AN EXPLANATION OF THE SYSTEM OF *KETIB (KETIV)-QERE*

Charles L. Echols, Ph.D.

Summary

The system of *Ketib-Qere* was created by the Masoretes to alert the reader to perceived issues with the written text (the *Ketib*). The Masoretes wrote a small circle over the word in question (the *Ketib*) that directed the reader to the margin where they wrote a small ק over which they indicated what they believed was the correct reading (the *Qere*).

Example: Judg 1:27

Ketib (K) indicated by small circle over the word in question
Qere (Q) indicated by small ק over which is the proposed reading

❋❋❋

Originally Hebrew was written using only consonants. By the Classical period (ca. seventh century BC), terminal vowels were added—but even these were consonants used as vowels. Subsequently, medial vowels were added—again using certain consonants. Not far into the Second Temple Period, Hebrew began to give way to other languages—notably Aramaic and Greek—as the vernacular. Indeed the production of the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), beginning probably in the early third century BC, reflects that fact that Hebrew was no longer the vernacular for most Jews. At least as early as the first century AD, several vowel systems existed to aid in reading Hebrew. The most famous were the Babylonian, Palestinian, and Tiberian systems, in which small marks were added above and below the text. During the rabbinic period, other notations to the text were made (e.g., the division of the text into paragraphs, *puncta extraordinaria*).

If we speed forward to the ninth-tenth centuries AD, we come to a group of faithful, brilliant Jewish scholars called the Masoretes. They preserved the text that had been passed down to them, including the vowels and notations that accompanied the text. In fact, they compiled further information, including notation on the side margin (the *masora parva)* and

bottom (the *masora magna*) of each page of the text as well as other information (e.g., the notation between the end of any biblical book and the beginning of the next book). Such was their reverence for the sacred text, however, that they made no alterations to the received consonantal text.

As they made copies of the received text, they noticed occasional differences with how they thought that the received text should be read. They wanted to register the differences and provide what they thought should be the alternative reading; but, again, because the text was Holy writ, they made notes in the margin rather than changing the consonants. The system of *Ketib-Qere* (K-Q) was implemented by the Masoretes to record such differences. Earlier rabbinic sources indicate that scribes were aware of such differences and had developed alternative readings, but the Masoretes were the first to record them in the margin of the page.[1] The word "*Ketib*" ("what is written") is from the Aramaic verb כְּתִיב and refers to the written (consonantal) text. "*Qere*" ("what is read") is also Aramaic (קְרִי/קְרִי) and signifies how the Masoretes thought that the text should be read (vocalized).

Some K-Q occur only once or are infrequent. Others, *Qere perpetuum* ("perpetual" or "constant" *Qere*) occur regularly as, for example, the Tetragrammaton (יהוה), where the vowels reflect, with some modification, those that belong to אֲדֹנָי. Because perpetual *Qeres* are invariable the Masoretes did not bother noting them.

Let's illustrate the system of K-Q with an example from 2 Kgs 23:36:

---

[1] That the system of *K-Q* is a product of the Masoretes is inferred from the fact that none of the ancient manuscripts, particularly those from the Judean Desert, have *Qeres* (Emmanuel Tov, *Hebrew Bible, Greek Bible and Qumran: Collected Essays* [Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 121; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008], 2-3). As evidence that the practice of alternative readings was in place prior to the Masoretes, Tov (p. 6) cites *b. Erub.* 26a: "It [העיר, 2 Kgs 20:4] is written 'the city,' but we read 'court.'"

The *Ketib*—the proper noun, Zebidah—is enclosed in the box. The small circle over it directs you to the margin where the *Qere* (זבודה) lies over a small ק. The difference between the *Ketib* and the *Qere* is in the third letter, i.e. י (K) and ו (Q). The Masorete scribe pointed the *Ketib* as he thought it should be vocalized. (Remember that the Masoretes added their system of vowels to the text that was handed down to them.) Hence, one simply transfers the vowels and any *dāgēš fortes* or *lenes* from the *Ketib* to the Qere to see the Masoretic vocalization. Further help comes from the a small, superscript "a" immediately following the *Ketib* that directs the reader to the critical apparatus at the bottom of the page. There the editor of the apparatus for 1-2 Kings (A. Jepson) provides fuller information. (Not all K-Q are noted in the critical apparatus.) He indicates that several Hebrew manuscripts (nonn Mss) and the Targum (𝕮) read with (ut) the *Qere*, while the Syriac and Vulgate (𝕾𝖁) read with the *Ketib* (as do the NASB, ESV, and NRSV). He also points the *Ketib* as the Masoretes might have heard it.

