Father, brother, and father-in-law as III-w nouns in Semitic

Aren Wilson-Wright
University of Texas
wilsonwright@utexas.edu

Abstract
In this paper, I argue that the Semitic kinship terms *ʔab- ‘father’, *ʔah- ‘brother’, and *ḥam- ‘father-in-law’ originally ended in a w, which left traces in several of their forms. In the singular, the w contracted with the case vowels leaving a distinctive pattern of short and long vowels in the unbound, bound, and suffixal forms. In the plural, the w was retained in several languages due to the insertion of an a-vowel between the final two root consonants, a common Afro-Asiatic pluralization strategy: *ʔabw- > *ʔabaw. I further suggest that the West Semitic plural morpheme -aw was derived by analogy with the plurals *ʔabaw and *ʔahaw, and is not, as commonly suggested, an inherited Semitic or Afro-Asiatic plural marker.

Keywords: Proto-Semitic, Kinship terms, III-w nouns, Bi-consonantal roots, Broken plurals

I. Introduction

The words for ‘father’, ‘brother’, and ‘father-in-law’ are considered some of the quintessential bi-consonantal nouns in Semitic.1 As such, they have featured prominently in the debate over the extent of bi-consonantal roots in Proto-Semitic.2 Yet they exhibit several morphological peculiarities that betray their tri-consonantal nature. All three nouns take long vowels in the bound and suffixal forms and have derivatives that contain a glide in several Semitic languages. It is unclear, however, whether this behaviour is original or a Procrustean adaptation to a predominantly tri-consonantal system. In this paper, I will argue that these features have a common, phonological origin: *ʔab-*, *ʔah-*, and *ḥam- were originally III-w forms in Pre-Proto-Semitic and, like many qvtl- nouns, formed the plural by ‘a-insertion’.

This suggestion is not entirely new. Jacob Barth (1887), Theodor Nöldeke (1910), and Rainer Voigt (2001) have all suggested that these words originally

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1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 224th annual American Oriental Society meeting in Phoenix. I would like to thank the members of the audience for their questions and critiques. I would also like to thank Na’a’ama Pat-El, John Huehnergard, the two anonymous referees, and the managing editor of BSOAS for reading and commenting on earlier incarnations of this paper. Any remaining errors are my own.

2 For an extensive survey of this discussion see del Olmo Lete 2008: 53–78, especially pp. 59 and 69.
ended in a third, consonantal w, but their conclusions have not found widespread acceptance. The reluctance to adopt their position is, I believe, motivated by the phenomenon of root extension, the addition of a weak consonant like w, y, or r to bi-consonantal roots in the plural. In several daughter languages, Semitic speakers expanded these roots to fit the predominant tri-consonantal paradigm: Biblical Hebrew ʾāmā ‘maidservant’, for example, becomes ʾāmāḥōt in the plural, while Classical Arabic sanatun ‘year’ becomes sanawāt, and so on (Steiner 2011: 43). It is conceivable then, that the w associated with *ʔab-, *ʔah-, and *ḥam- is a root extension and not a root consonant, a possibility which Barth, Nöldeke, and Voigt do not address. But, as I will demonstrate, the final w goes back to Pre-Proto-Semitic before root extensions can be detected. I will further argue that this w gave rise to the West Semitic plural marker –aw.

II. Analysis

The initial clue that *ʔab-, *ʔah-, and *ḥam- ended in a glide comes from their case vowels in the singular. In several Semitic languages, these vowels are short in closed syllables like the unbound form and long in open syllables such as the bound and suffixal forms (Table 1). Classical Arabic retains a full declension for all three forms (Fischer 1987: §150). Other languages have lost the case distinction in certain environments. In Akkadian, for example, case vowels dropped from the bound form early on, but were retained in other environments. The bound form of father and brother typically end in a final ī or a final ā in Old Akkadian prose and Old Babylonian poetry, remnants of the genitive and nominative cases respectively (von Soden 1995: §64 a, c). Ge’ez, on the other hand, preserves a distinction between accusative and non-accusative cases in the unbound and suffixal forms – nominative-genitive ṣabu- alternates with accusative ṣabā- – yet lost all case markings in the bound form (Dīlmann 2003: §154d). Hebrew lost case markings entirely in the singular, but the bound and suffixal forms of father and brother preserve the original ī of the genitive

