more see Y. Elitzur, "*Ir be-Sefer Yehoshua u-Techumei Mamlakhto shel Yoshiyahu Teluyim be-Kotzo shel Dalet*," in: M. Bar-Asher (ed.), *Sefer ha-Yovel la-Rav Mordekhai Breuer*, Jerusalem 5752, pp. 615-620); in II *Shmuel* 8:3 and elsewhere we find "Hadad'ezer," while in some manuscripts the name appears as "Hadar'ezer"; I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 12:8 reads "the sons of Yerucham from Gedor", while some manuscripts read "from Gedud"; and many other similar examples. See the commentary of Rav Shmuel bar Chofni Gaon (Greenbaum edition, Jerusalem 5739) on *Bereishit* 41:18 (and editor's note 79).

Sometimes the differences are reflected in the commentaries. For instance, concerning the verse, "For You write bitter things (*merorot*) against me, and make me inherit the transgressions of my youth" (*Iyov* 13:26), Rashbam comments, "'*merudot*' – causing me to rebel (*le-hamrideni*)" (S. Japhet, *Perush Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir [Rashbam] le-Sefer Iyov*, Jerusalem 5760, p. 374). Here, too, the different versions concern an interchange of *dalet* and *resh* as manifest from two manuscripts of *Tanakh* from the Middle Ages (see Japhet, p. 196).

² Several examples in which R. Shmuel David Luzzatto (Shadal) invokes this principle throughout his commentary on *Tanakh* are cited by S. Vargon, pp. 98-110.

³ As opposed to "Kittim and Dodanim" (*Bereishit* 10:4). Radak, commenting on the verse in *Divrei ha-Yamim*, likewise adopts the approach that the *dalet* and *resh* are interchangeable, but he limits this phenomenon specifically to names, based on the assumption that owing to the graphic similarity between the letters, both forms of the name developed:

"Since the form of the *dalet* and the *resh* are similar, among those reviewing books of lineage written in ancient times some would have read [the name] with a *dalet*, while others would have read it with a *resh*, and these names became familiar to people in both forms. Thus it happens that it appears in *Sefer Bereishit* in one form and in this book [*Divrei ha-Yamim*] in the other – showing that both are actually the same name, whether it is read with a *dalet* or with a *resh*. And a similar example is 'Rivleta' (meaning, 'to Rivla') (II *Melakhim* 25:6), with a *resh*, vs. 'Divleta' (meaning, 'to Divla') (*Yechezkel* 6:14), with a *dalet*. Likewise 'Re'uel'" (*Bamidbar* 2:14) with a *resh* and 'De'uel' (*ibid.* 1:14), with a *dalet*."

We may add many further examples to those noted by Rashi, where these letters are exchanged in parallel texts. An example is, "He was seen (*va-yera*) upon the wings of wind" (II *Shmuel* 22:11), as opposed to "He soared (*va-yede*) upon the wings of wind" in the parallel verse in *Tehillim* (18:11). Another example is from the description of the lean cows in Pharaoh's dream: the text describes cows that are "ill favored and lean of flesh (*dakot basar*)" (*Bereishit* 41:3), but when Pharaoh himself retells the dream to Yosef, he uses the expression "*rakot basar*" (ibid. 19).

This may help to solve textual difficulties involving specific words, and sometimes other textual witnesses even provide support for such exegetical possibilities. For example, in the story of the binding of Yitzchak we find,

"Avraham lifted his eyes and he saw, and behold, behind (*achar*) [him] a ram caught in the thicket by its horns." (*Bereishit* 22:13)

The word "*achar*" presents a problem, and the commentators offer different solutions. Rashi explains,

"After (*acharei*) the angel told him, 'Do not lay your hand...!' (ibid. 12), he saw it, caught."

