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A neglected phonetic law: the assimilation of pretonic yod to a following coronal in North-West Semitic¹

Romain Garnier, Université de Limoges
and Guillaume Jacques, CNRS (Paris)

Abstract:

This paper shows the existence of a pretonic assimilation of *y to a following coronal consonant (including *y from proto-Semitic *y and *w) in North-West Semitic languages. This rule, which has been obscured by analogy in each of the North-West Semitic languages, explains three independent sets of facts: the formation of irregular maqtal-s in Hebrew, Phoenician and Aramaic; the irregular conjugations of several verbs in Hebrew; the plural formation of the irregular noun “house” in Hebrew and Aramaic. This proposal also solves the long-standing problem of the etymology of the verb “to give” in North-West Semitic languages (NTN in Hebrew vs. YTN in Phoenician).

Keywords:

Gemination, Assimilation, Coronal consonant, Hebrew, Phoenician, Aramaic

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1. Introduction

In Hebrew and other North-West Semitic languages, we observe clear traces of y (either from proto-Semitic *w- or *y) assimilating to a following consonant in a way similar to n, as previously noted by Huehnergard (2006). In the present paper, we will study all available examples of y-assimilation in Hebrew, Phoenician and Aramaic, and propose the probable phonetic conditioning and time frame of this phonetic rule, which is no longer productive in any attested language.

We will start this investigation by looking at several maqtal nouns from I-y roots which demonstrate this assimilation.

Second, we will study a series of I-y Hebrew verbs which not only have y-assimilation in derived nouns, but also in some imperfective forms. We will show that the Hebrew verbal root $\sqrt{\text{NTN}}$ ‘to give’ is an innovation, and originally going back to a form $\sqrt{\text{YTN}}$ still attested in Phoenician: it was renewed on the basis the paradigms of I-n verbal roots. Finally, we will provide examples of that the same y-assimilation took place in Aramaic with the verbs “to know” $\sqrt{\text{YD}\aleph} < \sqrt{\text{wd}\aleph}$, “to sit” $\sqrt{\text{YTB}} < \sqrt{\text{w}\theta\text{b}}$ and “to blossom” $\sqrt{\text{Y}\aleph\aleph} < \sqrt{\text{w}\aleph'\aleph}$.²

Third, we will show that the y-assimilation rule can be used to explain the irregular plural of *bayit* “house” in Hebrew and Aramaic. This example will also provide critical evidence to assess the exact conditioning factors for the hypothesized sound change.

2. y-assimilation in maqtal deverbal nouns

Maqtal deverbal nouns of I-y roots are normally formed according to the following pattern: $\sqrt{\text{yC}_2\text{C}_3} > \text{m}\hat{\text{o}}\text{C}_2\bar{\text{a}}\text{C}_3$. For instance, the root $\sqrt{\text{Y}\aleph\text{B}} < \sqrt{\text{w}\theta\text{b}}$ “to sit” yields the regular maqtal *mōšāb* “seat, above”.

This noun formation reflects the proto-Semitic *w initial before it changed to y- in Hebrew. The original form of this maqtal was *ma-wθab-(u). The *ma- prefix prevented initial *w from becoming y- as in perfect forms such as *yāšāb* < *waθaba “he sat down”, and *aw monophthongized into long *ō* in Hebrew, hence *ma-wθab > *mawšab > *mōšab > *mōšāb*.

Nevertheless, a few maqtal nouns from I-y verbal roots do not have this expected $\text{m}\hat{\text{o}}\text{C}_2\bar{\text{a}}\text{C}_3$ configuration, in particular *maddāf* “knowledge” from $\sqrt{\text{YD}\aleph}$ “to know” and *massād* “foundation” from $\sqrt{\text{YSD}}$ “to establish”. Several other examples will be treated in the following section, but these

²We represent the reconstruction of proto-Semitic consonants in IPA reconstruction: the consonant corresponding to Arabic *ḏ* is reconstructed as an ejective lateral alveolar fricative *ʎ', that corresponding to Arabic *ẓ* as an ejective interdental fricative *θ' and that corresponding to Hebrew *ś* as a lateral alveolar fricative *ʎ.

two are non-controversial, as the corresponding verb roots have no traces of assimilation.

