

A Review of and Observations about Peter Whitfield's *A Dissertation on the Hebrew Vowel-Points*

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Introduction

Although some may surmise that the defense for the inspiration of the Hebrew vowel points is a recent novelty,¹ both Scripture and history argue in favor of their *ab origine* status. Scriptural arguments will be forthcoming whereas historical arguments will proceed immediately. The Yale Sterling Memorial Library in New Haven, CT, is one of eight libraries worldwide that holds the rare work of Peter Whitfield entitled *A Dissertation on the Hebrew Vowel-Points. Shewing that they are an Original and Essential Part of the Language* (Liverpoole: Peter Whitfield, 1748), 288 pp. This is one of several volumes that show the movement in the post-Reformation era to defend the inspiration of the Hebrew vowel points against the 16th century speculation of the likes of Elias Levita and Jacque Cappel (Capellus).² Others in this movement defending the divinely-given vowel points were Johann Buxtorf³ and John Owen (17th century),⁴ John Gill⁵ as well as Whitfield (18th century), and John Moncrieff (19th century).⁶

A Review of Whitfield's *Dissertation*

Whitfield's lengthy volume of 288 pages includes an introduction, ten arguments and a conclusion. Throughout he dialogues with the positions of Levita and Capellus, giving many biblical examples to refute their notion of the novelty of vowel points. In Whitfield's introduction he stresses how the Roman Catholic Church favors Levita's

¹Actually, the novel position is the one that assumes the vowels were not inspired and consequently critical scholars may revocalize the consonants, and this therefore constitutes biblical orthodoxy. One influential new evangelical critic states, "It should be understood that the vowel points were not inserted by the Masoretes to make the consonantal text of the Hebrew Bible accurate by providing vowel sounds until after A.D.600. In most cases we can assume that the oral tradition which was followed by the Masoretic scribes is correct unless there are strong indications in the context that suggest they were in error." Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), p. 63.

²The Reformation (AD 1517) set the stage for the Biblical Criticism movement which challenged all biblical authority, including the inspiration and preservation of the Hebrew vowel points of the OT Scriptures.

³Johann Buxtorf, *Tractatus de punctorum vocalium, et accentuum, in libris Veteris Testamenti hebraicis, origine, antiquitate, & auctoritate: oppositus Arcano punctationis revelato, Ludovici Cappelli* (Basileae: Sumptibus haeredum L. Konig, 1648), 437 pp.

⁴John Owen, *Biblical Theology* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1996 reprint of the 1661 edition), pp. 495-533.

⁵John Gill, *A Dissertation concerning the Antiquity of the Hebrew Language, LETTERS, VOWEL POINTS, and ACCENTS* (London: n. p., 1767), 72 pp.

⁶John Moncrieff, *An Essay on the Antiquity and Utility of the Hebrew Vowel-Points* (Glasgow: John Reid & Co., 1833), 107 pp.

position because it allows the priests to have the final say in interpretation. The lack of authoritative vowel points in the Hebrew Old Testament (OT) leaves the meaning of many words to the interpreter. The following sections in Whitfield's volume are his arguments for the divine origin of the Hebrew vowel points of the OT.

I. The necessity of vowel-points in reading the Hebrew language (pp. 6-46).

Whitfield argues for the obvious necessity of vowels in teaching the Hebrew language. Without vowels simple pronunciations so necessary in learning a language are impossible. He reproves Levita's naiveté in suggesting that the master could teach a child with a thrice-rehearsed effort (pp. 22-23). The author gives several biblical examples proving this necessity.

II. The necessity for forming different Hebrew conjugations, moods, tenses, as well as dual and plural endings on nouns (pp. 47-57).

That both Hebrew verbs, including the seven conjugations, the moods and tenses, and the Hebrew nouns, with singular, dual and plural endings, are based on vowel diagnostic indicators is without controversy. The tremendous complexity of the Hebrew language without vowels argues against any oral tradition preservation inscripturated through the recent invention of vowels. Whitfield poignantly argues "whoever will consider a great many instances of these differences, as they occur, will own, he must have been a person of very great sagacity, who could ever have observed them without the points" (p. 48).