Thus Rashi understands the word "*achar*" as meaning "afterwards" – but this creates a rather peculiar syntax in the sentence. Ibn Ezra rejects this interpretation ("If this were so, the text would say '*acharei*,' '*achar ken*,' or '*acharei zot*,' as it does everywhere else"), and proposes instead, "after (*le-achar*) it was caught in the thicket." The problem with his explanation is that it renders the word "*achar*" superfluous. Commenting on the same verse, the Targum Yerushalmi⁴ explains the word as meaning "one" ("*achad*," instead of "*achar*" – i.e. with the *resh* switched for a *dalet*) – perhaps on the basis of a manuscript that showed this version. The same version, or interpretation, is reflected in the Septuagint.⁵

This interpretation sits well with biblical language in other contexts – first and foremost among them, for our purposes, being the verse in *Daniel* 8:3,

"Then I lifted my eyes and I saw, and behold, there stood before the river a ram (*ayil echad*)"

which would appear to allude to the story of the binding of Yitzchak.⁶ The phenomenon of the Targum offering a version that may be explained in

⁴ On the Targum Yerushalmi and its erroneous attribution to Yonatan ben Uzziel, see R. Yehuda Komlos, *Ha-Mikra be-Or ha-Targum*, columns 748-749.

⁵ As well as in the Samaritan version (Tal and Florentin edition, p. 111), in the Syriac translation (*Peshitta*), and in other sources. See M. Tzippor, *Targum ha-Shiv'im le-Sefer Bereishit*, Ramat Gan 5766, p. 272.

⁶ The expression "And behold... one ..." also appears in I *Melakhim* 20:13; *Yechezkel* 1:15; 8:7, 8; *Daniel* 10:5.

accordance with the principle of interchangeable letters (or on the basis of a different textual version that may have been consulted) exists in various places, as noted by Radak and *Minchat Shai*.⁷

b. A letter or word that should be read as though repeated

Let us now move on to the phenomenon of "economical writing," finding expression in the omission of one of two identical (or similar) consecutive letters or words. Especially prevalent is a situation of two identical letters, one ending a word and the other starting the next word.

Let us first examine some examples where entire words are involved. Rashbam comments on this phenomenon,⁸ noting three instances. The first difficulty arises out of a contradiction between the verse in the Torah,

"And the sons of Elifaz were Teiman, Omar, Tzefo, and Ga'tam and Kenaz. And Timna was a concubine to Elifaz, son of Esav, and she bore Elifaz [a son:] Amalek" (*Bereishit* 36:11-12),

and the verse in *Divrei Ha-yamim*:

"The sons of Elifaz were Teiman and Omar, Tzefi and Ga'tam, Kenaz and Timna and Amalek." (*Divrei Ha-yamim* I 1:36)

Why is Timna, the son of Elifaz, as mentioned in *Divrei Ha-yamim*, not listed in *Sefer Bereishit*? Rashbam explains:

⁷ Let us consider two further examples.

A. In the war of Yisrael and Yehuda against Aram, we find a difficult phrase in the words addressed to Yehoshafat by Achav: "The king of Israel said to Yehoshafat, Disguise yourself (*hitchapes*) and enter the battle, and you – put on your robes. So the king of Yisrael disguised himself and went into battle" (I *Melakhim* 22:30). What is the meaning of the seeming repetition in the words of Achav, and why are we afterwards told that it is the king of Yisrael himself (i.e. Achav and not Yehoshafat) who disguises himself? Targum Yonatan translates the verse as, "**I shall disguise myself** and enter the battle," implying that the manuscript he had in front of him differed from our own one. The same interpretation is reflected in the Septuagint and in the Peshitta, and Radak himself offers a similar interpretation.

