THE INTERCHANGE OF THE PREPOSITIONS *BET* AND *MEM* IN THE
TEXTS FROM QUMRAN

Lawrence H. Schiffman

In 1959, Professor N. M. Sarna published an article entitled "The Interchange of the Prepositions *Beth* and *Min* in Biblical Hebrew."[1] He sought to demonstrate that the use of the preposition *bet* in the meaning "from", recently discovered in Northwest Semitic[2] and asserted for biblical Hebrew by the medieval Jewish grammarians,[3] could be proven to exist in the Hebrew

---

[1]   *JBL* 78 (1959), 310-316.

[2]   See the material cited by Sarna, *op. cit.*, 310 f. and notes, as well as C. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965), 92 f.; M. Dahood, *Ugaritic-Hebrew Philology* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute,1965), 29; J. Friedrich - W. Röllig, *Phönizisch-Punische Grammatik* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute,1970), rule 251 and note, and C. Brekelmans, "Some Considerations on the Translation of the Psalms according to M. Dahood-I, The Preposition *b* = from in the Psalms according to M. Dahood", *Ugarit-Forschungen* 1 (1969), 5-14. Sarna cited Gordon and Friedrich from earlier editions. J. Barr, *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 175-7 has challenged the existence of *bet* = "from" in the Bible.

[3]   Sarna, *op. cit.*, 311 and notes. Cf. W. Chomsky, "The Ambiguity of the Prefixed Prepositions *m, l, b* in the Bible", *JQR* N.S. 61 (1970/1), 87-9. It is remarkable that the only

Scriptures. Sarna adopted a systematic methodology for confirming the existence of this phenomenon: (1) Seven examples were cited to show that "either *b* or *mn* may be employed interchangeably as the subordinating preposition with the same verb."[4] (2) Next, he noted that "the ablative use of prepositional *b* has twice been preserved by the Kethib, whereas the Qere reflects the more usual form with *mn*."[5] (3) Sarna adduced five examples of parallel passages which demonstrated "the interchangeability of the two prepositions."[6] While he recognized that dialectal considerations might account for this last group, he cited (4) six examples in which the alternation of the prepositions within the same passage was "undoubtedly" for "purely stylistic reasons."[7]

After this methodical demonstration, Sarna suggested that the assumption of the use of *b* for *m(in)* would be of help in the elucidation of some difficult passages in Job. Needless to say, it was his intention that this conclusion might throw light on other difficult biblical passages. Yet it is probable that the history of this interchange did not end with the composition of the last biblical verse. Evidence of continuation

references to modern research in Chomsky's article are to the various editions of Gordon's work on Ugaritic. Professor Daniel Lasker of Ben Gurion University was kind enough to call to my attention the reference in Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed,* I,41 (end).

[4]   Sarna, *op. cit.,* 311.

[5]   *Op. cit.,* 312.

[6]   *Ib.*

[7]   *Op. cit.,* 313.

[2]

into the Hellenistic period may be available in the Greek Bible translations.[8]   This study is devoted to showing that the usage persisted into post-biblical Hebrew as found in the Qumran Scrolls.

In order to establish the occurrence of the phenomenon in Qumran literature, we shall follow Sarna's methodology. Examples in support of the interchange will be set out in several categories:

(1) Variants between Qumran biblical texts and the MT: E. Y. Kutscher[9] listed three cases in which 1QIsa[a] had the preposition *bet* where the MT had *mem*.

	MT	1QIsa[a]
Is. 46:6	מכיס	בכיס
Is. 48:16	מעת	בעת
Is. 66:6	מעיר	בעיר

Kutscher explains the first example as conditioned by the continuation of the verse, and takes the other two to be "exegetical." Kutscher[10] also adduced three examples in which the

[8]   S. R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text and Topography of the Books of Samuel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), lxvii and notes.

[9]   *Ha-Lashon We-Ha-Reqaʻ Ha-Leshoni shel Megillat Yeshaʻyahu Ha-Shelemah Mi-Megillot Yam Ha-Melaḥ* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1959), 309.

[10]   *Op. cit.,* 311. For a comparison with the ancient versions, see Kutscher, *loc. cit.*

scroll has *mem* where the MT has *bet*.

	MT	1QIsa[a]
Is. 6:13	בשלכת	משלכת
Is. 9:18	בעברת	מעברת
Is. 10:24	בשבט	משבט

Two cases may be cited from 11QPs[a] in which the scroll has *mem* where the MT has *bet*.

