The *Peh*/*Ayin* Order in the Acrostics of the Book of *Eichah*

by Mitchell First[1]

The first four chapters of the book of *Eichah* comprise alphabetical acrostics. In the acrostics in chapters 2, 3 and 4, the verses that begin with *peh* precede the verses that begins with *ayin*.[2] The Soncino commentary to *Eichah* remarks: "This unusual order has never been satisfactorily explained." [3] In light of the archaeological discoveries of recent decades, it is time to provide this explanation.

Preliminarily, it will be noted that the Talmud includes a comment on the unusual order of *peh* preceding *ayin* in the book of *Eichah*. The suggestion is made that it alludes to the sin of the *meraglim:*[4]

רבא אמר רבי יוחנן אמר בשביל מה הקדים פ"א לעי"ן בשביל מרגלים שאמרו בפיהם מה שלא ראו בעיניהם.

The sin of the *meragli*m is connected to the ninth of *Av* in a well-established rabbinic tradition:[5]

But even prior to the archaeological discoveries of recent decades, evidence of *peh* preceding *ayin* was found elsewhere. In the Septuagint version of תשא ליח (*Mishlei* 31:10-31), the translation of the *peh* verse, היפ, precedes the translation of the *ayin* verse, זע.[6] The earliest manuscripts of the Septuagint are from the 4ᵗʰ and 5ᵗʰ centuries, hundreds of years earlier than the earliest Hebrew manuscript of *Mishlei.*

The relevant archaeological discoveries of recent decades from the land of Israel are as follows:

-It was discovered that in the texts of *Eichah* from the Dead Sea, the *peh* verse precedes the *ayin* verse even in the first chapter.[7]

-During excavations between Oct. 1975 and May 1976 at Kuntillet 'Ajrud, a site in the northern Sinai,[8] a jar fragment was discovered which included three Hebrew abecedaries in which the *peh* precedes the *ayin*.[9] The site dates to a period between the mid-9ᵗʰ and mid-8ᵗʰ centuries and is believed to have been a religious centre in the tribe of Judah, at its border.[10]

-In 1976, a potsherd was discovered at Izbet Sartah (near Rosh ha-Ayin). The potsherd had five lines of Hebrew[11] writing on it, one of which was an abecedary (written left to right!). In this abecedary, the *peh* precedes the *ayin*. The writing and potsherd date to the 12th-11th centuries B.C.E. Scholars are confident that Izbet Sartah was an Israelite settlement.[12]

-In 2005, a Hebrew abecedary inscribed on a stone was discovered at Tel Zayit (north of Lachish). The stone had been used in the construction of a wall belonging to a 10th cent. B.C.E. structure. In the abecedary, the *peh* precedes the *ayin*.[13] Most probably, Tel Zayit was within the tribe of Judah in the 10th century B.C.E.[14]

The abecedaries mentioned above are the only Hebrew (or Proto-Canaanite[15]) texts of the alphabet in order that have ever been discovered in ancient Israel that date from the period of the Judges and the First Temple that are long enough to span the letters *ayin* and *peh*.[16] *Peh* precedes *ayin* in every single one.[17]

Abecedaries or other texts of the alphabet in order from other Western Semitic languages[18] have also been found, dating from the late second millenium and early first millenium BCE:

- Twelve Ugaritic texts include abecedaries, in whole or in part.[19] These are from Ras Shamra (on the Mediterranean coast of North Syria), and date from the 14th and 13th centuries B.C.E.[20] In the several abecedaries that are long enough to span *ayin* and *peh*, the cuneiform sign for the *ayin* precedes the cuneiform sign for the *peh*.[21]

- Among the other Western Semitic languages, *i.e.*, Aramaic, Ammonite, Moabite, and Phoenician, only one abecedary or text of the alphabet in order has been discovered that is long enough to span *ayin* and *peh*. This is an 8th cent. B.C.E. inscription in Aramaic from Tell Halaf, a site in northeastern Syria. Here too, *ayin* precedes *peh*.[22]

Now it is time to examine the balance of the alphabetical acrostics in the Bible. Aside from the first four chapters of the book of *Eichah,* and *Mishlei* 31:10-31, alphabetical acrostics are found in several chapters of the book of *Tehillim*: chapters 9-10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119 (every letter 8 times), and 145.[23]

In chap. 34 (*le-David be-shanoto*), verses 17 and 18 have troubled interpreters throughout the ages. In verse 17, we are told:

יז פְּנֵי ה׳ בְּעֹשֵׂי רָע לְהַכְרִית מֵאֶרֶץ זִכְרָם.