Alongside these irregular deverbal nouns, the regular maqṭal-s of these I-y roots are also attested: *môṣād* “foundation” and *môḏāf* “parent”. While *maddāf* is a relatively common noun, *massād* is considerably rarer than its regular equivalent *môṣād*.

- (1) û-mim-massad ʕad-ḥaṭ-ṭəpāḥōt
 “even from the foundation unto the coping” (I Kings 7:9)

The only way to explain these forms is to assume a phonetic change $*mayC_2aC_3 > *maC_2C_2aC_3$ identical to the one present in I-n roots $*manC_2aC_3 > *maC_2C_2aC_3$. Alternatively, the change could have been $*mawC_2aC_3 > *maC_2C_2aC_3$, with the assimilation of w as proposed by Huehnergard (2006), but we will show in section 4 that some data cannot be accounted for by that hypothesis.

3. y-assimilation in Hebrew and Aramaic verbal conjugation

Evidence for this y-assimilation rule is not limited to a few maqṭal-s. Clear traces are also found in the conjugation of six I-yṣ verbs and one I-yS₂ verb: $\sqrt{YṢB}$ “to take one’s stand”, $\sqrt{YṢG}$ “to set”, $\sqrt{YṢṬ}$ “to lay, spread”, $\sqrt{YṢQ}$ “to pour”, $\sqrt{YṢR}$ “to knead”, $\sqrt{YṢT}$ “to lighten” and $\sqrt{YṢR}$ “to chastise”. The most common I-yṣ verb, however, $\sqrt{YṢ?}$ “to go out, to depart”, shows no such assimilation in Hebrew. Joüon & Muraoka (2006: 185) posit alternating I-n roots to account for these assimilations. However, comparative evidence does not support this hypothesis.

In this section, we will present attested forms of each of these seven verbs to illustrate y-assimilation. These verbs will be divided into three groups: first, $\sqrt{YṢT}$ and $\sqrt{YṢG}$, which have no external cognates; second, $\sqrt{YṢQ}$ and $\sqrt{YṢR}$, which have cognates among North-West Semitic languages; third, $\sqrt{YṢṬ}$, $\sqrt{YṢR}$ and $\sqrt{YṢB}$, which have cognates outside North-West Semitic, and whose initial I-y comes from proto-Semitic *w-. These data are well known from Hebrew grammars, but it is nevertheless important to set out the facts clearly, as we will see concerning the root $\sqrt{YṢB}$.

Finally, we will show that the Hebrew root \sqrt{NTN} belongs in fact to the group of verbs presented in this section: it comes from an earlier \sqrt{ytn} , a form still attested in Phoenician.

3.1. YṢT and YṢG

The roots $\sqrt{YṢT}$ and $\sqrt{YṢG}$ have no known cognate outside of Hebrew, so we have no way of knowing whether their initial I-y comes from proto-

Semitic *y or *w.

√YŠT “to lighten, to burn, to catch fire” is attested in three forms: qal (for instance the 3sg. fem. waw-impf. *wattiššat*), nipʕal (3pl. masc. perf. *niššatū*) and hipʕil (2pl. masc. impf. *taššitū*). The expected forms of a regular I-y verb, such as hipʕil, *hōšit or *hēšit, are not attested.

√YŠG “to set” has hipʕil (3pl. masc. waw-impf. *wayyaššigū*) and hopʕal (3sg; masc. impf. *yuššag*) forms. The regular forms *hōšig/*hēšig are not attested.

- (2) wayyiqəḥû pəlišṭim ʔeṭ ʔārôn hāʔəlōhîm wayyābîʔû ʔōṭô bēyṭ
Dāgôn wayyaššigū ʔōṭô ʔēsel Dāgôn
“When the Philistines took the ark of God, they brought it into the
house of Dagon, and set it by Dagon.” (I Samuel 5:2)

3.2. YŠQ and YSR

The roots √YŠQ and √YSR are attested in other North-West Semitic languages (Phoenician and Ugaritic), but since these languages share the innovation *w- > *y-, we have no way of knowing whether these roots were *w-initial or *y-initial in the proto-language.

√YŠQ “to pour” has a Ugaritic cognate <YŠQ>. This root is attested in qal, hipʕil and hopʕal, but unlike the previous roots, it has both y-assimilating and regular forms. In the qal, we have both the imperfective form *ʔeššōq* with assimilation (see example 3) and the regular waw-imperfective *wayyīseq* without assimilation (example 4).