Table 1. The unbound, bound, and suffixal forms of *ʔab-, *ʔah-, and *ḥam- in Semitic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Unbound form</th>
<th>Bound form</th>
<th>Suffixal form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Akkadian</td>
<td>ʾabhām</td>
<td>ʾabī N/ʾabhā</td>
<td>ʾabī N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classical Arabic</td>
<td>ʾabvn</td>
<td>ʾabv N</td>
<td>ʾabv -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ge’ez</td>
<td>ʾabʾaʾaba</td>
<td>ʾaba N</td>
<td>ʾabu-ʾabā-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biblical Hebrew</td>
<td>ʾabar</td>
<td>ʾābī N</td>
<td>ʾābī-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proto-Semitic</td>
<td>*ʾabhām</td>
<td>*ʾabv N</td>
<td>*ʾabv -</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 The bound form of a noun marks it as the head noun in a nominal chain; the unbound form marks it as independent.
4 The genitive -i still survives in Old Akkadian in the construct on masculine and feminine singular nouns and feminine plural nouns (von Soden 1995: §64a; Hasselbach 2005: 183).
The similarity of the Akkadian and Classical Arabic patterns, coupled with supporting evidence from other West Semitic languages, suggests that this pattern goes back to Proto-Semitic. The words for sister and mother-in-law, which are derived from *ˀah- and *ḥam- by suffixation, exhibit a similar phenomenon. In several Semitic languages, the common feminine suffix -at appears as -āt in a historically open syllable (Table 2).

Several explanations have been advanced to account for this pattern of vowels. Carl Brockelmann (1908: 331) saw them as an early adaptation to the predominantly tri-consonantal pattern of Semitic. Hans Bauer and Pontus Leander (1962: 524; Bauer 1915: 561), on the other hand, derived them by analogy from the proposed vocative ending *-ā, while Aharon Dolgopolsky (1978: 1) posited stress-based lengthening of the case vowels. None of these suggestions is particularly convincing. Brockelmann does not explain why the kinship terms *ˀab-, *ˀah-, and *ḥam- received special treatment compared to other originally bi-consonantal nouns such as *yad- ‘hand’ and *ḥî- ‘tree’. Bauer and Leander’s vocative *-ā lacks adequate supporting data and Dolgopolsky’s stress-based approach falters for lack of evidence for phonemic stress in Proto-Semitic. Barth (1887: 610), Nöldeke (1910: 112), and Voigt

5 For the vocalization of this form see Huehnergard 2008b: 105.
6 Bauer (1915: 561) claims that the vocative -ā occurs frequently in Arabic, in Ethiopic abä, and in Babylonian belâmä. But his Akkadian example actually contains the Neo-Babylonian form of the 1cs possessive morpheme -ā (von Soden 1995: §42 j/k) and thus cannot constitute East Semitic evidence for this proposed morpheme. Without East Semitic data, we cannot reliably reconstruct a vocative morpheme -ā to Proto-Semitic (Huehnergard 2006: 2–3; Wilson-Wright 2014: 2) where it supposedly contracted with the case vowels.
7 Dolgopolsky (1978: 1–2) cites the plurals of segolate nouns in Hebrew and the allomorphy of the feminine singular morpheme as evidence for phonemic stress in Semitic, but these phenomena do not necessitate the reconstruction of stress. The Hebrew segolate plurals represent an inherited Northwest Semitic trait – the double pluralization of qvtl nouns (Huehnergard 1991: 284–5) – and the short form of the feminine singular morpheme could be the result of syncope (Steiner 2012: 373–5). If Proto-Semitic had phonemic stress, it would probably exhibit more apparent homophones that differed only in their stress patterns. Some Semitic languages do display phonemic stress (e.g. Hebrew qǝmā ‘she stood’ vs qǝ’mā ‘standing’; Ethiopic ra’kabā ‘they (fem.) found’ vs raka’bā ‘he found her’), as the result of secondary developments particular to each language; but