Yet immediately following this, we are told:

יח צָעֲקוּ וה׳ שָׁמֵעַ וּמִכָּל צָרוֹתָם הִצִּילָם.

Why should God listen to and save the evildoers, when we have just been told that He wants to cut off their memory from earth?

Based on the archaeological evidence for *peh* preceding *ayin*, let us see what happens under the assumption that *peh* precedes *ayin* here:

יז פְּנֵי ה׳ בְּעֹשֵׂי רָע לְהַכְרִית מֵאֶרֶץ זִכְרָם.

טז עֵינֵי ה׳ אֶל צַדִּיקִים וְאָזְנָיו אֶל שַׁוְעָתָם.

יח צָעֲקוּ וה׳ שָׁמֵעַ וּמִכָּל צָרוֹתָם הִצִּילָם.

The ones whom God listens to and saves are not the evildoers, but the *tzadikkim*. Suddenly, the sequence of verses makes perfect sense![24]

But what about the acrostics in the rest of the book of *Tehillim*? Did *peh* originally precede *ayin* in *Ashrei* (*Tehillim* 145)?[25] Did *Tehillim* 119 originally have 8 *peh* verses preceding 8 *ayin* verses, all of which were later switched?

The response to this is to distinguish between earlier and later books of *Tehillim*. The acrostics in the book of *Tehillim* are found only in the first book (9-10, 25, 34, and 37) and the fifth book (111, 112, 119, and 145).[26] A widespread view in modern scholarship is that the first book of *Tehillim* is the earliest of the books of *Tehillim*,[27] and that the fourth and fifth books are the latest books.[28]

It is useful to remind ourselves of two verses in the fifth book of *Tehillim* which strongly suggest that this book is post-exilic:(1) (126:1) כְּחֹלְמִים הָיִינוּ צִיּוֹן שִׁיבַת אֶת ׳ה בְּשׁוּב, and (2) (137:1) עַל נַהֲרוֹת בָּבֶל שָׁם יָשַׁבְנוּ גַּם בָּכִינוּ בְּזָכְרֵנוּ אֶת צִיּוֹן. Also, although the Talmud[29] attributes the book of *Tehillim* to David ע"ע הרשע ינקז מינקז from his time and earlier,[30] a different rabbinic tradition includes Ezra as one of the ten authors of *Tehillim*.[31]

I suggest that the difference in the era of composition of the first and fifth books of *Tehillim* is reflected in the alphabetical order with which each was composed. The acrostics of the fifth book of *Tehillim*, of post-exilic origin, were composed with the *ayin-peh* order. While the acrostics of the first book of *Tehillim*, composed in the time of David or during the First Temple period, were composed with the *peh-ayin* order.

Can I prove this?

1. With regard to the acrostic that spans chapters 9 and 10, it only includes the following letters: *alef* through *gimmel* (9:1-7), *vav* through *lamed* (9:8–10:1), and *kof* through *tav* (10:12-18). But if one wants to take the reasonable approach that there was a complete acrostic here once and that our text of chapters 9 and 10 is faulty,[32] verses 10:7-8 provide some evidence that the *peh* verse may have preceded the *ayin* verse in the original text:[33]

ז אָלָה **פִּיהוּ** מָלֵא וּמִרְמוֹת וָתֹךְ תַּחַת לְשׁוֹנוֹ עָמָל וָאָוֶן.

ח יֵשֵׁב בְּמַאְרַב חֲצֵרִים בַּמִּסְתָּרִים יַהֲרֹג נָקִי **עֵינָיו** לְחֵלְכָה יִצְפֹּנוּ.