III. The necessity of vowel-points in distinguishing a great number of words with different significations which without vowel-points are the same (pp. 58-61).

Whitfield gives many examples of the same consonants with different points constituting different words. The diacritical mark (dot) above the right tooth or the left tooth of the *shin/sin* letter makes a great difference in some words. He argues that if he gave all the examples, Whitfield would need "to transcribe a good part of the Bible or lexicon" (p. 58).

IV. The inconsistency of the lateness of vowel-points in light of the Jew's zeal for their language since the Babylonian captivity (pp. 62-65).

The Jews were zealous for their language, Whitfield observes, and they would not have been careless to let the inscripturated vocalization disappear through careless or indifferent oral tradition from the time of the captivity onward. He cites several ancient authorities describing the Jews' fanaticism about protecting the minuteness of their Scripture.

V. The various and inconsistent opinions of the advocates for the novelty of vowel-points concerning the authors, time, place, and circumstances of their institution (pp. 66-71).

Whitfield argues that the advocates for the recent vowel system have a wide variety of suggestions. Concerning the authors, some maintain that the inventor[s] were the Tiberian Jews while others suggest that it was Rabbi Judah Hakkadosh (cf. AD 230). Some say the points were invented after the Talmud (c. AD 200-500), by the Masoretes⁷ (AD 600), or in the 10th century or the 11th century. For the place some have posited Tiberias whereas others have suggested the "lesser Asia."

VI. *The total silence of the ancient writers, Jew and Christian, about their recent origin (pp. 72-88).*

Whitfield cites both early rabbis and Jerome as neglecting to refer to the late (post-Mosaic) origin of vowel-points.

VII. *The absolute necessity to ascertain Divine authority of the Scripture of the OT (pp. 89-119).*

The author Whitfield affirms that Scripture is based on words and words are based on consonants and vowels. If there are no vowels in the Hebrew OT originals, then there is no Divine authority of the Hebrew OT Scriptures, he argues, citing II Tim. 3:16. Whitfield then gives a vast listing of passages that change meaning when points are lost, and thereby undermining divine authority.

VIII. *The many anomalies or irregularities of punctuation in the Hebrew grammar (pp. 120-133).*

Whitfield's objection to the novelty of vowel-points is the many exceptions to vowel-point rules, which these anomalies and irregularities demand a codified system for their exceptions to emphasize a particular point of grammar and truth.

IX. *The importance of the Kethiv readings versus the Keri marginal renderings (pp. 134-221).*

The existence of *Kethiv* (Aramaic for "write") readings in the Hebrew text and *Keri* (Aramaic for "call") readings in the margin of Hebrew manuscripts show that the rabbis were serious about preserving the original words, including the vowel-points, when a questionable word arose in a manuscript. The pre-Christian antiquity of the *Keri* readings in the margin demands the pre-Masoretic antiquity of the vowel points.

X. *The answer to two material questions (pp. 222-282).*

⁷This word comes from *masar* and means "to hand down." It is variously spelled and any reference to the Masoretes in this essay refers to their popularization of the pointed Hebrew text. Reference to the Masoretic Hebrew text is similar to reference to the King James Bible. In neither case do advocates promote the Masoretes or King James of England as spiritual worthies.

Whitfield responds to two of three significant questions in this section: 1) why does the *LXX* and Jerome's version differ from the Hebrew text in corresponding vowels on proper names? 2) Why the silence of the Jewish writers on the pointing prior to the 6th century of Christianity? and 3) Why were unpointed copies used in the Jewish synagogues? Briefly, he refutes the first questions by stating that the differences in the translations and the Hebrew pointed texts cannot be attributed to the vowels since the translators obviously did use the pointed copies, and that the Jewish commentators, coeval with the Masorettes, did in fact refer to the points. The third question, answered later in his book, is resolved by the fact that there is no historical proof that unpointed copies were used exclusively in the synagogues.

Conclusion

Whitfield concludes his biblical and linguistic defense of the antiquity of the vowels, saying:

[I]t is manifestly impossible the contrary should be a self evident, incontestible (*sic*), truth; and all the writings which have been published, in favour of the novelty, cannot make it so; especially as, in them all, very imperfect answers have been given to any of these arguments for the antiquity; and the principal have not, so much as, been mentioned. And the character of the learned authors, who have asserted the novelty of the points, is, certainly at least, ballanced (*sic*) by those of the contrary opinion: for against Elias Levita, Capellus, Walton, etc., we need not blush to place the two Buxtorfs...Vander Hooght...Gagnier...Scultens (p. 288).