B. Before he is executed, Agag says, "Surely the bitterness of death is come (*sar mar ha-mavet*)" (I *Shmuel* 15:32). Most of the commentators interpret the word '*sar*' (spelled *samekh resh*) in the sense of 'coming' or 'passing.' However, Targum Yonatan understands the phrase as an exclamation: "[Please], sir, the bitterness of death!" In other words, Agag is actually trying to arouse Shmuel's compassion, so that he will spare him the death sentence. In any event, the Targum is treating the word '*sar*' as though written with the letter '*sin*' (cf. Targum Yonatan on I *Shmuel* 22:14; *Yirmiyahu* 6:28). For additional examples see Y. Komlos, under "Tanakh, Targumim" in *Encyclopedia Mikrait* 8, Jerusalem 5742, column 745.

⁸ Other commentators follow his example – e.g. Chizkuni on *Bereishit* 36:12; R. Yosef Bekhor Shor on *Bereishit* 36:12.

"I saw in Shochar Tov:⁹ 'and Timna' is connected to the previous verse... and here, too, 'And the sons of Elifaz were Teiman, Omar, Tzefu, and Ga'tam, and Kenaz, and Timna. And Timna was a concubine...." The first Timna is a male, one of the sons of Elifaz; the second is female – 'And the sister of Lotan – Timna.'"

In his view, the word "and Timna" should indeed have appeared here twice – once at the end of the first verse, which lists the sons of Elifaz (and here it refers to the name of a man who was one of Esav's descendants); and again at the beginning of the second verse, as the name of a woman – Elifaz's concubine. The word appears only once, but in terms of the content of the verses it should actually be read twice.

Another example discussed by Rashbam pertains to the description of God's command to Yehoshua to divide the land among the tribes:

"And now, divide this land for an inheritance to the nine tribes **and the half tribe of Menashe**. With him (*imo*) the Reuveni and the Gadi have received their inheritance, which Moshe gave them, beyond the Jordan, eastward..." (*Yehoshua* 13:7-8)

Verse 7 talks about the tribes that are destined to inherit land on the western side of the Jordan, including the half tribe of Menashe; verse 8 deals with the two tribes that have inherited on the eastern side, and hence the expression with which the verse opens – "With him" – is supposed to refer to the half tribe of Menashe that has inherited along with them. Here, too, Rashbam proposes that the words "the half tribe of Menashe" should be read twice:

"We have no choice but to say that the second verse is deficient, for it should have said, 'And the other half of the tribe of Menashe has received its inheritance....'¹⁰

While Rashbam notes only three examples, we may perhaps point to other verses where a similar phenomenon may be proposed. For instance, there is an exegetical question surrounding the well-known verse,

"Speak to all the congregation of *Bnei Yisrael* and say to them, You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy (*ki kadosh ani Hashem Elokeichem*)." (*Vayikra* 19:2)

⁹ This explanation does not appear in the Midrash Shochar Tov as we know it. See Y. Jacobs, "Le-Berur Hekef Hekeruto shel Rashbam im Midrash Lekach Tov," in: A. Reiner et al. (eds.), *Ta Shema – Mechkarim be-Mada'ei ha-Yahadut le-Zikhro shel Yisrael M. Ta Shema*, Alon Shevut 5772, pp. 480-483.

¹⁰ Rashbam's third example pertains to the contradiction between I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 8:35-36 and *ibid.* 9:41-42.

To which part of the verse does the word '*ani*' (I) belong? On the one hand, we may read it as the continuation of the first phrase – "You shall be holy, for I am holy" – as indeed arises from many other verses, such as:

"You shall sanctify yourself and be holy, for I am holy, and you shall not defile your souls... you shall be holy for I am holy." (ibid. 11:44-45)

On the other hand, many of the verses in chapter 19 (e.g., 3, 4, 10) conclude with the words, "I am the Lord your God." Here, too, we might therefore raise the possibility – following the example of Rashbam et al – that the word '*ani*' should be read twice: "For I am holy; I am the Lord your God."