2. With regard to the acrostic of chapter 25,[34] verses 15-16 present no difficulty in their present order:

טו עֵינַי תָּמִיד אֶל ה׳ כִּי הוּא יוֹצִיא מֵרֶשֶׁת רַגְלָי.
טז פְּנֵה אֵלַי וְחָנֵּנִי כִּי יָחִיד וְעָנִי אָנִי.

But the verses can be read just as well in the *peh-ayin* order.

3. With regard to the acrostic of chapter 37, this is an acrostic where the *ayin* section, and the *ayin* section alone, is missing.[35]

But close examination of the verses reveals that the section for the *samech* is unusually long.[36] This strongly suggests that there was an *ayin* verse here once, some of whose words are preserved in the *samech* verse.[37] Of all 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, why is it that a textual problem arises in the context of the *ayin* verse? Probability strongly suggests that it has something to do with the *peh-ayin* order. Is it too bold to suggest that a scribe of the Second Temple period, familiar with the *ayin-peh* order from his time, was copying from a text which had the older *peh-ayin* order, and became confused?

Based on the cumulative evidence, it seems obvious that the translators of תשא ליח into Greek were copying from a Hebrew text which had the *peh* verse before the *ayin* verse.[38] Let us take a closer look at the key verses in תשא ליח:

כד סָדִין עָשְׂתָה וַתִּמְכֹּר וַחֲגוֹר נָתְנָה לַכְּנַעֲנִי.
כה עֹז וְהָדָר לְבוּשָׁהּ וַתִּשְׂחַק לְיוֹם אַחֲרוֹן.

In the traditional order, the women of valor laughs to the last day because she makes cloaks and sells them, delivers belts to the merchant, and is clothed with might and splendor. But if the order here was *peh-ayin*, the reason she laughs to the last day would also be based on her דסח and המכח:

כו פִּיהָ פָּתְחָה בְחָכְמָה וְתוֹרַת חֶסֶד עַל לְשׁוֹנָהּ.

כה עֹז וְהָדָר לְבוּשָׁהּ וַתִּשְׂחַק לְיוֹם אַחֲרוֹן .

A much more profound statement!

Some scholars have argued that chapters 30-31 of *Mishlei* are of post-exilic origin.[39] They are the latest chapters in the book and are not even attributed to Shelomo.[40] (Chapter 30 is attributed to Agur son of Yakeh, and chapter 31 is attributed to king Lemuel.) But if 31:10-31 follows the *peh-ayin* order, this suggests that at least this poem dates from the First Temple period, and that perhaps chapters 30 and 31 do as well.

As stated above, every known Hebrew abecedary from the period of the Judges and the period of the First Temple has the *peh* preceding the *ayin* (if it is long enough to include these letters).

The above analysis of the Biblical acrostics suggests that this was not just a variant order, but that it was **the only order** used in Israel in the period of the Judges and the First Temple. This order is reflected in the acrostics in the older section of *Tehillim* (*i.e.*, first book), the acrostic at *Mishlei* 31:10-31, and all the acrostics in the book of *Eichah.* [41]

This study began with a technical observation about the acrostics in the book of *Eichah*. It led to insights into the authorship of the books of *Tehillim* and *Mishlei,* and into the history of the alphabet.[42] I will leave it to someone else to consider its impact in the field of *gematria!*

Select Bibliography:

A. Demsky, "A Proto-Canaanite Abecedary Dating from the Period of the Judges and its Implications for the History of the Alphabet," *Tel Aviv* 4 (1977), pp. 14-27.

A. Demsky and M. Kochavi, "An Alphabet from the Days of the Judges," *BAR,* Sept.-Oct. 1978, pp. 23-30.

P.Gaebelein, Jr., "Psalm 34 and Other Biblical Acrostics: Evidence from the Aleppo Codex," *Maarav* 5-6 (Spring, 1990), pp. 127-43.

M. Kochavi, "An Ostracon of the Period of the Judges from 'Izbet Sartah," *Tel Aviv* 4 (1977), pp. 1-13.

G.W. Nebe, "Alphabets" in *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, vol. 1, pp. 18-20 (2000).