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Akkadian</td>
<td>ˀahātum</td>
<td>Akkadian</td>
<td>emētum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ugaritic</td>
<td>’ahātūm5</td>
<td>Ge’ez</td>
<td>hamāt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syriac</td>
<td>ḥātā &lt;*’ahāta’</td>
<td>Classical Arabic</td>
<td>hamāt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biblical Hebrew</td>
<td>ḥāt &lt;*’ḥāt</td>
<td>Syriac</td>
<td>ḥmātā &lt;* ḥmāta’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proto-Semitic</td>
<td>*’ḥātātum</td>
<td>Biblical Hebrew</td>
<td>ḥmōt &lt;*ḥamāt</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(2001: 206–13) come closer to the reconstruction advocated here when they reconstruct *'ab-, *'ayh-, and *ham- with a final, consonantal w that contracted with the case vowels. Yet they do not relate these contractions to general sound changes, but instead give examples of ad hoc vowel shortening in particular forms. As I will show, however, the alternating quantity of the case vowels in *'ab-, *'ayh-, *ham- is the result of a general Proto-Semitic sound change.

An identical pattern of long and short vowels can be reconstructed to Proto-Semitic for the preterite of II-glide verbs as the result of the glide contracting with the following vowel (Table 3). Third masculine singular yaqum, for example, alternates with third masculine plural yaqūmī. Contractions also took place in nominal forms derived from II-glide roots such as Akkadian *malwutum ‘bridle’ > malātum and Arabic *maqwamum ‘place’ > maqāmun (Table 4). On the basis of these forms, John Huehnergard (2006: 10; 2008a: 230; 2010: 125–6) has proposed a Proto-Semitic sound change: *Cwv, *Cyv > Cv in closed syllables but Cv in open syllables, which can account for the behaviour of both middle weak roots and the nouns derived from them. The same rule can also account for the case vowels of *'ab-, *'ayh-, and *ham- and the long feminine suffixes of *'ahāt- ‘sister’ and *hamāt- ‘mother-in-law’. In the unbound forms, Pre-Proto-Semitic nominal *'abwum contracted to *'abum, while in the bound and suffixal forms, *'abwu- contracted to *'abū. In the case of sister and mother-in-law, *'ahwatum contracted to *'ahātum.

It remains to specify which glide triggered these contractions (see Table 5). In the case of brother, at least one Proto-Semitic derivative contains a final w: the nominal verb *ta'ahwa ‘to be brothers’, which is attested in Akkadian (atḥu ‘to fraternize’), Ge’ez (ta’ahwā/ta’āhwa ‘to be brothers, contract an alliance’), Sabaic (rīhw ‘to ally oneself with’), and Classical Arabic (āḥawa ‘to associate with someone as a brother’) typically in the Gt stem. *'ab- and *ham-, on the other hand, do not have any Proto-Semitic derivatives that contain w. But they probably ended in a w as well, because other forms of *'ab-, *'ayh-, and *ham- also contain a glide, even though they cannot be formally reconstructed to Proto-Semitic. The Ge’ez, Tigré, and Mehri plurals of father and