- (3) ʔeššōq rūḥî ʕal zarʕekā
I will pour my spirit upon thy seed and my blessing upon thine
offspring. (Isaiah 44:3)
- (4) wayyīseq dam = hammakkāh ʔel ḥēyq hārākeb
And the blood ran out of the wound into the midst of the chariot.
(I Kings 22:35)

In the hipʕil, we find the waw-imperfective *wayyaššiqū* with assimilation of yōḏ, but the infinitive *môšāqet* (II Kings, 4:5) shows no assimilation. Finally, in the hopʕal, only regular forms are found: perfective *hūšaq*, imperfective *yūšaq*.

√YSR “to chastise” has a cognate D-stem form in Ugaritic <YWS-RNN>, with geminated initial I-w (Huehnergard 2006: 459, n. 9). In Hebrew, it shows gemination in some qal forms such as *ʔessōrēm* “I will chastise them” (Hosea 10:10). It is the only II-s verb to do so.

3.3. YṢṢ, YṢB and YṢR

The roots $\sqrt{YṢṢ}$ “to spread” and $\sqrt{YṢB}$ “to take one’s stand” both have Arabic cognates, respectively *waḍaḍa* “he laid down” and *waṣaba* “he was firm”, from proto-Semitic $\sqrt{wḏḏ}$ and $\sqrt{ws'b}$. In these two roots, the assimilating *yôḏ* comes from an older *w (Huehnergard 2006: 460). As for $\sqrt{YṢR}$ “to form”, comparative evidence is ambiguous.

$\sqrt{YṢṢ}$ “to spread” is only attested in *hipʿal* (3sg. masc. impf. *yaṣṣiʿ*) and in *hopʿal* (3sg. masc. impf. *yuṣṣaʿ*). Only forms with y-assimilation are found. This root has a *maqtal* deverbal noun *maṣṣāʿ* “couch, bed” which belongs to the same category as the two examples presented in example 2..

$\sqrt{YṢB}$ “to station oneself, take one’s stand”³ is attested only in the *hiṭpaʿel* (3sg. masc. impf. *yityaṣṣēb*). There is no evidence of y-assimilation in the verbal conjugation of this verb, since I-C is always prevocalic in the paradigm of the *hiṭpaʿel*. However, this verb has a derived *maqtal* *maṣṣāb* “place, military post”, whose exact meaning can be illustrated by the following example:⁴

- (5) *wa-yyiggālû ṣānēyhem ʔel maṣṣab pəlišṭīm*
and both of them (Jonathan and his armour-bearer) appeared to
[the men] of the garrison of the Philistines (I Samuel 14:11)

$\sqrt{YṢR}$ “knead, make (as a potter)” has cognates in Ugaritic and Phoenician: the *qāṭil* of the root (written <YṢR>) is attested in the sense of “potter” in these two languages. The corresponding Akkadian cognate *eṣērum* would suggest a I-y root, but other languages such as Eblaite reflect I-w (Huehnergard 2006: 459, n. 8).

This root mainly has forms without assimilation, such as *nipʿal* *nōṣar* and *hopʿal* *yūṣar* and *qal* waw-imperfective 3sg. masc. *wayyīṣer*.

Forms showing y-assimilation are only found in the *qal* imperfective with suffixed pronouns, such as *ʔeṣṣārəkā*:

- (6) *bə-ṭerem ʔeṣṣārəkā (ʔṢWRK) babbeten yəḏaʿtīkā*
“Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee.” (Jeremiah 1:5)

In example 6, the <W> in the spelling <ʔṢWRK> (for expected <ʔṢR-K>) probably transcribes the stem vowel, suggesting perhaps an alternative pronunciation */ʔeṣṣōrəkā/.

³Hebrew $\sqrt{YṢB}$ is not to be compared with the root $\sqrt{NṢB}$ “to erect” (reflected by Arabic *naṣaba*, *yaṣubu* “he set up, he erected”), whence Ugaritic $\sqrt{NṢB}$ “to erect” (<SKN> “a stele”), Hebrew *nipʿal* 3sg. masc. perf. *niṣṣab* <*na-NṢáB-a) and *maṣṣēbāh* “stele” (= phoen. <MṢBT>, neo-Pun. <MNṢBT>), pointing to *ma-NṢiB-atu- (Krahmalkov 2001: 128).