Some Observations regarding the Inspiration of Hebrew Vowels

The aforementioned writers, who have defended the divine origin of the Hebrew vowel points, including Whitfield, consistently give some basic Scriptural and linguistic arguments that are difficult, if not impossible, to overturn. This present author will revisit Whitfield's first three arguments and give fresh examples from the Hebrew text of Scripture to prove the Biblical necessity of the divinely inspired and preserved Hebrew vowel points.

The Biblical Necessity for Reading and Writing the Hebrew Language

When the Lord renewed His covenant with Israel, He used Moses to write the very same words that were on the initial tablets (Ex. 34:1 ff.). The Lord said to Moses, "Write thou these words: for after the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with thee and with Israel" (v. 27). The expression "after the tenor of these words" (*al piy hadevariym ha'elleh*) could be translated literally "on [the basis of] the mouth of these words." The only way Moses could have written the Lord's spoken words was to hear the vowels in the consonants and then to write the words with the vowels intact. The Mosaic Law, then, constituted the very written words of Jehovah, including the consonants and vowels. Furthermore, the Jews were to obey the Mosaic Law in minute detail, not adding to nor diminishing from it (Dt. 4:2). They were to keep or preserve (*shamar*) the Law

and not forget the things they had seen and were written down in it, and then to teach their children the Mosaic Law (vv. 6, 9, 10; cf. 6:7; 32:46). These verses conclusively argue against any notion that the vowel sounds were merely given to Moses who passed on the oral tradition of the pronunciation until the Masoretes invented a system to approximate the vowels. Levitas' speculation that the Masoretes invented the points has nothing to commend it but has all Scriptural authority to condemn it.⁸

The initial Psalm addresses the blessed man and his responsibility to delight in and meditate on the law of the Lord, stating: "*But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night*" (Ps. 1:2). The word "meditate" comes from *hagah* that means "to mutter" and suggests the deliberate pronunciation of the words of Scripture. It is impossible to recite consonants without vowels and it is impossible to delight (*chaphatz*) in consonants with non-authoritative vowels. Again, the fallacious view that man invented the Hebrew vowel points has nothing to commend it. Is there any reason that Bible believers must countenance the view that the Lord God, the Creator of language, disdains vowels, at least to the extent that He would not preserve them in written form?⁹ After all, has not the Lord Jesus Christ referred to Himself as the *Alpha* and *Omega* (Rev. 1:8; 21:6), the first and last vowels of the Greek language?¹⁰

The Linguistic Necessity for Distinguishing Hebrew Verbs and Nouns.

Hebrew verbs are made up of seven stems, of which are the *Qal* stem and six derived stems, including the *Niphal*, *Piel*, *Pual*, *Hithpael*, *Hiphil*, and *Hophal*.¹¹ These stems apply equally to both the strong and weak verbs. The differentiation of some of these stems is based on complex vowel pointing, without which tremendous confusion abounds. The *Piel* and *Pual* differ from each other and the *Qal* stem only by vowels and diacritical marks. The *Niphal* perfect 3ms (3rd person, masculine, singular), *Niphal* imperfect 1cp (1st person, common, plural), and *Niphal* participle ms differ by vowel points alone, and both may be confused with the *Qal* imperfect 1cp except for the points. The imperfect forms for all of the stems except the *Hiphil* and *Hithpael* are identical without points and consequent confusion would abound without the divinely preserved vowel points. If the stems are significant, which they must be, then their respective

⁸Owens questions the very existence of a 5th or 6th century school of Masoretes, stating "It is said to have been the common work of the school of Massorettes (*sic*) in Tiberias. At least Elias Levita says so...What then if someone should suggest that these Tiberian Massorettes perhaps never did exist at all, and that those who would persuade us that the Massorettes dreamed up the points first dreamed up the Massorettes themselves?" p. 508-509.