Scholars debate over what exactly the *Qeres* signify, although most work from two general suppositions: the *Qeres* reflect (a) the majority reading of a number of texts (the "collation" theory) or, (b) an oral correction to a standard text (the "correction" theory). Tov's recent work expands somewhat in deliberating between three possibilities: the Qeres signify (1) a reading (vocalizing) correction to the *Ketib*, (2) a written variation from the *Ketib*, and (3) a reading tradition that accompanied the *Ketib*.[2] Tov rejects the first opinion because, for example, there are occasions when "the same words . . . sometimes form the *Qere* word in one verse, and the *Ketib* word in another one" (p. 57; cf. √אסר, Gen 39:20; Judg 16:21, 25). He debates over the second opinion because "the existence of merely one variant is illogical" (p. 58). Tov is persuaded by the third opinion. As evidence he points to the very terms, *Ketib* (how the text is written) and *Qere* (how the text should be read/vocalized). As further evidence that the *Qeres* are not a record of alternative written readings, he observes (p. 56) that the *K-Q* are "the only para–textual feature of 𝔐 that is not paralleled by the Judean Desert scrolls," the latest of which is probably from the 1st century AD. Also, in any given place where the *Qere* differs from the *Ketib*, there is only one *Qere* among all of the manuscripts. Tov (p. 58) allows that there are "intermediate positions" between the three.

In many cases, the third position is the most persuasive; but it is debatable whether it satisfactorily accounts for all of the *K-Q*. Würthwein, for example, states that the *K-Q* reflect dissatisfaction with the received text "on grammatical, esthetic, or doctrinal grounds."[3] Indeed, one cannot be sure that the *Qere* reading reflects the judgment of the

---

[2] Emmanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (3rd, revised ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 54–59. Compare, in English, where, for example, the vowel "a" in the word "rather" when spoken with a British accent sounds long (as in "a̱lternate") whereas it is short with a North American accent (as in "ba̱t"). For a survey of explanations of the *Qere* from ancient to modern times, see Michael Graves, "The Origins of *Ketiv-Qere* Readings," Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion; n.p.; accessed 22 November 2013. Online: http://rosetta.reltech.org/TC/vol08/Graves2003.html#fnref1.

[3] E. Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament* (2nd ed.; trans. Erroll F. Rhodes; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 16.

Masoretes on the best of a number of alternative readings as Orlinsky supposed in 1960.[4] Würthwein also registers Gerlemann's suggestion that in some instances the *Qeres* record "popular variants."[5] Elsewhere, even Tov allows that the *Qeres* perform other functions, instancing √אהל, Gen 9:21, where there is no real aural difference between the *Ketib* and the *Qere*.[6]

The example from 2 Kgs 23:36 follows Tov's opinion that the *Qere* indicates an alternate vocalization. If the first of the three opinions mentioned above is correct, then the *Qere* is a correction to the vocalization. If the second is the case, then the *Qere* reflects an alternate version of the written text.

A few concluding examples will illustrate the variety with which *Qeres* were used. Some background information is necessary for the first. Since the biblical period spans well over 1000 years, it should not be surprising to find different types of Hebrew. Scholars distinguish between three general types: Archaic, Classical, and Late. Occasionally the Masoretes would "update" instances of Archaic Biblical Hebrew, as is the case in Gen 9:21. The *Ketib* reads אָהֳלֹה, "his tent," with the archaic 3ms pronominal suffix ה-. "The ה represents the *h* of the primitive form *ahu*."[7] The *Qere* records the morpheme with the "modern" spelling, i.e., אָהֳלוֹ.

In some places it is quite clear that the text has suffered corruption and the Masoretes would sometime offer a correction. The *Ketib* for Deut 5:10 (מצותו), for example, reads, "but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep his commandments." The pronoun "his" is awkward and "my" is clearly wanted, and the *Qere* supplies it. (It is quite possible that the error came in the process of copying the text as the scribe either mistook י for ו—the two are very similar in handwritten texts—or misunderstood the sound since *ay* could be aurally close to *aw*.)

Qeres were also used to harmonize spellings. The example of Oholibama's first son, Jeush, is an example. The name occurs nine times in the Old Testament: Gen 36:5, 14, 18; 1 Chr 1:35; 7:10; 8:39; 23:10, 11, 19. In seven of these occurrences, the *Ketib* spells it as יעוש, but in Gen 36:5, 14, and 1 Chr 7:10, the *Ketib* reads יעיש. In these three instances, the *Qere* notes that it should be read as יעוש (the majority wins!).