⁴In the sentence following this passage (I Samuel 14:12) *ʔanāṣēy ham-maṣṣābā* “the men of the garrison”, the word *maṣṣāb* is likely to have been a glotta, being mistaken for a proper name in the Septuaginta, which renders *ʔanāṣēy ham-maṣṣābā* by οἱ ἄνδρες Μεσσαβ “the men of Messab” (the Vulgate correctly reads *uirī dē statiōne* “the men of the garrison”).

The data from these seven verbs are summarized in the following table. Verb forms without assimilations are indicated between brackets.

Root	Meaning	qal	nipʕal	hipʕil	hopʕal	yitpaʕel
$\sqrt{Y\dot{S}G}$	to set			wayyaššîgû	yuššāg	
$\sqrt{Y\dot{S}R}$	to knead	(wayyîšer)	(nōšar)		(yūšar)	
		ʔeššārəkā				
$\sqrt{Y\dot{S}T}$	to lighten	wattiššat	niššatū	taššîṭū		
$\sqrt{Y\dot{S}ʕ}$	to lay			yaššîʕ	yuššaf	
$\sqrt{Y\dot{S}B}$	to station					(yityaššēb)
$\sqrt{Y\dot{S}Q}$	to pour	(wayyîšeq)		wayyaššîqû	(yūšaq)	
		ʔeššōq				
$\sqrt{Y\dot{S}R}$	to chastise	ʔessōrēm		(ʔayəsîrēm)		

Table 1: y-assimilating verbs in Hebrew

Most forms without assimilation are analogical, as were maqʕal-s of the form $m\hat{o}C_2\bar{a}C_3$ discussed in the previous section. However, we will show in section 4 that the waw-imperfective *wayyîšer* and *wayyîšeq* are most probably inherited forms, and that the absence of assimilation here is due to a constraint on the application of the rule.

3.4. NTN “to give”

Hebrew \sqrt{NTN} seems at first glance to be entirely distinct from the seven verbs presented in this section. However, strong evidence suggests that this verb was y-assimilating at some stage of proto-Hebrew.

The corresponding Phoenician cognate is \sqrt{YTN} . If we suppose that Phoenician preserved the proto-Cananean form while Hebrew innovated, it becomes possible to account for this irregular correspondence I-y::I-n. Attested Phoenician forms of the verb \sqrt{YTN} are summarized in Table 2.⁵

In Hebrew, the form \sqrt{YTN} is reflected in one personal name *Yatnîʔel* (1 Chronicles 26:2) and the place name *Yitnān* (Josuah 15:23). These names either represent preservation from an earlier stage of Hebrew or borrowing from a Cananean language preserving the older root.

Outside of Hebrew and Phoenician, this root is also attested in Ugaritic as \sqrt{YTN} , a fact that confirms the antiquity of I-y in this root. The spelling <YTT> for the first person singular perfective can only be interpreted as *yatattu according to [Bordreuil & Pardee \(2004: I:69\)](#), a form deriving from earlier *yatan-tu.

⁵The abbreviations CIL and CIS respectively stand for *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* and *Corpus Inscriptionum Semitarum* (Pars prima Inscriptiones Phœnicias continens).

Class	Testimonia	Phoen. restitution	Can. etymon	Heb. parallel
maqtal	ma-ta-an-ba-ʕ-al ^a Neo-Pun. m't'b'l	*mattōn “gift” CS *mattan-baʕal	*ma-WTáN-u- “gift”	PN <i>mattān</i> ^b <i>mattan-yāhū</i> ^c
miqtal ^d	Mitun, ^e Metun ^f Metunilim ^g	*mittōn “gift” Juxt. *mittōn + ilim	*mi-WTáN-u- “gift”	∅
maqtil	Ματτήν, ^h ma-ti-nu-ba-ʕ-li ⁱ	*mattēn “gift” Juxt. *mattinu + baʕli	*ma-WTíN-u- “gift”	∅
miqtil	mi-e-te-en-na ^j Μεττηνος ^k	*mittēn “gift”	*mi-WTíN-u- “gift”	∅
muqtal	Μυττυνος, ^l Μοττονης ^m MUT(H)UN ⁿ *Μιλκικαθων	*muttōn “given” *Milk(u) yatōn “the god Milk has given”	*mu-WTáN-u- “given” *X YáTaN-a (Proto-Phoen. *YaTáN)	∅ PN <i>yô-nātān</i> “YHWH has given”
Deus dedit	(Rhod. gen. sg. mi-li-ki-ya-to-no-se) ^o			<i>nātan-ʔēl</i> ^p <i>nātan-yāhū</i> ^q <i>nātan-melek</i> ^r
dedit Deus	∅	∅	*YaTaN-a X	