R. Tappy, P. McCarter, M. Lundberg and B. Zuckerman, "An Abecedary of the Mid-Tenth B.C.E. from the Judaean Shephelah," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research,* Nov. 2006, pp. 5-46.

Z. Meshel, *Kuntillet 'Ajrud: A Religious Centre from the time of the Judaean Monarchy on the Border of Sinai*, Israel Museum Catalogue no. 175 (1978).

[1] I would like to acknowledge Sam Borodach and Rabbi Mordy Friedman for their thoughts and assistance over the years on this topic.

[2] In chap. 3, each letter is repeated three times.

[3] Comm. to *Eichah* 2:16. This commentary was published in 1946. See also the EJ entry, Acrostics (2:229), which refers to a "curious but unexplained" transposition of *ayin* and *peh*.

[4] This explanation is recorded in the Talmud at San. 104b, and twice in *Eichah Rabbah (*comm. to *Eichah* 2:16 and 3:46). But it does not explain why the first chapter is in the regular order. The Maharsha (comm. to San. 104b) suggests that the first chapter was kept in the regular order to prevent someone from claiming (as I will shortly!) that *peh* preceding *ayin* was the standard order at the time of *Eichah*. See also *Siftei Chachamim* to *Eichah* 2:16.

[5] See M. Taanit 4:6.

[6] See E. Tov, "Recensional Differences Between the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint of Proverbs," in H.W. Attridge et al., *Of Scribes and Scrolls: Studies on the Hebrew Bible, Intertestamental Judaism, and Christian Origins Presented to John Strugnell* (1990), p. 53.

[7] *See Discoveries in the Judean Desert*, XVI, p. 234. This volume was not published until 2001.

With regard to the second and third chapters of the book of *Eichah*, the Dead Sea scrolls only include verses 2:5 and 3:53-62. The *peh* preceding *ayin* order is confirmed in the Dead Sea material from the fourth chapter, although it is very fragmentary. See *Discoveries in the Judean Desert*, III, pp. 176-78. (This volume was published in 1962.)

[8] The site is about 50 km. south of Kadesh Barnea.

[9] The find is described only briefly in the catalogue published by Z. Meshel, *Kuntillet 'Ajrud: A Religious Centre from the time of the Judaean Monarchy on the Border of Sinai*, Israel Museum Catalogue no. 175 (1978). The catalogue includes a photo of the jar fragment at p. 11 (Heb. section). The abecedaries on the jar fragment are transcribed, among other places, in F.W. Dobbs-Allsopp, et al, *Hebrew Inscriptions: Texts from the Biblical Period of the Monarchy with Concordance* (2005), p. 294. A sketch of these abecedaries is found at A. Lemaire, *Les écoles et la formation de la Bible dans l'ancien Israël* , p. 27.

[10] This is the view of Meshel, who was in charge of the excavations. Another scholar believes the site to have been primarily a way station for travelers. See J. Hadley, "Some Drawings and Inscriptions on Two Pithoi from Kuntillet 'Ajrud," *Vetus Testamentum* 37, 2 (1987), p. 184. Phoenician inscriptions were also discovered at the site, evidence that it was used by a diversity of peoples.

[11] Technically, I should call the writing "Proto-Canaanite." Proto-Canaanite is the name the scholars give to this alphabet. It is only because scholars are confident that Izbet Sartah is an Israelite settlement that I can call this writing "Hebrew." The same issue arises with respect to the find at Tel Zayit. See below, n. 14.

[12] For example, the site contains the typical Israelite storage pits, and the structure of the house in the area where the potsherd was found is similar to the structure at other Israelite settlements. See M. Kochavi, "An Ostracon of the Period of the Judges from 'Izbet Sartah," *Tel Aviv* 4 (1977), p. 3, and A. Demsky and M. Kochavi, "An Alphabet from the Days of the Judges," *BAR,* Sept.-Oct. 1978, p. 24. Kochavi writes that identification of Izbet Sartah as an Israelite site "is not open to question." (Kochavi directed the excavations at Izbet Sartah.) The Philistine site of Aphek was to the west of Izbet Sartah.

