

Kri and Ktiv:

Kri and ktiv is a phenomenon found throughout the torah. It is when the text of the bible says one thing yet the reader is meant to pronounce something else. It is so common people rarely stop to ask themselves why is it even there, what is its purpose and origins?

The properly answer this question, we must have a very clear idea of what kri and ktiv is. I know I just described it: when the text and pronunciation differ, but if we want to understand it we must take a much closer look.

There are actually three related phenomena: kri vlo ktiv, ktiv vlo kri, and kri uktiv. That is there are times when a word is written but not read, read but not written, and written but read differently. By far the most common is the latter, and that is what we will focus on, but much of what we say will be applicable to those as well.

There are many different theories that we will explore about kri and ktiv. Some of them are more localized, that is they cannot explain all kri uktiv throughout tanach, but only those in a certain context. Many people react to this by rejecting these theories, claiming that if it can't explain the phenomenon in its entirety, it must be completely inaccurate. This argument is based on the premise that all kri and ktiv are the same, that is that they are all more or less doing the same thing. That much is clearly not true. As we will see, there are at least 4 different ways in which the kri and ktiv distinguish themselves, all of which serve a different purpose. Thus, while it is possible they all stem from a single explanation, it is indeed quite plausible that there are multiple explanations that work together.

So, Kri and ktiv can be broken down into four different types. Each type has different characteristics. To quickly enumerate them:

- 1) The homophone. These kri and ktiv are different words that are pronounced the same way.
- 2) The euphemism. Here, the ktiv is a derogatory word and the kri is a more refined euphemistic version of the same idea.
- 3) Grammatical differences. Here, the ktiv is seemingly in error, either due to a bad spelling, or another grammatical error such as the wrong gender or tense, and the ktiv is the seemingly correct version.
- 4) Malei and Chaser, lit. full and lacking. These are cases where the text is written without certain letters that are not mandatory, and as a result the text alone could be pronounced differently, where as the word is pronounced as if those non-mandatory letters were there. Also included in this category are words where the nikud could be read to mean one word or another. This category is different from the others in that it is not usually referred to by the term kri and ktiv in the talmud, but by the term mikrah and mesoret. These are not included in the Masoretic lists.

Let us look at examples of each: (read examples)

Now that we have a good grasp of what we are talking about, lets see the reason behind and origins of these kri and ktiv.

While the Talmud never explicitly divides kri and ktiv into the categories above, it is quite clear from the Talmud that there are different components in what we today term kri and ktiv. Lets look at the Talmudic sources.

The type of kri and ktiv that we termed “euphemistic” is explicitly dealt with in the Talmud, seemingly as its own phenomenon. (Read Talmud in megillah).

There are two take-aways. First, we see that the gemara is clearly aware of this sub-category within kri and ktiv. Second, and most significant, is the final opinion of Rabi Yehoshua ben Karcha. He maintains that the last kri mentioned is incorrect, and instead we should stick with the ktiv, as even though it is derogatory, the verse is dealing with idol worship, about which derogatory remarks are permissible. While I don’t think this is the only way to read this piece, the simple understanding is indicative that there was no oral transmission of which words should be read differently, at least regards to euphemistic substitutions, but because of a value (modesty), we substitute a nicer word. That is why we can have rabbi Yehoshua argue, because he thinks the value we are trying to protect is not present in the last case. Were these words to be a direct mesorah from har sinai, or in the case of nach, from the author, to be read euphemistically, his argument would not make sense.

The problem is, this seems to be in contradiction with the other main Talmudic source about kri and ktiv, the gemara in Nedarim.(read nedarim 37b)

To be totally clear, this gemara does not mention kri and ktiv at all. It limits itself to the two less common related phenomena, kri vlo ktiv and ktiv vlo kri. The gemara says on no uncertain terms that they are halacha lemoshe misinai. Yet while kri and ktiv is

suspiciously left out, it would be odd indeed if it was of rabbinic origin if the other two were not. A halacha lemoshe misinai is generally understood as it sounds, an oral tradition given to moshe at sinai that has no basis in the text. We are thus left with a problem, is kri and ktiv of rabbinic origin or mosaic?

The rashba in shut takes this gemara at face value, explaining that since they are from sinai, the kri is not a violation of reading something not in the text. Similarly, the Shulchan aruch takes the gemara at face value, with an interesting story. The Malbim as well was a very strong supporter of taking the gemara in Nedarim at face value and attempted to refute the other opinions we will see later. So how do they understand the gemara in Megillah?

There are two possibilities. Had we grouped all kri and ktiv together, we would be compelled to say that they all have the same origin, anything else would be ridiculous. But once we see that there are different types of kri and ktiv with clearly different intents and differences, it is plausible that one originated at sinai and the rabbanan decided to make a similar distinction for a different reason. It is plausible that when Moshe Rabeinu got the torah, he received the kri and ktiv of types 1,3, and 4 that we enumerated above, and the rabbis, in their wisdom, decided that they wished to lighten how certain derogatory statements are read out loud, and thus took this concept and applied it to the pesukim listed in megillah.

Another possible approach is to reread the Talmud in megillah. Perhaps rabi Yehoshua ben karcha meant to argue not on the rationale, but on the Mosaic tradition, and cited a rational argument as to why his version of the tradition is superior.

Although the Shulchan Aruch is probably the most authoritative opinion on the matter, various other Rishonim, as well as later authorities, have espoused various opinions.