Occasionally the Masoretes saw the *Ketib* as obscene, blasphemous, or theologically troubling and used the *Qere* to provide an acceptable reading. In 2 Kgs 18:27, for instance, the Rabshekah delivers an insulting warning to the Israelite soldiers, telling them that they are doomed:

"to eat their own dung (חַרְאֵיהֶם) and to drink their own urine (שֵׁינֵיהֶם)" (ESV). The *Qere* reads:

---

[4] H. M. Orlinsky, "The Origin of the *Kethib-Qere* System: A New Approach" (*Congress Volume*; *VTSup 7* [1960]), 187, in Graves, "Origins of *Ketiv-Qere* Readings."

[5] Würthwein, *Text of the Old Testament*, 17, n. 21, citing G. Gerlemann, *Synoptic Studies in the Old Testament* (Lund: Gleerup, 1948).

[6] Tov, *Hebrew Bible, Greek Bible and Qumran*, 5, n. 17.

[7] Paul Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Revised English ed.; *SubBi* 27; Roma: Pontifico Istituto Biblico, 2006), §94h.

"to eat their own filth (צוֹאָתָם) and to drink the water of their legs (מֵימֵי רַגְלֵיהֶם)." The *Qere* thus substitutes euphemisms for the obscene terms.

The system of *K-Q* is complex and it origins remain poorly understood. The opinion of Graves has much to recommend it:

> Perhaps the immediate origin of the *Ketiv-Qere* system was the need to record both an authoritative written text and a separate reading tradition, but the ultimate source of the reading tradition was a popular manuscript recension. This would account for both the presence of *Qere* readings in ancient sources and the function which the *Ketiv-Qere* system seems to have performed during the Masoretic period.[8]

That said, the uncertainty over the origins of the *K-Q* has consequences for adjudicating over *K-Q* divergence. It is probably safe to say that in the majority of cases, the *Qere* indicates the preferred reading, but there are exceptions as we have seen. Uncertainty over the origins of the system and inconsistencies in its application in 𝔐 preempts any claim to a "one size fits all" approach. Rather, when working through a K-Q, one should consider the different possible explanations and conclude for the one that is the most contextually persuasive.

Nedarim 37b-38a
Although technically not K-Q, there are other Masoretic notations that function similarly. The Babylonian Talmud tractate *Ned.* 37b-38a, for example, mentions a list of words that are not in the text but that the scribes thought should be, and a list of words that are in the text that the scribes thought should not be (cf. the *itture sopherim*).

1. The following is the list of words to be added (indicated in brackets):[9]
   - 2 Sam 8:3

David also defeated Hadadezer the son of Rehob, king of Zobah, as he went to restore his power at the river [Euphrates].

---

[8] Graves, "Origins of *Ketiv-Qere* Readings."
[9] Unless otherwise noted, the English translation for both lists is the ESV.

In the boxed area, the Masoretes have supplied the vowel points for the noun "Euphrates" (cf., e.g., Gen 2:14). The small circle above the vowel points directs you to the Mp, where the consonants are written. The superimposed "c" just after בִּנְהַר־ directs you to the critical apparatus, where the editor notes that many Hebrew manuscripts have "Euphrates" and invites a comparison with the versions. The Septuagint and Vulgate, for example, also have "Euphrates."

- 2 Sam 16:23

וַעֲצַת אֲחִיתֹפֶל אֲשֶׁר יָעַץ בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם כַּאֲשֶׁר יִשְׁאַל־ בִּדְבַר הָאֱלֹהִים כֵּן כָּל־עֲצַת אֲחִיתֹפֶל גַּם־לְדָוִד גַּם לְאַבְשָׁלֹם׃

Now in those days the counsel that Ahithophel gave was as if [one] consulted the word of God; so was all the counsel of Ahithophel esteemed, both by David and by Absalom.

- Jer 31:38

הִנֵּה יָמִים נְאֻם־יְהוָה וְנִבְנְתָה הָעִיר לַיהוָה מִמִּגְדַּל חֲנַנְאֵל שַׁעַר הַפִּנָּה

Behold, the days [are coming], declares the LORD, when the city shall be rebuilt for the LORD from the tower of Hananel to the Corner Gate.

- Jer 50:29

הַשְׁמִיעוּ אֶל־בָּבֶל רַבִּים כָּל־דֹּרְכֵי קֶשֶׁת חֲנוּ עָלֶיהָ סָבִיב אַל־יְהִי־[כ= זז] [ק= לָהּ] פְּלֵטָה שַׁלְּמוּ־לָהּ כְּפָעֳלָהּ כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר עָשְׂתָה עֲשׂוּ־לָהּ כִּי אֶל־יְהוָה זָדָה אֶל־קְדוֹשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל׃

Summon many against Babylon, All those who bend the bow: Encamp against her on every side, Let there be no escape [for her]. Repay her according to her work; According to all that she has done, so do to her; For she has become arrogant against the LORD, Against the Holy One of Israel. (NASB)

- Ruth 3:5

וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיהָ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר־תֹּאמְרִי אֶעֱשֶׂה׃

And she replied, "All that you say [to me] I will do."