Also noteworthy in this abecedary is that the *het* precedes the *zayin*. Demsky (pp. 17-18) provides grounds to suspect that this was a scribal slip. But interestingly, this same order is also found in the Tel Zayit abecedary.

[13] This abecedary departs from the traditional order in three other instances: 1) *vav* precedes *he*, 2) *het* precedes *zayin*, and 3) *lamed* precedes *kaf*. (As to the last, there is evidence that the author of the abecedary realized that this was a mistake.)

[14] See R. Tappy, et al, "An Abecedary of the Mid-Tenth B.C.E. from the Judaean Shephelah," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research,* Nov. 2006, pp. 6-7, 22, and 42. The authors write (p. 22) that in the tenth century, "the stratigraphic and cultural history of the site seems to be parallel closely that of nearby Lachish...with both sites maintaining their principal cultural affinities with the highlands to the east and serving as borderland settlements that marked the westernmost Judahite frontier." As to the script, the authors write (p. 5): "The Tel Zayit abecedary represents the linear alphabetic script of central and southern Canaan at the beginning of the first millenium B.C.E., a transitional script that developed from the Phoenician tradition of the early Iron Age and anticipated the distinctive features of the mature Hebrew national script."

[15] See above, n. 11.

[16] Other First Temple period Hebrew texts of the letters of the alphabet in order have been found, but they are much shorter. For example, הדגבא was found incised on one of the steps of the palace at Lachish. Other finds in ancient Israel include: דגבא, טחזו, חזו, טחז, and רק. Most of these are collected in A. Lemaire, *Les écoles et la formation de la Bible dans l'ancien Israël* (1981). For additional references, see M. Haran, "On the Diffusion of Literacy and Schools in Ancient Israel," S*upplements to Vetus Testamentum*, vol. 40 (1988), p. 86. Some see the letters גבא on the Gezer Calendar, but the identity of the third letter is disputed.

[17] As indicated in the text, these abecedaries come from different regions in ancient Israel. They do not just reflect one local custom.

[18] Semitic languages are traditionally divided into three branches: Eastern, Western, and Southern. The Eastern Semitic languages (*i.e.*, Akkadian, Babylonian, and Assryian) were written in Sumerian cuneiform, which was not an alphabetic cuneiform script. Southern Semitic languages (*i.e.*, South Arabian, Ethiopian, and Arabic) have an entirely different alphabet order. Interestingly, an abecedary in cuneiform which follows the South Semitic alphabet order was found in Beit Shemesh. It dates from the 13th cent. B.C.E.

[19] See P. Craigie, *Word Bible Commentary, Psalms* (vol. 19), p. 130.

[20] See J. Naveh, *Early History of the Alphabet,* pp. 29-30.

[21] The Ugaritic abecedaries were written in an alphabetic cuneiform script. For an illustration of one of these Ugaritic abecedaries in which *ayin* precedes *peh*, see Naveh, p. 30.

Note that "o" precedes "p" in English today, which also reflects this order.

[22] See R. Degen, "Ein aramäisches Alphabet von Tell Halaf," in R. Degen, W. Müller & W. Röllig, *Neue Ephemeris für Semitische Epigraphik*, vol. III, 1978, pp. 1-9. (The article in the *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls* which I listed in the bibliography states that the *peh* precedes the *ayin* in this inscription, but this is a mistake.)

For references to shorter texts of the alphabet in order that have been discovered in Aramaic and the other Western Semitic languages from the early first millenium BCE, see A. Lemaire, "Abécédaires et exercises d'écolier en epigraphie nord-ouest-sémitique," *Journal asiatique* (1978), pp. 225-228. See also *Semitica* 28 (1978), pp. 7-10, and *Semitica* 32 (1982), p. 33, no. 16.

[23] It has also been suggested that a partial alphabetical acrostic is found at the beginning of Nachum chap. 1. It is too vague to comment upon further. There are no alphabetical acrostics in the Torah.

[24] The Daat Mikra commentary is even willing to consider the possibility of re-ordering these verses.