8 Other III-w nouns like Ge’ez badw ‘desert’, Classical Arabic da’watum ‘acclaim’, and Biblical Hebrew šalwā ‘rest, ease’ appear to violate this sound change. But since they are derived from verbal roots, the w was probably retained due to paradigm pressure. Furthermore, many of them do not go back to Pre-Proto-Semitic when this sound change was operative. In his extensive study of isolated nouns in Proto-Semitic, Fox (2003: 77) only mentions a single isolated qatw- noun, *qaww- ‘thread, line’, which probably resisted contraction due to the gemination of the glide. He does note, however, six isolated qvtw- nouns that do not undergo contraction: *ary- ‘wild animal’, *gady- ‘kid’, *laňy- ‘jaw’, *ṭaby- ‘gazelle’, *kvly- ‘kidney’, and *ury- ‘manger’. These nouns pose a problem for half of Huehnergard’s proposed sound change, but do not affect my argument.

9 The Biblical Hebrew form *'ałhwatum > *'ałhōwā ‘brotherhood’ (Zech 11: 14) appears to have survived this sound change. It should have contracted to *'ahātum like its homophone *'ałhwatum ‘sister’, but retained the original glide.
brother, for example, take the form $\text{CaCaw}$, while other, derived, forms contain a $w$ as well.

Rebecca Hasselbach (2007: 126) and Frank Moore Cross (2003: 355) treat the $-aw$ of $\text{ʔabaw}$ and $\text{ʔahaw}$ as an independent plural morpheme, sporadically attested in other Semitic languages (e.g. Geʿez $\text{afaw}$ ‘mouths’). Yet there is little evidence for reconstructing $-aw$ as an Afro-Asiatic or even Proto-Semitic plural marker. The form $-aw$ only appears as a plural morpheme in West Semitic languages like Geʿez, Syriac, and Arabic and therefore cannot be reconstructed to Proto-Semitic on the basis of internal evidence. Furthermore, the Afro-Asiatic parallels for this morpheme are weak. In Egyptian the masculine plural is marked by a final $-w$, which survives into Coptic under a bewildering variety of forms, including $-ew$, $-ēw$, $-ēwā$, $-ōw$, and $-ow$ (Layton 2004: 87). Of these, only $-ow$ reflects original $-aw$.12 This suggests that $-aw$ was either one of

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10 The Tigrē form $\text{abaw}$ is a morphological relic relegated to secondary semantic use. The normal plural of $\text{ab(ū)}$ is $\text{abač}$ or $\text{abayt}$ (Palmer 1962: 75; Raz 1983: 18).

11 I would like to thank Aaron Rubin for providing information about the Modern South Arabian forms used in this paper.

12 See Allen (2013: 26), for the reconstruction of Egyptian vowels on the basis of Coptic.
many different masculine plural markers in Egyptian or, more likely, that the Egyptian masculine plural morpheme had the form -w(v) and “trapped” the preceding vowel (e.g. *sa’nu-w(v) ‘brothers’ > snēw, but *ti’ha-w(v) ‘oxen’ > ehow). With regard to Chadic, Paul Newman (1990: 36) remarks that “the evidence here is too weak to justify reconstructing -au or -aw as a PC [Proto-Chadic] ending. Although plural forms with final -au or -o do occur on the surface in a number of scatter languages, it is unlikely that most of them are cognate”. Andrzej Zaborski (1986: 295) does not find any examples of -aw in the Cushitic languages in his comparative study of plural morphology. And, in the Berber language Tuareg, the plural morpheme -aw only occurs on two nouns (Ratcliffe 1998: 103), which does not provide enough evidence for reconstructing -aw to Proto-Berber.

