

# The Vocalization of the Worms *Mahzor*

## English Summary

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**L**ALTHOUGH WE HAVE dependable evidence of a Jewish presence in Germany in the Christian Roman period (or, to be more precise, of the existence of an organized community in Cologne in the fourth century), in terms of social order, legal status, and spiritual and cultural uniqueness, German Jewry is a mediaeval phenomenon arising in the Carolingian period in Christian Europe. According to the evidence of historical sources, Jewish resettlement in Germany began at the start of the ninth century in the vicinity of the palace of Karl the Great in Aachen. From the middle of that century down to the end of the eleventh century we find Jewish settlements in western Germany in the Rhine valley (Mainz, Worms, Speyer, Cologne, and elsewhere) and along the length of the Mosel River, the western tributary of the Rhine (Metz and Triere); in eastern Germany in the Salle valley (Marsburg and Halle); in the Elbe valley (Magdeburg) in the north; and in the Danube valley (Regensburg) in the south, as well as in central Germany (Bomberg and Wurzburg).

The new communities which grew up in the large, ancient cities of the Rhine valley came to assume the central role in the history of German Jewry specifically and of early Ashkenazi Jewry in general (including all three of its component parts in western Europe: the French, the German and the English).

ii. The new immigrants to Germany, who came from France, Provence and Italy, already before the time of the Crusades laid the foundations of a Jewish vernacular in their new land. Since Hebrew was for them primarily a liturgical language, the emphasis of linguistic interest has been focused on their liturgical reading tradition that was used in the transmission of those parts of the Hebrew literature which have particular religious importance. The traditional pronunciation of the early German Jewry is known to linguistic scholarship as the pre-Ashkenazi pronunciation.

The main evidence of the pre-Ashkenazi pronunciation used in the reading of post-biblical literature is provided by the vocalization (and the orthography, which includes many vowel letters) of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century *mahzorim*, which contain the prayers according to the custom of western Germany ("the Rhine custom"). The linguistic information which is contained in the graphic symbols of vowels and the other symbols of vocalization, makes it possible to attempt a reconstruction of the reading tradition of the Ashkenazi vocalizers of the *Mahzorim* in two

distinct fields: In the pronunciation of the vowels and several characteristics which concern the pronunciation of the consonants; in the pronunciation of the mishnaic and talmudic words and grammatical forms.

iii. A careful and comprehensive clarification of the specific characteristics of the system of vocalization is a precondition for the identification of the phonetic value of the symbols of vocalization in ancient texts and for an accurate evaluation of the vocal shape of the linguistic forms. This sort of clarification expands beyond the bounds of the history of Hebrew pronunciation and takes on scholarly importance of its own because it relates to the history of writing. The results of such an analysis can be expected to teach us how ancient systems of vocalization created in the East in the Geonic Period were used in manuscripts far-removed in time and place from the original locale and period in which they developed.

The vocalized manuscript of the Worms *Mahzor* is one of the most reliable and important of the manuscripts for the recognition of the pre-Ashkenazi reading tradition. This article in its Hebrew version describes and analyzes the phonological and morphophonological data which can be derived from the vocalization of the liturgical hymns and the prayers in this *Mahzor* (in its first volume).

In the English summary of our paper several general remarks about the vocalization systems in the region of Germany during the first half of the Middle Ages and about the pre-Ashkenazi reading tradition will suffice.

iv. Vocalizers of the liturgical texts which were copied in the centres of transmission in the region of early Ashkenazi settlement could choose from two ancient systems which had developed in Eretz Israel and which were already known within the sphere of the new culture of the west: the Tiberian vocalization and the so-called Palestinian-Tiberian vocalization. The evidence of the earliest vocalized Ashkenazi texts demonstrates that both systems were in use in Germany. They were used alongside one another in the liturgical texts, in Bibles and in *mahzorim*, but neither gained preferred status over the other.

The Ashkenazi *mahzorim* vocalized according to the Tiberian system reveal three sub-types, as used by the vocalizers of the liturgical hymns and the prayers:

1. The Precise Type. The vocalizer attempts to be true and as close as possible to the traditional Tiberian vocalization of the Bible. It is clear that some variation from the Tiberian vocalization of the Bible is inevitable in a non-biblical text, nor can we expect to find no trace of the contemporary phonetic environment, which was essentially non-Tiberian.

2. The Vulgar Type. Many of the special characteristics of the traditional Tiberian vocalization are blurred, while the influence of the local way of speech is clearly recognizable.