^aAnnals of Assarhaddon 5⁶⁰(Reign : 680—669 BC). Data apud [Friedrich \(1951: 89\)](#).

^bName of a priest of Baal (II Kings 11:18).

^cLevite name (Chronicles I, 25⁴). Compare with *Nəṭanyāhū* “YHWH has given”), another Levite name (II Chronicles 17:8). Note also the shortened by-forms *Mattanyāh* “gift of YHWH” (II King 24:17) and *Nəṭanyāh* (II Kings 25:23).

^dAs pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, we do not find any gemination in the Latin transcriptions of miqtal; this fact is unexplained.

^eCIL 8, 27527.

^fCIL 8, 20492.

^gCIL 8, 12322. Properly “given by the gods”.

^hHerodotus, VII, 9. Personal name of a Tyrian leading a ship among the Persian fleet (Τύριος Ματτήν Εἰρώμου “Mattēn the Tyrian, son of ʔahīrōm”). Note the accent on the final syllable.

ⁱAnnals of Salmanazar 2:93 (Reign : 727—722 BC). Compare with the seventh century PN *Mattanbaʕl.

^jAnnals of Tiglath-pileser III 67:66 (he conquered Phoenicia from 743 to 738).

^kFlavius Josephus, *Contra Apionem* 1, 124. King of Tyre, son of Βαλεζωρος (*Baʕl ʔazōr “Baal helped me”). His reign was from 850 to 821 BC. In the ninth century, his name was perhaps still something like *Mittīnu rather than *Mittēn.

^lJudge (i.e. suffet) of Tyre (Jos., Ap. 1, 157).

^m[Dittenberger 1915](#): 585, 86.

ⁿCIL 8, 8714. Compare Mutto (Just. 184). Note also the Punic PN MUT(H)UNBAL (CIL 8. 68, 16726) and MUTHUNILIM “god(s)-given” (CIL 8, 23904), reflected by the Latin PN *Ādeōdatus* (son of St. Augustine, who died at 19). [Segert \(1976: 85\)](#) explains this form as a maqtūl *ma-WTūN-u-

^oCIS 1, 10.2. See also [Friedrich \(1951: 66a, 78c, 132b and 193b\)](#).

^pFrom Proto-Hebr. *natana-ʔil(u) “the (bull-)god ʔilu has given”.

^qFrom Proto-Hebr. *natana-YHWH “YHWH has given”.

^rMaybe reflecting *proto-Hebr. *natana-Milk(u) “the god Milku has given”, with a Massoretic trivialization of the second part of the compound, no longer understood as a theophoric PN.

Table 2: Nominal forms of the verb “to give” in Phoenician and Hebrew

An alternative hypothesis is mentioned by Huehnergard (2006: 469-1, fn. 57), according to which Ugaritic and Phoenician innovated the y-initial form. In this theory, imperative $tēn < *tin$ served as the pivot form: for both I-y and I-n, the first radical disappears in the imperative ($gaš$ from $\sqrt{NGŠ}$ “to get closer” vs. $šēb$ from $\sqrt{YŠB}$ “to sit down”). This hypothesis, however, would imply that the innovation occurred independently in Ugaritic and Phoenician, and is at odds with the fact that traces of the form \sqrt{YTN} can be found in Hebrew. The Akkadian form $nadānum$, though probably cognate to Hebrew \sqrt{NTN} , presents an unexplainable second radical II-d which cannot in any way correspond to Hebrew and Phoenician II-t. Besides, Assyrian $tadānum$ (Huehnergard 1997: 603) has no initial n-. It seems that this root underwent major refection in Akkadian dialects: analogical change from I-w to I-t is well attested in Akkadian (Huehnergard 2006: 464). The Akkadian form cannot be used as a proof that the I-n in Hebrew is original. We suggest a reconstruction $*\sqrt{wtn}$ for this root in proto-Semitic: it would account for all the data except the II-d in Akkadian.