The suggestion that these verses need to be re-ordered was made long ago. See, *e.g.*, S.R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*, p. 346 (4ᵗʰ ed., 1892; Driver probably made this suggestion in the first edition, published in 1891, but I have not seen the first, second or third editions), and J. Wellhausen, *The Book of Psalms, Critical Edition of the Hebrew Text*, p. 81 (1895) (citing the German Bible scholar Hermann Hupfeld, 1796-1866). More recently, the suggestion that these verses need to be re-ordered is found in the EJ entry, Acrostics (2:229). Within rabbinic tradition, there are early sources which interpret verse 18 as relating back to the prayers of the *tzadikkim*. See the *Baraita of 32 Rules* in *Midrash ha-Gadol*, Genesis, p. 38, and R. Saadiah Gaon, *Emunot ve-Deot* (end of the 4ᵗʰ treatise). But these do not suggest that the verses need to be re-ordered.

[25] One reason this seems unlikely is that the *ayin* and *peh* lines in *Tehillim* 145 seem to be parallel to the following lines in *Tehillim* 104:

כז: כֻּלָּם אֵלֶיךָ יְשַׂבֵּרוּן לָתֵת אָכְלָם בְּעִתּוֹ.

כח: תִּתֵּן לָהֶם יִלְקֹטוּן תִּפְתַּח יָדְךָ יִשְׂבְּעוּן טוֹב.

[26] The fifth book comprises chaps. 107-150.

[27] The first book comprises chaps. 1-41. With the exception of chaps. 1, 2, 10, and 33, all have captions connecting them to David. (Of the 109 psalms in books II through V, only 18 have captions connecting them to David.) Almost certainly, the reason such a caption is lacking in chap. 10 is that it was once united with chap. 9. (These two chapters are united in the Septuagint.) As to chap. 33, it has a Davidic superscription in the Septuagint. The entry "Book of Psalms" in the *EJ* includes the following statement: "the earliest collection is undoubtedly Book I, or rather Psalms 3-41 within it."

It should also be mentioned that verse 72:20, at the conclusion of book II, reads: תולפת דוד ןב ישי ולכ .

The *EJ* entry "Book of Psalms" suggests that some of the books of Psalms were originally independent collections, as it is hardly conceivable that an editor who was aware of the 18 psalms attributed to David in the subsequent books would have written תולפת דוד ןב ישי ולכ in chap. 72. See EJ 13:1308.

[28] See, *e.g., EJ* 13:1308-1310. A widespread view is also that the division between books IV and V is artificial. See, *e.g., EJ* 13:1308.

[29] Baba Batra 14b.

[30] Adam, Malkitzedek, Avraham, Moshe, Heman, Yedutun, Asaph and three sons of Korach.

[31] See Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah 4:4 (and the comm. of וי״זרהמ), Kohelet Rabbah 7:19, and Yalkut Makhiri to Psalms (beginning). Some have argued that the inclusion of Ezra in these sources is so anomalous that it must be an erroneous reading. (The הפי לוק to Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah suggests emendation to אריע, based on 2 Sam. 20:26.) But since Ezra is included as one of the ten in several different sources, and Yalkut Makhiri is generally viewed as preserving reliable texts (see *EJ* 16: 706, and Daat Mikra, intro. to *Tehillim*, pp. 12-13), there is no reason to reject the present texts.

[32] P. Craigie, *Word Bible Commentary, Psalms* (vol. 19), p. 129, points out that the acrostic that spans chaps. 9 and 10 is much less even with respect to the average unit length for each section than are the other acrostic psalms in the Bible. This also suggests that the acrostic is textually corrupt.

[33]The suggestion that והיפ was the first word of the *peh* verse, and ויניע the first word of the subsequent *ayin* verse has been made by many. See, *e,g,*, C.A. Briggs and E.G. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (International Critical Comm.), vol. 1, p. 70 (1906).

[34] This acrostic is missing *bet, vav* and *kof*. The oldest acrostics that we have, the ones in the first book of *Tehillim*, are the ones whose texts have been less well preserved. The acrostics in the fifth book of *Tehillim,* by contrast, since they are likely post-exilic, are preserved completely (including each letter eight times in chap.

