**Language and Culture Show and Tell: Hebrew**

**Dr Alinda Damsma**

**Transcript**

**Slide 1**

Shalom! Welcome to this Hebrew taster video. My name is Alinda Damsma and I teach ancient Semitic languages in the Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies. This video has the title: Wordplay in biblical Hebrew. I am going to introduce you to some of the mysteries behind the Hebrew alphabet with the help of an object from UCL’s Collections. And don’t worry: even if you do not know Hebrew, you will still be able to understand these mysteries.

**Slide 2**

During this showcase you will be shown several images that are found in a medieval manuscript of the Hebrew Bible that is held in UCL’s Special Collections. You will learn how the scribe of this manuscript added playful touches to his work. And with the help of this manuscript, you will learn what the Hebrew alphabet looks like and how it was used in Hebrew wordplay. You will even learn an ancient Hebrew cipher, the so-called atbash code, which is based on the Hebrew alphabet. You will be given an example of this atbash code, and by the end of this video you will have become a codebreaker yourself!

**Slide 3**

On the screen you can see the cover of a medieval manuscript, which is known as manuscript Mocatta 27. It is held in UCL Special Collections, and it is in a very fragile state. We do not know its exact age, but it seems to date from the late medieval period. This manuscript contains large parts of the Hebrew Bible. Before the art of book printing was invented, scribes would copy the text of the Hebrew Bible word for word, letter by letter. This was a task that required endless patience, great skill and also creativity. Copying the text of the Bible was considered a sacred task, and up to this very day there are still scribes who copy the Bible, or parts of the Bible, by hand.

**Slide 4**

Although the outside of the manuscript does not look very remarkable, it is very interesting inside. The image that you see here features a leaf, or rather folio as we call it, with biblical text copied by the scribe in the ancient Hebrew language. Now look…inside the circle at the bottom of this image you can see a drawing with a Hebrew word. Let us take a closer look at this drawing…

**Slide 5**

Here you can see the image in more detail. It is a lovely, delicate drawing. It almost looks like a crown which has a Hebrew word inside of it. The Hebrew word is *we’emet*, which means ‘and truth’. It seems a bit odd to see such an apparently random word inside the drawing. However, throughout the manuscript we also find other drawings with seemingly random Hebrew words inside of them.

**Slide 6**

And here you can see another leaf from this manuscript, which features two columns with biblical text and also has a drawing at the bottom. I have encircled the drawing, and let us also take a closer look at this one…

**Slide 7**

Here you can see the drawing in more detail. Inside the drawing we find a Hebrew word. This Hebrew word is *wayyomer*, which means ‘and he said’. The insertion of this Hebrew word seems even more random than the previous one. What could have prompted the scribe to add these particular words?

**Slide 8**

These words were not chosen at random. When a scribe would reach the end of the folio, the end of the page so to speak, he would sometimes write the next word at the bottom of the folio inside a little drawing. He would write the same word again at the top of the next folio and continue copying the rest of the biblical passage. The image on the screen shows the top of the next folio. Inside the circle you can see the same Hebrew word that was written inside the drawing: *wayyomer*, which means ‘and he said’.

**Slide 9**

The manuscript conceals more mysteries. Let us explore another one! Inside the purple box that you see on the screen, we find one of the psalms of the Hebrew Bible. There are 150 psalms in the Bible, and they are written in a poetical style. Most of them probably had a liturgical function. We find a variety of moods and themes in the psalms: there are psalms of praise, thanksgiving, and lament. We also find celebrations of kingship; celebrations of wisdom and celebrations of the *Torah*, which is the first and most sacred part of the Hebrew Bible. The psalm inside the box is Psalm 111 and it is a psalm of praise. The beginning of the Psalm reads as follows in the English translation: ‘Praise the Lord! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart’.

