

The Resh Riddle – Identifying the Biblical Hebrew Rhotic

Carlo Meloni and Evan-Gary Cohen

In our study, we propose a reconstruction the Biblical Hebrew rhotic, *resh*, based on an analysis of its phonological behaviour. We examine phonological phenomena related to *resh* on a quantitative basis, and argue that it is best identified as an alveolar tap – ɾ.

In light of the cross-linguistic diversity of rhotics, it can be challenging to identify a rhotic's phonetic realisation in dead, unrecorded languages, such as Latin and Ancient Greek. The same holds for the Biblical Hebrew rhotic. According to some accounts (e.g. Gesenius and Kautzsch 1910; Blau 2010), the Biblical Hebrew rhotic, *resh*, should be categorised as some kind of back consonant, while other accounts (Luzzatto 1853; Harper 1912; Joüon and Muraoka 2006) classify *resh* as an alveolar or dental segment. Others still, such as Khan (2020), relying on Early Hebrew grammarians, reached the conclusion that *resh* had a twofold pronunciation depending on its phonological environment. These accounts were not based on a systematic examination of the phonological phenomena related to *resh*, which suggest that it should be grouped in the natural class of the coronals.

In order to reconcile our account with the grammarians' accounts, we assume a diachronic transition, during which an original alveolar trill lenited to a transitional alveolar tap, which in turn changed into the back consonant described by the grammarians. This assumption is supported by a typological review of the rhotics' diachronic changes. Moreover, we propose a possible timeline for this diachronic change, basing it on extra-Biblical sources, such as transcriptions of Hebrew words in cuneiform characters and in the Greek alphabet, and a comparative examination of the rhotics in the Semitic languages.

Selected References

- Blau, Joshua (2010).** Phonology and morphology of Biblical Hebrew. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns.
- Gesenius, Wilhelm and Emil Friedrich Kautzsch (1910).** Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Harper, William Rainey (1912).** Elements of Hebrew by an Inductive Method. Charles Scribner's sons.
- Joüon, Paul and Takamitsu Muraoka (2006).** A grammar of Biblical Hebrew. Vol. 27. Gregorian Biblical BookShop.
- Khan, Geoffrey (2020).** The Tiberian Pronunciation Tradition of Biblical Hebrew. Vol. 1. Open Book Publishers.
- Luzzatto, Samuel David (1853).** Grammatica della lingua ebraica. Vol. 1. Co' tipi di A. Bianchi.