119), except for the missing *nun* verse in chap. 145. This suggests that chap. 145 never had a *nun* verse, and that the *nun* verse found in the Septuagint and the Dead Sea Psalms text (see J.A. Sanders, *The Dead Sea Psalms Scroll*, p. 66) is a later addition.

It is noteworthy that both Psalms 25 and 34 are missing a *vav* verse and add a verse beginning with *peh* at the end. This suggests that both were authored by the same author, or at least in the same period.

The absence of a *vav* verse may reflect a stage in the history of the alphabet in which *vav* was not viewed as a consonant. See P. Craigie, *Word Bible Commentary, Psalms* (vol. 19), p. 129. An 8th or 7th century B.C.E. Aramaic text from Deir 'Alla (the Biblical Succoth, on the east bank of the Jordan River) records the following sequence of letters: *aleph, bet, gimmel, dalet, zayin,* and *het.* Possibly, *heh* and *vav* were left out here because they were not considered consonants. See J. Hoftijzer and G. van der Kooij, *Aramaic Texts from Deir 'Alla*, pp. 267 and 285.

[35] The fact that Psalm 145 lacks a *nun* verse is well-known, as the Talmud (Ber. 4b) comments about it. To my knowledge, there are no comments in the Talmud or other classical rabbinic sources about the missing verses in the other Psalms.

[36] It spans three verses, while the sections for all the other letters span only one or two verses. Note also that the Septuagint version of the *samech* section is even longer, as it includes an additional phrase not found in the Hebrew. (In the Septuagint manuscripts, there are different versions of the additional phrase.) The observation that the *samech* verse in chap. 37 is unusually long and that there was once an *ayin* verse here was made long ago. See, *e.g.,* S.R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*, p. 368 (4th ed., 1892), and J. Wellhausen, *The Book of Psalms, Critical Edition of the Hebrew Text*, p. 82 (1895).

[37] But none begin with *ayin*.

[38] Unfortunately, we have no Dead Sea text of *Mishlei* chap. 31.

The Greek translation of *Mishlei* differs in many other ways from the Masoretic text. It has been argued that the Greek translation was based on a different rescension altogether. See E. Tov, "Recensional Differences Between the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint of Proverbs," in H.W. Attridge et al., *Of Scribes and Scrolls: Studies on the Hebrew Bible, Intertestamental Judaism, and Christian Origins Presented to John Strugnell* (1990), pp. 43-56.

[39] See, *e.g.,* S.R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*, p. 406:

By the addition, at a still later date, of c. 30, 31:1-9, and 31:10-21,

all doubtless of post-exilic origin, the Book of Proverbs finally

reached its present form.

[40]Compare the first verse of the book, which tells us that what follows are the proverbs of Solomon, and verse 25:1 (introducing chaps. 25-29): "These also are proverbs of Solomon, which were copied by the men of Hezekiah king of Judah."

[41] The comments of the author of the *EJ* entry "Book of Lamentations," in his attempt to date the various chapters of the book, are worth noting (10:1374):

Certainly none of the chapters can postdate Cyrus' proclamation of 538...

since none of the hope which it engendered is reflected in the book.

[42] An issue I did not address is what caused the *peh-ayin* order to arise, given that the earliest abecedaries (Ugaritic, 14th -13th centuries B.C.E.) record an *ayin-peh* order. I can only speculate that the order of all the letters may not have been completely fixed in earliest times, and perhaps the peh-ayin order was not merely a later

development. (There are now two ancient abecedaries in which the *het* precedes the *zayin*.) One scholar has noted that in an early stage, the letters *ayin* and *peh* had a similar form (at least in some regions). This resemblance could have caused a fluidity or confusion about their order. See *Give Ear to My Words: Psalms and other poetry in and around the Hebrew Bible: essays in honour of Professor N.A. van Uchelen*, ed. J. Dyk, p. 192.

Another issue I did not address is what led Hebrew to revert to the *ayin-peh* order in the post-exilic period. A good guess is that the *ayin* preceded the *peh* in the Aramaic alphabet in use in Babylonia, and this led the scribes who returned to adopt this order for Hebrew.