Finally, since assimilation of the first radical consonant in I-y verbs is much rarer than in I-n verbs, where it is fully regular, analogy can only have taken place from I-y to I-n, not the other way round.

3.5. y-assimilation in Aramaic verbal conjugation

The assimilation of y- before coronals is not a phenomenon limited to Hebrew; other North-West Semitic languages show traces of it. Unfortunately, for Phoenician and Ugaritic, the absence of vocalization and gemination in the writing system make it impossible to determine with confidence whether or not such a phonetic change took place. However, in the case of Biblical Aramaic and Syriac, we are fortunate to have fully adequate writing systems.

In Aramaic, three verbs show traces of y-assimilation: $\sqrt{YD\aleph}$ “to know”, \sqrt{YTB} “to sit” ($< * \sqrt{w\theta b}$) and $\sqrt{Y\aleph?}$ “to bloom” ($< * \sqrt{w\aleph?}$). The conjugation of the first two verbs is well documented in all grammars of Biblical Aramaic (see for instance Rosenthal 1988: 73).⁶ \sqrt{YTB} has the imperfective form $yittib$, which presents a clear case of y-assimilation:

(7) $yittib < *ya\theta\theta ib < *yay\theta ib < *yaw\theta ib-u$

The case of $\sqrt{YD\aleph}$ “to know” is slightly more complex, since its imperfective (3sg. fem.) is $tinda\aleph$, instead of expected $*tidda\aleph$ if y-assimilation had occurred. We propose here that the geminated $*d$ was dissimilated to a

⁶The verb “to be able” \sqrt{YKL} is often cited with these two verbs, as gemination is found in the imperfective $yikkul$. However, gemination in this verb has a different origin, see Huehnergard (2006: 471).

cluster *nd, a phonetic rule that has left many other traces in Aramaic (Davidson 1848: 83):

(8) *tindaʕ < *tandaʕ < *taddaʕ < *taydaʕ

The root $\sqrt{Y\text{ʕ}ʕ}$ “to bloom” presents an even more complex evolution. Targum Aramaic <YNʕY> *yinʕēʕ* is the imperfective 3sg. masc. of the verb *yəʕaʕ* meaning “to bloom”. It is found in the Onkelos Targum, where it glosses Hebrew $\sqrt{PR\text{H}}$ “to grow sprouts” or $\sqrt{S\text{W}S}$ “bloom” (Jastrow 1903: 583). The perfective form *yəʕaʕ* goes back to a Common-Semitic protoform *waʕʕaʕ-a “he went out” (Geʕez *waḏaʕa*, Hebrew *yāšāʕ*). The meaning “to grow sprouts” is found in Akkadian (w)āšûm (< *waʕʕāʕ-u-) “to go out, to grow, to bloom”.

The imperfective form <YNʕY> *yinʕēʕ* is extremely irregular; dictionaries set a distinct root $\sqrt{N\text{ʕ}ʕ}$ alternating with $\sqrt{Y\text{ʕ}ʕ}$. We propose a different solution, which involves y-assimilation like the two previous verbs: *yawʕʕiʕ-u > *yayʕʕiʕ > *yaʕʕiʕiʕ

(9) *yaʕʕiʕiʕ < *yayʕʕiʕ < *yawʕʕiʕ-u

Assimilation took place before the regular Aramaic change *ʕ > ʕ, when the place of articulation of this consonant was still coronal. After this assimilation, a dissimilation occurred, exactly as with $\sqrt{YD\text{ʕ}}$ “to know”.

(10) *yandʕiʕ < *yaddʕiʕ < *yaʕʕiʕiʕ

This dissimilation took place at an intermediate stage of change, when the consonant coming from proto-Semitic *ʕ was still a coronal, but had become voiced: *ʕ changed to ʕ through a voiced pharyngealized stop transcribed here as *ḏ (its exact pronunciation is difficult to ascertain). Then, the regular vowel changes applied, yielding the attested form *yinʕēʕ* < *yandʕiʕ.