3. The Intermediate Type. The character of its vocalization is somewhere between that of the Precise Type and that of the Vulgar Type. It is the most common of the types of Tiberian vocalization used in the early Ashkenazi *maḥzorim*. The vocalizers of the *maḥzorim* in this group differ in their knowledge of Tiberian grammar and the extent to which they followed the traditional vocalization of the Bible, and on the other hand in the extent to which their pointing reflects their own non-Tiberian tradition of pronunciation. The period of co-existence with the Palestinian-Tiberian system of vocalization left its impression on some of the manuscripts in this group, such that one finds in them, regularly or only occasionally, a few of the symbols which are characteristic of the competing system.

v. A study of the German *maḥzorim* vocalized according to the Palestinian-Tiberian system shows that the system of vocalization used in them changed somewhat from its original character, which is found primarily in *genizah* fragments from the East, though it is also known from the large Bible manuscripts vocalized in Italy and in Germany itself. There are several aspects to this change: (1) Some of the distinctive characteristics of the vocalization disappear completely or nearly so; (2) the use of other characteristic traits becomes less frequent, and they appear irregularly and unsystematically; (3) certain traits of the vocalization are used mistakenly or in ways different from the original norm. All of these phenomena can be seen in the Worms *Maḥzor*, whose vocalizer belongs to the German branch of the Palestinian-Tiberian school.

Three primary factors caused the Palestinian-Tiberian vocalization in the *maḥzorim* to deviate from the accepted norms of the Palestinian-Tiberian system:

1. Certain elements of the vocalization — the graphic notation itself or the methodological principles behind the system — were completely or partially forgotten. The distance in time and space and the lack of close ties to the source of the tradition in Eretz Israel adequately explain this cause.

2. The strength of the Palestinian-Tiberian system was weakened in its constant confrontation with the Tiberian system of vocalization, and was shaken further by the growing preference (around the end of the thirteenth century) for the Tiberian system as the ideal, which led to the desire to fix the Tiberian vocalization as the sole system of vocalization in Germany.

3. The vocalizers of liturgical hymns and prayers do not tend to employ all of the details of a system of vocalization with precision. They are especially careless in the use of those elements which have no consequences for actual pronunciation.

vi. What are the salient points of the pre-Ashkenazi traditional pronunciation of Hebrew? It had its inception, chronologically, in the tenth century (with the growth of the centres of Torah scholarship in Germany), and continued until about the middle of the fourteenth century. In terms of geographical location, it had its beginning (and its primary point of concentration) in the

western regions of Germany, spreading from there to eastern and central Germany.

The period of pre-Ashkenazi pronunciation (which is clearly distinguishable by the lack of any distinction between *kamez* and *pataḥ* and between *zere* and *segol*) and the later period, the period of "Ashkenazi" pronunciation (primarily characterized by the contrasting pairs *kamez-pataḥ* and *zere-segol*) are divided chronologically according to linguistic criteria, but surprisingly there is a parallel to this distinction in the history of German Jewry.

Nevertheless, it should be stressed that the changeover from the old way of pronunciation to the new Ashkenazi custom did not take place all at once; it is in the nature of phonological developments taking place over a large area that they occur gradually and over a long period. Indeed, the first signs of this change appear already in the end of the thirteenth century, but many varied proofs can be adduced to demonstrate that the new Ashkenazi pronunciation became an accomplished fact only in the fifteenth century.

The pre-Ashkenazi pronunciation, which is notable for its high level of regularity, derives from and is a continuation of the Palestinian pronunciation (as known from *genizah* fragments in Palestinian and Palestinian-Tiberian vocalization). This derivation is common to the Jews of Germany and the Jews of Spain, whose traditional pronunciation also can be traced back to Eretz Israel. However, despite the common roots of the reading traditions in the two main centres of Jewry in the West, each system developed independently and separately in a unique way.

vii. An external factor significantly influenced the establishment and internal development of pre-Ashkenazi Hebrew, namely the Judeo-German (Yiddish) vernacular. The Jews who settled in the Rhine district found there when they arrived a German-speaking population; even from the first stages of the adoption of the foreign tongue as their spoken language, the Jews did not speak "pure" German, but rather a composite dialect comprised of several elements: (1) The German component, which is quantitatively the largest and the most important, derives from Middle High German, or, to be more precise, from its Franco-Rhinish dialect. This is the dialect which was spoken in the early days of Jewish settlement by the non-Jewish population in the main Jewish centres of Lothar-Germany. (2) The Romance component derives from old Italian and old French, which were the spoken tongues of the first Jewish settlers in Germany before their immigration. (3) The Hebrew (and Aramaic) component derives from the Jewish liturgical language. (Later, with the eastward spread of German Jewry, a Slavic component also was absorbed into this Jewish language.) This amalgamated language of the German Jews is Judeo-German, that is to say, Yiddish.