**Slide 10**

Let us have a closer look at this psalm. As I said before, the Psalms are written in a poetic style, and wordplay features prominently in biblical Hebrew poetry. As you can see on the screen, I have marked 22 Hebrew letters inside this psalm with a purple colour. I did not mark these Hebrew letters at random. We are dealing in Psalm 111 with a so-called alphabetical acrostic. This means that we find each consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet at the start of a new sentence. Since Hebrew is written from right to left, we find the first Hebrew letter of the alphabet at the top right corner. It is the letter *alef* (א). The final letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which is called the letter *taw* (ת), is found at the bottom right corner.

**Slide 11**

You can see the entire acrostic even better in this edition of the Hebrew Bible. Psalm 111 is printed in such a way here that you can clearly see how each new line starts with the consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The arrow in the top right corner points to the letter *alef*, with which this psalm starts. The arrow at the bottom points to the letter *taw*, which starts the concluding line of this psalm.

**Slide 12**

With the help of the Hebrew alphabet, we can now tackle another mystery that is concealed inside the Hebrew Bible. We are going to crack an ancient cryptogram! This cryptogram is based on a reversal of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. We call it the *atbash* code, and it is a substitution code, whereby the first letter of the alphabet (א *alef*) is replaced by the last letter (ת *taw*) and vice versa, the second letter (ב *bet*) is replaced by the second last letter (ש *sin* or *shin*) and vice versa, etc. The name ‘atbash’ refers to the first letters of the names of these Hebrew characters: ***a****lef*, ***t****aw*, ***b****et* and ***sh****in* = **atb**a**sh.** The key to crack the code is given here on the screen.

**Slide 13**

In one of the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible, in the Book of Jeremiah, we find a cryptogram hidden in chapter 25 verse 26. The prophet Jeremiah was active towards the end of the seventh century BCE in the Kingdom of Judah. It was a time of great tension because the mighty Babylonian empire was threatening the very existence of this tiny kingdom. Chapter 25 contains the prophet’s oracle against the nations and part of verse 26 is cited here on the screen:

*[…] and all the kings of the north, near and far, one after the other, and all the kingdoms of the world which are on the face of the earth, and the king of* ***Sheshach*** *[…]*

Who is this mysterious ‘king of Sheshach’? We have no evidence of the existence of a place called *Sheshach* in those times. Perhaps we are dealing with a cryptogram…In Hebrew the name *Sheshach* is spelled with the following letters: ששך. Reading from right to left we have the letter *shin* (ש), again the letter *shin* (ש), and finally the letter *kaf* (ך), which always has a slightly different shape when it is used at the end of a word.

**Slide 14**

If we apply the *atbash* code to the name ששך, what result do we get? The key to crack this cryptogram is given on the screen, and I give you a bit of time to work it out…And do not forget to write from right to left…

And here is the answer:

בבל (*bbl)*

We have to replace the two *shin* letters by the *bet* (ב) and the final *kaf* by the *lamed* (ל).

**Slide 15**

Congratulations if you had the correct answer. You are a 007 in the making! If we apply the vowels to the letters, the word becomes *babel*, i.e. Babylon, the capital of the Babylonian empire in the first millennium BCE. The king of Sheshach is, in fact, the king of the Babylonian empire. We find the same cryptogram later on the Book of Jeremiah, in chapter 51 verse 41.

**Slide 16**

It is unclear whether the prophet Jeremiah resorted to this cryptogram out of fear of reprisals from his enemies, or that he employed it solely for stylistic purposes. It may be the latter case because the name Babylon is explicitly referred to elsewhere in the Book of Jeremiah. An interesting observation was made by Prof. Scott Noegel in his study on wordplay in the Hebrew Bible. In the ancient Israelite culture, as well as in the Ancient Near East in general, words were powerful and possessed an almost magical or theurgic quality. According to the ancient mindset, the spoken word was capable of changing reality. Noegel states that ‘if words possess power and essence, *atbash* represents a reversal of that power and essence’. Since the biblical *atbash* verses typically deal with power struggles, the inverted language expresses the inversion of power. Ultimately, it is impossible to determine why the biblical author resorted to this cryptic language, but it is a fascinating phenomenon nonetheless.

**Slide 17**

I hope you have enjoyed this brief presentation on wordplay in the Hebrew Bible and I thank you for listening!