3.6. Concluding remarks

The Hebrew, Phoenician and Aramaic data reviewed in this section have shown that the cases of gemination in various verbal forms of I-y verbs is better explained as being due to assimilation of y- to the following consonant following the rule *VyCV > *VCCV. These data cannot decide whether assimilation took place before or after the change *w- > *y-, so that they would be compatible with Huehnergard’s hypothesis that *VwCV > *VCCV (where C stands for a dental consonant).

In cases where cognate I-n and I-y roots are attested (such as Hebrew \sqrt{NTN} , Phoenician \sqrt{YTN}), the I-n form must be the analogical one, as gemination resulting from assimilation is regular in I-n verbs, whereas it is only residual in I-y verbs.

4. Bayit

The noun for “house” in Semitic (Hebrew *báyit*, Arabic *baytu*ⁿ, etc.) is notorious for its irregular paradigm, which has never been satisfactorily explained. However, we will show that the rule of assimilation illustrated by verbal alternations in the previous sections can account for the Hebrew and Aramaic data.

In Hebrew, the plural of *báyit* shows unexplained gemination *bāttîm* (Joüion & Muraoka 2006: 294). The same gemination is found in Aramaic dialects. In Biblical Aramaic, the attested plural is *battê-kôn* < *battáy-kum (Daniel 2₅), and in Syriac, the singular and plural forms of this noun are *bayt-ā* and *battē* respectively.

The singular form goes back to **báytu* in proto-North West Semitic, hence Hebrew *báyit* in pausa with vowel fracture, but status constructus *bêṭ* = , 1sg possessive *bêṭ-î* from proto-Semitic **báyti-ya* with monophthongization (–i– being the Genitive case suffix, and –ya the 1sg possessive suffix).

The plural must be reconstructed as **batt-ū-ma* in the Nominative and as **batt-î-ma* in the oblique cases, with status constructus **battáy*= (Hebrew *bāttê-kem*, Biblical Aramaic *battê-kôn* “your^phouses”).

Joüion & Muraoka (2006: 294, fn. 4) suggests that Aramaic *batt-* is due to the intervocalic syncope of –y–: Common Semitic **bayat-* > proto-Cananean **bahat-* > proto-Aramaic ***baht-* with compensatory gemination, but this ad hoc theory requires one to suppose a special phonetic rule which applied only to this word. Besides, it would not account in any way for the Hebrew form, and it is highly unlikely that Hebrew *bāttîm* could be a borrowing from Aramaic.

The rule of assimilation presented in the previous section offers a simpler explanation: the geminate in the plural of this noun is due to the assimilation of *y to the following consonant:

- (11) **bayt-áy-* > **batt-áy-* (status constructus plural, Hebrew *battê-*)
**bayt-îma* > **batt-îma* (status absolutus plural, Hebrew *bāttîm*).

This noun, however, allows us further to refine the conditioning of the y-assimilation rule, as no gemination is found in the singular:

- (12) **báyti-* (status constructus singular, Hebrew *bêṭ-*)
**báytu* (status absolutus singular, Hebrew *báyit*).

The main difference between examples 11 and 12 is that in the former, the stressed syllable follows the postulated **-yt-* cluster, while in the latter, the stressed syllable precedes it. This shows that y-assimilation only occurs in pretonic position (**-VyTṼ-* > **-VTṼV-*).

No other CayC- noun shows the same alternation in any North-West Semitic language; however, this is probably due to the fact that less com-

mon nouns underwent analogy and the original geminated plural was replaced by a plural following a more regular pattern. As pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, the expected regular plural of *báyit* should be a broken plural **bayatīm* > **bəyātīm*.⁷ This is actually the form attested in Ugaritic.⁸

This pattern is found with some other CayC nouns, such as *ḥáyil*, plural *ḥāyālīm* “strength, army”. However, we also find simple plurals of the type **CayC-īm*, such as *zayt* “olive”, plural *zēyātīm* < **zaytīm* “olive trees” (as in the place-name *har hazzēyātīm* “Mount of Olives”).

The irregular plural of *báyit* constitutes important evidence for the rule of y-assimilation: it proves that this rule cannot have taken place before the change **w* > **y*, otherwise *báyit* would not have undergone assimilation, since the *-y-* in this noun goes back to proto-Semitic. Besides, it proves that the assimilation rule was conditioned by supra-segmental factors.