The coexistence in the region of Germany of Hebrew as the liturgical language and Old Yiddish as the spoken language left its traces in the harmonization of the rules of reading and the phonetics of speech. In other words, the nature of certain phonemic and allophonic characteristics specific to Hebrew became confused on the one hand, while on the other certain phonetic characteristics and distinctions specific to Yiddish came to be copied into Hebrew.

viii. The clarification of each feature of the system of vocalization of an ancient Ashkenazi *maḥzor* presents the researcher with a major problem: Does the phenomenon in question have pho-

netic implications, methodological ones, or perhaps only orthographic significance? Furthermore, should it become clear that some element of the vocalization in fact reflects pronunciation, to what extent does this pronunciation reflect the actual pronunciation of the German vocalizer himself? Perhaps he was only using a traditional vocalization, reflecting the ways of reading of previous ages and distant places. Thus, in order to draw valid phonological conclusions, a scholar must exhaust all the details of the vocalization in all of their appearances in the source before him, relating them back to the ancient systems of vocalization and the reading traditions they reflect, as well as to the spoken language of the vocalizer.

This sort of clarification makes it possible to characterize with some measure of certainty the source of pronunciation in the pre-Ashkenazi reading tradition. It enables us to distinguish which features derive from ancient Hebrew traditions and which developed through the phonetic influence of the vernacular, which were late inner developments arising by themselves (with no connection to the spoken language), and which were artificial readings in accord with the rules of Tiberian grammar, the result of conscious normative efforts.

ix. The biblical section, which in the original scope and organization of the *Mahzor* was the last part of the book (as M. Beit-Arié has demonstrated in his codological research), comprises today the books of Ecclesiastes and Job and parts of Jeremiah (i-xxiii:5) and Isaiah (xxxiv:1-xxxv:10).

The system of vocalization used in the biblical texts is similar but not identical to that used to point the liturgical hymns in the *Mahzor*. The differences between the vocalization of the liturgical hymns and that of the parts of the Bible in the *Mahzor* can be classified into three groups:

1. Differences of degree in the distribution of certain features of vocalization;
2. A feature of vocalization found in the liturgical hymns but not (or virtually not) in the biblical sections;
3. A feature of vocalization found in the biblical sections but not (or virtually not) in the liturgical hymns.

These differences apparently provide sufficient proof that the vocalization of the liturgical hymns and that of the biblical sections in the *Mahzor* were the work of two different men. Nevertheless, it seems more likely to me that one man vocalized

the entire *Mahzor*. Differences in features of the vocalization which do not reflect pronunciation can be explained by the differing approach of that self-same vocalizer to different liturgical texts, i.e., to the Bible on one hand and the liturgical hymns (*piyyuṭim*) on the other. With regard to features of the vocalization which do reflect pronunciation, the differences could result from the clear distinction made by the vocalizer (as by all other vocalizers and public readers of the Bible) between the Bible and post-biblical texts. Whereas the reading of the Bible tended toward the normative pronunciation represented by the accepted Tiberian vocalization, the actual customs of speech influenced the reading of the post-biblical texts.

x. As for the morphology of post-biblical Hebrew in the Ashkenazi tradition, the accepted view is that the linguistic information provided by the contemporary Ashkenazi reading of the Mishnah and the liturgical hymns (*piyyuṭim*) is generally worthless, as it is based on late printed editions whose orthographic and vocalization traditions are undependable. (They are full of printing errors, "corrected" versions and "grammatical" vocalizations.) Thus, whoever wants to acquaint himself with the *living* tradition of the Ashkenazi Jews for reading post-biblical literature before the decline of that tradition and its distortion by external influences, must approach the *ancient* written sources, i.e. mediaeval manuscripts (of Ashkenazi provenance).

Since we have no vocalized manuscripts of the Mishnah (nor of the rest of classical Jewish literature) from the Ashkenazi region, we must make do with the vocalized manuscripts of the *mahzorim* of the old Ashkenazi custom. Behind the pronunciation of the words, to which the vocalizers of the early German *mahzorim* tried to give expression in their vocalization, we can clearly see a linguistic tradition which is extremely substantial and exceptionally trustworthy. This mediaeval Ashkenazi tradition for reading the prayers and liturgical hymns drew on ancient oral traditions, and it preserves many distinguishing features, i.e. many grammatical forms whose construction does not follow the rules of biblical morphology and words whose shape diverges from that prescribed by the Tiberian tradition of Hebrew.

The second section of this article (in its Hebrew version) attempts to exemplify through selected words and linguistic forms the morphology of post-biblical Hebrew as reflected by the tradition of the vocalization of the Worms *Mahzor*.