I would like to suggest, therefore, that ʼabaw and ʼahaw are broken plurals (i.e. plurals formed by a change in vocalic pattern) and that -aw was only later reinterpreted as a separate plural morpheme by analogy with the singular. The reason for this is simple. As qatl nouns, Pre-Proto-Semitic *ʼabw-, and *ʼahw- most likely formed their plurals by a-insertion – the inter-digitation of an a-vowel between the second and third radicals. This morphological process, as Joseph Greenberg (1955: 198–204) has shown, is a common way of forming the plural of qvtl nouns in Afro-Asiatic. Furthermore, these plurals must predate Proto-Semitic, because the elision of the glide in the singular in Proto-Semitic left speakers with no evidence for restoring the original glide in the plural. Once the w elided in the singular, the final -aw of the plural appeared unmotivated and was ripe for reinterpretation in accordance with Kuryłowicz’s fourth law of analogy (Kuryłowicz 1945–49: 30). Speakers of different West Semitic languages extracted a new plural marker from *ʼabaw and *ʼahaw by analogy with the external plurals:

ʼilum : ʼil-ūna :: ʼabum : ʼab-aw

They then transferred the newly minted plural morpheme to other nouns by means of a second analogy:

Ge’ez ʼab : ʼab-aw :: ʼaf : ʼaf-aw13

In other cases, the old plural gave way to new forms. Already in Proto-Semitic, a new plural was formed by geminating the second consonant and adding an external plural marker, a common pluralization strategy in Semitic: *ʼabum ~ *ʼabb-ū-na.14 The new plural of *ʼahw- was especially pervasive; it appears in

13 In several Aramaic dialects, speakers no longer understood -aw as a plural marker and added the general plural morpheme -āt to these forms to supplement the weakening numeric associations of -aw (compare Ge’ez ʼafawāt ‘mouths’ and Arabic sanawāt-un ‘years’). This process gave rise to several plurals in -āwāt such as Syriac ʼafrawātā ‘places’ from ʼafrawāt and Targumic Aramaic ʼāfwāt ‘signs’ from ʼāf, which do not have w as a final root consonant. See Nöldeke 1875: 167; Bauer and Leander 1962: §53j; Fassberg 1990: 136 for more examples of this plural ending. Most of the nouns they cite, however, originally had w as a third consonant.

14 Compare Akkadian arku ‘long (sg.) ~ arrakā ‘long (pl.)’ (CAD A2 303) and Hebrew qeṣet ‘bow’ ~ qaššētōt (cnst.) ‘bows’ (Isa. 5: 28; Jer. 51: 56; Ps. 37: 15; Neh. 4: 7).
Table 6. Retention of *ʔahaw in the plural of ‘sister’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tigrinya</td>
<td>ʰḥawāt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>ʾʔahawāt-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syriac</td>
<td>ʾʔhwātāg&lt;ʾʔahaw-ʕt-a’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mehri</td>
<td>gawton&lt;ʾʔahaw- tin!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harsusi</td>
<td>gawton&lt;ʾʔahaw- tin?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Akkadian (ahḥū), Aramaic (ʾahīn<ʾʔahḥīn), and Hebrew (ʾahīm<ʾʔahḥīm) and is therefore reconstructable to Proto-Semitic alongside the original plural ʾʔahaw.

The original -w of *ʔabw-, ʾʔahw-, and ʾʔamw- survives in other patterns as well, such as the Sabaic plurals ḫbw ‘fathers’ (C 322/7), ʾḥwt ‘elders’ (C 609/2), and ʾḥwāt ‘brothers’ (C 541/18). A.F.L. Beeston (1962: 35) treats ḫbw as an ʾaf’al-ū plural – that is a plural with a suffixed w – but the most common internal plural in Sabaic is ʾaf’āl, which accounts for more than half of such plurals (Beeston 1984: 26). Thus, ḫbw most likely preserves the original w of *ʔabw-. The Ge’ez plural ‘ahmāw ‘fathers-in-law’ reflects the same pattern. Similarly, the Classical Arabic dual forms ʾʔahaw-ānī ‘brothers (du.),’ ʾʔabaw-ānī ‘fathers (du.)’ appear to be built on a singular qatal base that also preserves this final w. In several languages, the plural of sister derives from the original plural of brother. Tigrinya ḥawat, Classical Arabic ʾʔahawāt-, Syriac ʾʔhwātā, and perhaps Mehri and Harsusi gawten all reflect *ʔahaw with the addition of the feminine plural morpheme -ʕt (Table 6).15 The Classical Arabic plural of mother-in-law takes the same pattern: hamawāt-. The concatenation of these Proto-Semitic suffixes with *ʔahaw and *ʔabaw suggest that these plurals are also very old.