With this rule in mind, we are now in a position to explain the forms *wayyīšer* from $\sqrt{Y\dot{S}R}$ “to make” and *wayyīšeq* from $\sqrt{Y\dot{S}Q}$ “to pour” in section 3.2. that show no assimilation of *y-*. The expected forms if y-assimilation had occurred in all VyCV contexts would have been **wayyīššer* and **wayyīššeq* on the model of I-n roots.

In these two waw-imperfectives, the stress falls on the personal prefix:

- (13) *wayyīšer* < **wa-yá-yšir*
wayyīšeq < **wa-yá-yšiq*

The absence of gemination here is expected given the accentual conditioning of y-assimilation: since the stressed syllable precedes the **-yC-* cluster, no assimilation takes place here as in example 12 above.

By contrast, imperfective forms without waw have the stress on the radical, and undergo assimilation:

- (14) *ʔeššōq* < **ʔa-yšúq*

The rule of y-assimilation can therefore not only explain various irregular paradigms, but also sheds some light on the reconstruction of the proto-North-West Semitic accentual system.

⁷Plurals built on the binyan QaTaL are very widespread in North-West Semitic, as in Hebrew *melek* < **máلك-u* “king” vs. *mālākīm* < **malak-īm* “kings”.

⁸In Ugaritic, the singular BT **bētu* comes from the same proto-form **báyit-u-* as Hebrew *báyit*, but the plural BHT-M “the houses” is not directly comparable to *bātīm*. In BHT-M “the houses”, the spelling *-H-* probably represents a hiatus. Sivan (2001: 34-5) cites an alternative spelling BWT-M, and it is most likely that both BHT-M and BWT-M stand for a plural form **ba.at-ūma*. This form would reflect an innovative broken plural **ba(y)at-u* “houses”. This broken plural, which originally probably had a collective meaning “a group of houses” or maybe “the rooms (of the house)”, would have superseded the original geminated plural **batt-ū-ma*.

5. Conclusion

This article has shown the existence of a rule involving the assimilation of *y-* to a following consonant in North-West Semitic and set out its precise phonetic conditioning. Its clearest traces are found in verbal flexional and derivational morphology, but evidence is also found in the peculiar flexion of the irregular noun “house”.

The data presented here show that **y* (either from proto-Semitic **w* or **y*) assimilates in pretonic position to a following coronal consonant, including proto-Semitic **t*, **θ*, **s*, **d* as well as the emphatic (or ejective) **s'*, **t'*, **θ'*. No traces of assimilation with other coronals such as **z*, **n*, **ð*, **ʔ*, **ʃ*, **l* and **t'* have been found, but this may reflect a gap in our data rather than an original constraint on this phonetic rule, given the limited number of examples which have resisted analogy. Among the verbs preserving the *y*-assimilation rule, the important proportion of roots with *Ṣ* as a second root consonant in Hebrew probably reflects the fact that this consonant results from the merger of three proto-Semitic consonants **s'*, **t'* and **θ'*.

The effect of this rule has been largely levelled by analogy in most North-West Semitic languages, and traces can only be detected in old derivations or irregular paradigms.

Huehnergard (2006) has already proposed explaining the maqṭal formations and some of the irregular verbs discussed in this paper by the assimilation of the first radical consonant. However, he argues for a much earlier time frame than we do: according to him, it goes back to proto-Semitic, and the assimilation of *w-* to a following *t-* in Akkadian and Arabic (Brockelmann 1908-13: I:177) would be traces of this rule. In our hypothesis, the *y*-assimilation rule postdates the change **w* > **y*, and assimilation of **w* to **t* in proto-Semitic is an unrelated phenomenon.

The hypothesis laid out in the present article has two advantages over Huehnergard's. First, in Arabic and Akkadian, assimilation only occurs before *t*, whereas in North-West Semitic, as we have seen, it occurs with most coronal consonants; Huehnergard argues that assimilation of *w-* to all dental consonants (not just to *t-*) is of proto-Semitic date, but it seems highly unlikely that no trace of this rule on dental consonants other than *t-* would have been preserved in Arabic and Akkadian.

Second, Huehnergard's hypothesis cannot account for the plural form of *báyit*, which would have to be analysed as an entirely unrelated fact.

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