⁹Cf. Ps. 12:6-7: "*The words of the LORD are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times. Thou shalt keep them, O LORD, thou shalt preserve them from this generation for ever,*" and Mt. 24:35: "*Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.*"

¹⁰In fact, would not the questioning of the inspired and preserved vowels of the Scripture, Old Testament or New Testament, be constituted as an attack upon the person of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ (Jn. 5:46-47)?

¹¹For the non-Hebraist, these stems are derived from the consonants of the *Qal* (simple) verb and represent the simple passive voice, the intensive active voice, the intensive passive voice, the intensive reflexive voice, the causative active voice, and the causative passive voice, respectively.

vowel differences are significant, and must be carefully maintained to make sense of any given passage.

For example, in Gen. 1:26, Scripture uses the first of several Qal imperfect 1cp verbs (*na`eseh*) for God to designate "let us make" man. However, without vowels this verb could be "he was made" (Niphal [passive] perfect 3ms) or "we will be made" (Niphal imperfect 1cp). Furthermore, the Niphal participle ms without the pointing would be the same consonants and mean "being made." Although some might say that the context would always show which conjugation and tense was divinely inspired, in this case the context would probably eliminate only the participle. Did Jehovah say "let us make" man, or man "he was made," or "we will be made" man?

Another example should suffice for this point. In response to Isaac's query about the animal sacrifice, Abraham answered "*God will provide (yire'eh) himself a lamb*" (Gen. 22:8). Is the verb *Qal* imperfect 3ms and therefore active (God will provide for Himself a lamb) or *Niphal* imperfect 3ms and therefore reflexive (God will provide Himself for a lamb)? The Masoretic text has the former reading and therefore the answer is that God, and no one else, including Abraham, will provide the lamb.¹² Without authoritative pointing, the precise theology required here and elsewhere is forfeited.

With respect to nouns, the endings on masculine nouns are necessary to determine number. In Hebrew nouns may be singular, dual or plural. Examples of dual masculine nouns include things that come in pairs such as hands, feet, eyes, ears, etc. The distinctive ending of a masculine dual noun is *pathach, yodh, chirek,* and *mem,* in contrast to the distinctive ending of a masculine plural noun: *chirek, yodh, mem.* The first verse of the OT Scriptures is instructive. Scripture says, "*In the beginning God created the heaven and earth*" (Gen. 1:1). Without authoritative vowels, one would not know that the word "God" (*'elohim*) is a masculine plural noun and that the word "heaven" (*hashshamayim*) is a masculine dual noun. The Masoretic text teaches that the plural Godhead created the two heavens (first and second).¹³ Or was it that the dual Godhead (yin yang) created a plurality of heavens?

Regarding proper nouns, the consonantal text provides several interesting, but non-authoritative, alternatives to the Masoretic pointed text. In Proverbs 30:1, did Agur address Ithiel and Ucal? Kidner states,

The Hebrew consonants of this phrase can be revocalized to read: 'I have wearied myself, O God, I have wearied myself, O God, and come to an end', which introduces the opening theme well. The ancient versions likewise eliminate the proper names, but fail to agree in their translations. It remains an open question.¹⁴

¹²The issue of whether the divine Lord Jesus Christ is the Lamb or not is not the question here since the NT clearly states that He is the Lamb of God (cf. Jn. 1:29, 36; I Pet. 1:19; Rev. 5:6; *et al*).

¹³The Lord created the third heaven (II Cor. 12:3) during the creation week (Job 38:7; Col. 1:16), but its creation is not alluded to in first chapter of Genesis.

¹⁴Derek Kidner, *Proverbs, An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 1976), p. 178.

If vowel points may be rearranged in proper nouns, what prevents the interpreter from the thorough rearrangement of major sections of the Hebrew text and thereby the creation of new and false doctrine?

Another example of the alleged need to revocalize the Masoretic text brings consternation to those who maintain the integrity and originality of the Hebrew vowel points. In the passage that deals with "the great wall" of Aphek, the Scripture states "*there a wall fell upon twenty and seven thousand of the men that were left*" (I Ki. 20:30). Kulus, in citing Donald Wiseman's statement: "The 'thousand' (*'eleph*) might be revocalized without change of consonants to 'officer' (*'alluph*)...the number might represent twenty-seven officers killed," charges some who "will not hear this number because it is too large!"¹⁵ In this context one would not know if 27,000 men were killed or twenty-seven officers were killed.