Given the wide distribution of these patterns, it is unlikely that the w of father, brother, and father-in-law is a root extension. First, root extensions can only be detected when the bare stem alternates with an augmented stem. But, at the Pre-Proto-Semitic level, all forms of *ʔabw-, ʾʔahw-, and ʾʔamw- contain a final w. They do not alternate with anything (as recognized by Voigt 2001: 207). Second, *ʔabw-, ʾʔahw-, and ʾʔamw- lack clear Afro-Asiatic cognates which could settle the issue. In their Afro-Asiatic dictionary, Vladimir Orel and Olga Stolbova (1995: 1) equate *ʔabw- with certain Berber and Cushitic

Lipiński (2001: 252–3) cites more examples and suggests that the underlying plural pattern is C₁₂vC₂C₂a(C₃), which would yield *ʔabba-ʕ > ʾabbū. See further Erika Reiner (1966: 64–5) for the Akkadian data.

15 In the Modern South Arabian forms, -awten could also be a reflex of the feminine plural marker -ūtem. In the Mahriyyet dialect of Mehri, /ū/ and sometimes /ā/ become /aw/ immediately following a guttural; these allophones of /ū/ and /ā/ are even more common in the Mehreyet dialect (Watson 2012: 28–9).

16 The Biblical Hebrew form ʾahwōtay in the Leningrad Codex of Joshua 2:13 may preserve a similar plural, but it is most likely a scribal error for ʾahyōtay, which is attested in several other Masoretic manuscripts.
forms which lack a final w, including Tawlemmet abba, Izyazan ibba, Bilin abba, Saho abba, Somali aba, Sidamo aabbo, and Asa aba. It is unclear, however, whether these words are actually cognate with *abw-. At most, they share the CV segment -ab- with *abw-, which could be the result of chance, especially since the word for ‘father’ is often a Lallwort (Ringe 1999: 218–9). Furthermore, the geminated b in many of these forms lacks a parallel in Semitic. Theoretically, it could result from the assimilation of a final w to the preceding voiced bilabial stop, but we lack historical data from these languages to verify this.

III. Conclusion

I have reconstructed the Pre-Proto-Semitic words for ‘father’, ‘brother’, and ‘father-in-law’ as *abw-, *ahw-, and *hamw-. In Proto-Semitic, the final w contracted with the case vowels in the singular as the result of a regular sound change, giving rise to a characteristic pattern of long and short case vowels in the bound, unbound, and suffixal forms. This w survived in other patterns, however, such as the denominal verb *taḥwya ‘to be brothers’ and the plurals *abaw and *ahaw. Later speakers of different languages reinterpreted the aw of *abaw and *ahaw as a new plural morpheme on the basis of other nouns. But at the earliest level the final w in these forms was not a root extension; it was a root consonant. The Semitic words for father, brother and father-in-law were originally tri-consonantal and this affects how we conceptualize the pre-history of Semitic. With two fewer bi-consonantal nouns to work with, the possibility of an earlier bi-consonantal stratum in Semitic becomes even more remote.

References


17 They also equate Semitic *ahw- with the Cushitic forms Kulere ahy ‘uncle’, Warjiri yah- ‘brother’, and Musgum ahī ‘brother’ (Orel and Stolbova 1995: 6). Of these, only ahī comes remotely close to matching both the phonology and semantics of Semitic *ahw-. It is probably safe to say that similarities are coincidental and Semitic *ahw- does not have any Afro-Asiatic cognates. They do not list any Afro-Asiatic cognates for *hamw-.


Ringe, Donald. 1999. “How hard is it to match CVC-roots?”, Transactions of the Philological Society, 97, 213–44.