- Ruth 3:17

וַתֹּאמֶר שֵׁשׁ־הַשְּׂעֹרִים הָאֵלֶּה נָתַן לִי כִּי אָמַר אַל־תָּבוֹאִי רֵיקָם אֶל־חֲמוֹתֵךְ
saying, "These six measures of barley he gave to me, for he said [to me], 'You must not go back empty-handed to your mother-in-law.'"

2. The following is the list of words that should not be read (indicated in brackets):
- 2 Kgs 5:18

אֲחֵרִים כִּי אִם־לַיהוָה: 18 ᵃלַדָּבָר הַזֶּהᵃ יִסְלַח יְהוָה לְעַבְדֶּךָ בְּבוֹא אֲדֹנִי בֵית־רִמּוֹן לְהִשְׁתַּחֲוֺת שָׁמָּה וְהוּא ׀ נִשְׁעָן עַל־יָדִי וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוֵיתִי בֵּית רִמֹּן ᵇבְּהִשְׁתַּחֲוָיָתִיᶜ בֵּית רִמֹּן יִסְלַח־נָאᵈ יְהוָה לְעַבְדְּךָ בַּדָּבָר

הַזֶּה: 19 וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ לֵךְ לְשָׁלוֹם וַיֵּלֶךְ מֵאִתּוֹ כִּבְרַת־אָרֶץ: ס

20 וַיֹּאמֶר גֵּיחֲזִי נַעַר אֱלִישָׁעᵃ אִישׁ־הָאֱלֹהִיםᵇ הִנֵּה ׀ חָשַׂךְ אֲדֹנִי אֶת־

In this matter may the LORD pardon your servant: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, when I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, the LORD pardon [I pray thee] your servant in this matter.

- Deut 6:1

[וְזֹאת] הַמִּצְוָה הַחֻקִּים וְהַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם לְלַמֵּד אֶתְכֶם לַעֲשׂוֹת בָּאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם עֹבְרִים שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ:

[Now this is] the commandment, the statutes and the rules that the LORD your God commanded me to teach you, that you may do them in the land to which you are going over, to possess it.

- Jer 51:3

אֶל־יִדְרֹךְ [הַדֹּרֵךְ] קַשְׁתּוֹ וְאֶל־יִתְעַל בְּסִרְיֹנוֹ וְאַל־תַּחְמְלוּ אֶל־בַּחֻרֶיהָ הַחֲרִימוּ כָּל־צְבָאָהּ:

Let not him who bends his bow [bend it], Nor let him rise up in his scale-armor; So do not spare her young men; Devote all her army to destruction. (NASB)

- Ezek 48:26 [sic, v. 16]

וְאֵלֶּה מִדּוֹתֶיהָ פְּאַת צָפוֹן חֲמֵשׁ מֵאוֹת וְאַרְבַּעַת אֲלָפִים וּפְאַת־נֶגֶב חֲמֵשׁ [חמש] מֵאוֹת וְאַרְבַּעַת אֲלָפִים וּמִפְּאַת קָדִים חֲמֵשׁ מֵאוֹת וְאַרְבַּעַת אֲלָפִים וּפְאַת־יָמָּה חֲמֵשׁ מֵאוֹת וְאַרְבַּעַת אֲלָפִים:

And these shall be its measurements: the north side, four thousand and five hundred cubits; and the south side, four thousand and five [five] hundred cubits; and the east side, four thousand and five hundred cubits; and the west side, four thousand and five hundred cubits. (my translation)

- Ruth 3:12

וְעַתָּה כִּי אָמְנָם כִּי [אִם] גֹאֵל אָנֹכִי וְגַם יֵשׁ גֹּאֵל קָרוֹב מִמֶּנִּי:

And now it is true that [if] I am a redeemer. Yet there is a redeemer nearer than I.

As with the system of *Kethib-Qere*, there is Masoretic notation in the *Masora parva* for all of the words in both lists; however in no case is there the ק over which is a *qere* reading that one sees in a normal K-Q. Still, in the critical apparatus, the editor notes that there is a "Q" (*qere*) reading for most of the occurrences:

	qere in critical apparatus	no *qere* in critical apparatus
List 1		
2 Sam 8:3		√
2 Sam 16:23	√	
Jer 31:38	√	
Jer 50:29	√	
Ruth 3:5	√	
Ruth 3:17	√	
List 2		
2 Kgs 5:18	√	
Deut 6:1		√
Jer 51:3		√
Ezek 48:26 (sic, v. 16)		√
Ruth 3:12	√	

The two lists attest to different systems of *qere* readings besides the better-known (and more frequent) K-Q readings.