Far more common is the omission of one of two consecutive identical letters, and here too, commentators of different generations have noted the phenomenon. In describing the attitude of Ben-Hadad's servants towards Achav, our Masoretic text reads:

"The men took it for a [good] sign, and they hastily caught at his words (*va-yachletu hamimenu*), and they said, Your brother, Ben-Hadad." (*Melakhim I* 20:33)

However, in some of the Hebrew manuscripts the letters are grouped differently – "*va-yachletuha mimenu*." The same meaning arises from the Targum Yonatan (as well as the Septuagint). Rashi (according to the Keter edition) maintains that the letter '*heh*' at the end of the word '*va-yachletuha*' belongs not just to that word, but also to the beginning of the next word – "*va-yachletuha ha-mimenu*" – meaning, they wondered whether his words had been uttered intentionally.

Another example is to be found in the law obligating one who forces sexual relations upon a woman to marry her if she desires: "he may not send her away (*lo yukhal shalcha*) all his days" (*Devarim* 22:29). There is a linguistic difficulty here, since after the words "*lo yukhal*" the verb should appear as some form of the infinitive, just as it did a few verses previously, with regard to a man who marries and then slanders his wife, claiming that she was not a virgin: "She shall be his wife; he may not send her away (*lo yukhal le-shalcha*) all his days" (ibid. 19). It appears then, that here too the letter *lamed* should be read as belonging to both words: it concludes the word "*yukhal*" and also starts the word "*le-shalcha*."

R. Barukh Epstein, author of the *Torah Temima*, cites (in his commentary on *Bereishit* 14, note 10)¹¹ many instances where, in his view, this phenomenon exists:

"It is the way of the language that in some places, a letter that is at the end

¹¹ We have addressed previously the specific context in which he discusses the phenomenon, with regard to the verse in *Bereishit*.

of a word also serves as the beginning of the following word, where this letter is required there. Hence the letter is omitted from the second word, or from the end of the first word. Examples:

1. "*ba-layla hu*" (on that night) (*Bereishit* 19:33; 30:16; 32:23; I *Shmuel* 19:10) instead of "*ba-layla ha-hu*";¹²
2. "*ozi ve-zimrat Y-h*" (God is my strength and [my] song) (*Shemot* 15:2; *Yishayahu* 12:2; *Tehillim* 118:14) instead of "*ozi ve-zimrati Y-h*";
3. "*hishameru lakhem alot ba-har*" (guard yourselves [not] to ascend the mountain) (*Shemot* 19:12) instead of "*me'alot ba-har*";
4. "*lo tikach ha-em al ha-banim*" (you shall not take the mother with the young) (*Devarim* 22:6) instead of "*me'al ha-banim*" (i.e., "from atop the young");
5. "*lo yukhal shalcha*" (*Devarim* 22:29) instead of "*le-shalcha*";
6. "*va-yikatev sefer zikaron*" (a book of remembrance was written) (*Malakhi* 3:16) instead of "*va-yikatev be-sefer zikaron*" (i.e., "it was written in the book of remembrance");
7. "*yada'ti ki kol tukhal*" (I know that You can do everything) (*Iyov* 42:2) instead of "*ki yakhol tukhal*," and many more such examples."

A more extensive list of this type of linguistic phenomena is to be found in R. Reuven Margalio's work, *Ha-Mikra ve-ha-Masora* (Jerusalem 5749, pp. 66-70).¹³

Thus we have seen that it is possible, from an exegetical point of view, to raise suggestions that explain a word as if it were written differently, but without resorting to the argument that the text is corrupt. In many cases an apparent textual difficulty simply reflects a linguistic phenomenon characterizing the biblical text, rather than evidence of its corruption.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

¹² Indeed, in all three instances that the *Torah Temima* cites from the Torah, the Samaritan text reads "*ba-layla ha-hu*."

¹³ To the examples cited by R. Barukh Epstein and R. Margalio we may add I *Melakhim* 21:21; *Yirmiyahu* 19:15; 39:16 (see also *Bamidbar* 32:42). For further examples taken from the commentary of Shadal, see Vargon, pp. 111-113.