	MT	11QPs[a]
Ps. 119:87	בארץ	מארץ	col. 10:6
Ps. 139:21	ובתקוממיך	וממתקוממיכה	col. 20:13[11]

(2) Variation between the MT and the biblical text which is reflected in a sectarian composition: 1QH 5:13 reads, *wa-taṣel nefesh ʾani bi-meʿon ʾarayot*. This passage is a mosaic of biblical phraseology: Jer. 20:13 and Ps. 35:10 (cf. 72:12) supply the verb and predicate; the object of the preposition comes from Nah. 2:12; Jer. 20:13 has the preposition *miyyad*, and Ps. 35:10 uses *m(in)*. Nah. 2:12 has no preposition. Nevertheless, our Qumran text exhibits the preposition *bet*.[12]

---

[11] On the addition of the second *mem* in 11QPs[a], see J. A. Sanders, *The Psalms Scroll of Qumran Cave 11 (DJD IV)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 41.

[12] Cf. 1QH 5:18 f. as restored in J. Licht, *Megillat Ha-Hodayot* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute 1957), 102. If the proposed reading, *[wa-taṣel niḷṭraf mi-bor ʾarayot*, is accepted, it lends further support to our example of the interchange. But note also the alternatives *mi-koaḥ* and *mi-paḥ* cited in Licht's textual note on *bor*.

[4]

Either the author of the hymn had a variant biblical text before him, or, more likely, this is an example of the use of *bet* to mean "from". The line may therefore be translated: "You rescued the poor man *from* the lion's den".

(3) Interchange of the subordinating preposition: The previous example (1QH 5:13) shows that *bet* could be employed as the subordinating preposition in cases normally requiring *m(in)*. This phenomenon can be further documented. In 1QH 1:23, the *nif'al* of the root *b't* ("to be terrified") governs the preposition *bet*. In 3:14 this same verb form governs *m(in)*. Biblical usage exhibits a compound preposition beginning with *mem*.

1QH 1:21 reads *'eleh yada'ti mi-binatkhah*. 1QM 10:16 has *'eleh yada'nu mi-binatkhah*. 1QH 14:12 has *wa-'ani yada'ti u-mi-binatkha*. From the continuation it is clear that the *waw* is either otiose or explicative. Yet 1QH 15:12 reads *wa-'ani yada'ti be-binatkha*. This last passage has *bet* where the other three have *m(in)*.

(4) Poetic parallelism of *bet* and *mem*: Such a case occurs in 1QS 3:19.

> *be-ma'ayan 'or toledot ha-'emet*
>
> *u-mi-meqor ḥoshekh toledot ha-'awel*
>
> *From* a spring of light (come) the generations[13]

---

[13] The term *toledot,* literally "generations," has a complex meaning at Qumran. See J. Licht, *Megillat Ha-Serakhim* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1965), 85. G. Scholem, *"Hakkarat Panim We-Sidre Sirṭuṭin", Sefer Assaf,* ed. U. Cassuto (Jerusalem 1942/3), 477-9 would have us translate "nature", but this does not seem to fit the context. *Toledot* at Qumran refers to the origin, nature and activities of the thing described. This term is certainly worthy of a thorough study.

of truth,

And from a source of darkness (come) the

generations of unrighteousness.

In the passages quoted so far, it was possible to marshal literary or textual evidence in favor of understanding a given *bet* as meaning "from". For the following examples, no such support can be cited. Nevertheless, the evidence from the passages discussed above allows us to assume that the interchange was still operating when the scrolls were composed and copied. We may therefore use it to solve textual problems and to avoid needless textual emendations. These examples are taken from the Qumran legal materials:

The sectarian law--the *nistar*--must be kept secret by the sect. The *maskil* (sectarian scholar-teacher) is required, in the words of 1QS 9:17, *u-le-satter 'et 'aṣat ha-torah be-tokh 'anshe ha-'awel*. Rejecting P. Wernberg-Møller's proposed emendation of *be-tokh* to *mi-tokh*,[14] we still translate, "To keep secret the counsel of the Torah *from* among the men of iniquity."[15]

1QS 7:10-12 contains an allusion to the voting procedure at Qumran.[16] The passage begins, *we-khen la-'ish ha-niftar be-moshab ha-rabbim 'asher lo' be-'eṣah....* We translate, "And

[14] *The Manual of Discipline* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1957), 42.

[15] For a fuller discussion of this passage see my *Halakhah at Qumran* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975), 27.

[16] C. Rabin, *Qumran Studies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), 105f. See also E. Ferguson,"Qumran and Codex 'D'", *RQ* 8 (1972), 75-80.

likewise, as to the man who is absent *from* the session of the assembly, without permission...".[17]

The few examples discussed here do not exhaust the possibilities. However, it cannot be assumed that every *bet* in Qumran literature means "from". But the evidence marshalled suffices to buttress the possibility that the interchange of the prepositions *bet* and *m(in)* is in evidence at Qumran, and that we are therefore entitled to appeal to this interchange in interpreting Qumran literature.

---

17 For a complete discussion, see *Halakhah at Qumran*, 69 f.