The Necessity of Vowel Points to Distinguish Different Words of the Same Consonants

In Psalm 119, the *sin/shin* stanza (vv. 161-168), displays an illustration of the necessity for diacritical markings (i.e., titles [Mt. 5:18]). The sibilant or "s" letter designated *sin* looks like a three-pronged comb with a dot over the left tooth (שׁ). The *shin* has the same consonantal form but has the diacritical dot over the right tooth (שׁ) and produces the "sh" consonant. The psalmist declared in v. 164 "*Seven times a day do I praise thee because of thy righteous judgments.*" Without the diacritical dot over the right tooth of the first consonant in the noun *sheva`* ("seven"), the word could be the perfect verb *sava`* ("he is satisfied"). Therefore the Hebrew text could read "He is satisfied in the day I do praise thee because of thy righteous judgments." The context cannot render an authoritative solution and hence the text becomes as wax ready to be twisted by every interpreter.

Moses puns on the nakedness of Adam and Eve and the subtlety of the serpent, using two words with the same consonants, *`arom* and *`arum*, respectively. The only difference between these two adjectives, other than the first is plural¹⁶ and the second is singular, is the vowel pointing. What did Moses intend to say: the couple was naked and the serpent was subtle, the couple was subtle and the serpent was subtle, the couple was subtle and the serpent was naked, or the couple was naked and the serpent was naked? At this stage in the development of Moses' narrative, it would be impossible to know absolutely without pointing.

Finally, a cursory glance at any elementary Hebrew glossary would show basic words differentiated only by pointing. For example, one should consider the following: 'l ("God" or "to" or "no"), 'm ("mother" or "if"), 'ph ("nose" or "also"), 'th ("with" or "you"), bn ("to perceive" or "between"), bqr ("cows" or "morning"), gll ("to roll" or "on account of"), hw' ("he" or "she"), hnh ("they" or "behold"), zcr ("male" or "to

¹⁵Chester Kulus, *Those So-Called Errors* (Newington, CT: Emmanuel Baptist Theological Press, 2003), p. 304.

¹⁶Moses uses the plural *`arummiym* (naked) in Gen. 2:25 and Solomon uses the plural *`arumiym* (prudent) in Prov. 14:18. In this case, the only difference is the *dagesh forte* (dot) in the *mem* ("m") of the former word "naked."

remember"), chwh ("to bow" or "Eve"), lchm ("to fight" or "bread"), mn ("from" or "manna"), ngs/ngsh ("to beat" or "to draw near"), `d ("witness" or "unto"), `wr ("to arouse" or "skin"), `m ("people" or "with"), prs/prsh ("to spread out" or "horseman"), r` ("friend" or "evil"), and shm ("name" or "there"). With these words, some verbs, some nouns, some adjectives, some adverbs, and some pronouns, making up thousands of contextual possibilities, it would be ludicrous to suggest vowels were not originally inscripturated.

Conclusion

Whitfield's volume draws attention to the ongoing attack upon the authority of Scripture. He argues succinctly for the Scriptural and linguistic necessities of the inspiration and preservation of the vowel points of the OT Hebrew text. He is in the list of defenders of the preservation of the Hebrew vowels. Those that would attempt to overthrow the biblical and linguistic arguments marshaled by these scholars must do so on the basis of several presuppositions. They must presuppose that the Scripture does not teach the preservation of the Words of the Lord, that Hebrew may be learned precisely and preserved without authoritative vowels, and that the Lord God, for some unknown reason, disdains the preservation of vowels along with His inspired and preserved consonants. This essay has refuted all three fallacious presuppositions. The real issue is the one of final authority. Who has the last say about the Old Testament, and consequently about all of the Scripture--the Roman Catholic Church, the Masoretes, the critical scholars (including some fundamentalists), or the Lord Jesus Christ? Will professed Bible believers allow the Lord to speak authoritatively through His Old Testament Words? *"The Lord GOD hath spoken"* (Amos 3:8).