The next opinion we will examine can be found in the meiri on that gemara in Nedarim. He also discusses it at much greater length in the intro to his sefer kiryat sefer.

(Read meiri on Nedarim.)

Note: his words malei and chaser, usually referring to plene and full spelling, cannot mean that here, as the examples cited in the Talmud have nothing to do with that. They must mean missing and added words.

He does not bother explaining how a halacha lemoshe mesinai can be from ezra. How does the Meiri understand the words halacha lemoshe misinai?

This question is part of a much larger issue. The answer is simple, but the details are way beyond the scope of our discussion. While most agree that halacha lemoshe misinai means an oral tradition received by Moses, as the words literally imply, those who follow the Maimonidean school interpret it differently. In his introduction to Peirush hamishnah, Rambam lists 30 examples of halacha lemoshe misinai. One of them is *That a teacher may use an oil lamp to find his students' place in a text on Shabbos*; which seemingly is a dispensation from a rabbinic enactment. Some explain that according to Rambam, an ancient principle that is universally excepted can also be deemed a halacha lemoshe misinai. The meiri often times follows the rambam, and it is likely that is how he understood the passage in nedarim.

So even if this meiri is correct, how can we reconcile what he says in Nedarim with the Talmud in megillah? Clearly doubts played no role there. He must believe that the

doubts were the cause of some, but other kri and ktiv, like the euphemistic ones, had a differing origin.

The meiri's approach is followed by at least 2 others, the ephodi, cited in Abarbanel, and the Radak in his intro to Yehoshua. (Read Radak.) The main sources for this is the Yerushalmi (read yerushalmi), and at least from a theological perspective, kiddushin 30a. (read kiddushin.)

One basic question asked on the Radak is if he is correct, how was it decided which version would remain in the text, and which would be the kri? Another question is what would happen if there were 3 possibilities?

Rabbi Mordechai Breuer has an explanation that is extremely similar to the Radak, and it answers these questions. He says that throughout history there have been two groups of people working on preserving the masorah, those whose job it was to read the torah, and those whose job it was to copy the torah. If an error crept into one tradition, it did not necessarily creep into both. Variations in these 2 traditions, doubts if you will about what is the proper text, are kri and ktiv. The kri is the verbal mesorah and the ktiv is the written mesorah. While this approach is fascinating, it makes the Yerushalmi about the 3 sefarim much less relevant as a source of this theory, but still it remains valid as a precedent.

Another important opinion would be the Abarbanel, in his intro to yirmiyahu.

Unfortunately, I could not find a digital version of the Abarbanel, but I can paraphrase it. He rejects the Radak and instead posits that the kri was written by Ezra hasofer for one of two reasons. Either

- 1) Because the ktiv represented a deep sod, or secret, but the simple person was not able to understand it, so he added the kri as the simple understanding
- 2) The navi was not an expert in Hebrew grammar, and made some errors that Ezra corrected with the kri.

This shocking second reason is used by Abarbanel to explain the much larger number of kri and ktiv found in sefer yirmiyahu. He presumably would have to read the halacha lemoshe misinai in Nedarim the same way as said above. Its also possible he is not extending this phenomenon to chumash.

I once heard Rabbi Carmy say a very similar alternative to this Abarbanel that is essentially the same idea, but more pleasing to the ear. He says that perhaps Yirmiyahu was not bad at grammar but spoke a slightly different dialect of Hebrew. This theory is backed up by the fact that many of the kri and ktiv in Yirmiyahu seem to be making the same “errors” in conjugation.

Until now, we have only looked at sources either dealing with kri and ktiv in general, or with specifically the category of spelling errors (Abarbanel) and euphuism (megillah). Yet our other two categories have different rules and theories specific to them.

First, lets deal with the homophone. While I am no expert on all of tanach and this phenomenon may occur in many places I am unaware of, it is clear that there is one case in particular that is very common, the word Lo written lamed aleph and read lamed vav. This occurs in a large number of places, both in the torah as well as nach.

There are several places in the gemara where someone is doresh this double meaning (read chullin). The earliest is likely the Mishnah in sotah (read mishnah). The pasuk in

question is a kri and ksiv, although fascinatingly that fact is not mentioned in the Mishnah. The gemara as well does not mention kri and ksiv. (read gemara). While the second pasuk quoted is also a kri and ksiv, once again the gemara does not mention this, giving the impression that this is a rule true of all words lo. Rambam implies this as well (read rambam on the mishnah), as does tosfot in chullin. The meiri explicitly explains the gemara as based on the fact that these are kri and ksiv.

In makkos, the gemara makes several derashot where it seems to read a lo with an aleph as having a vav. The ritvah (read ritvah) cites an opinion that this is in accordance with the gemara in sotah, but rejects that because this is not a kri and ksiv (as well as for other reasons), and explains an alternative read of makkos. But the opinion he rejects, ie. that the gemara in sotah can apply even to places without a kri and ksiv, aside from being the simple read, is explicitly upheld in makkos by the iyun Yaakov, a Peirush on the ain Yaakov.

We also have the view of the ibn Ezra. (read ibn ezra). He is a little cryptic. He rejects the view that both are significant, but what does he mean that only the kri is important? My rebbi Rabbi Carmy explained that he believes the kri and ktiv are not alternatives, but rather that the kri is instructions in how the ktiv is supposed to be pronounced. Obviously, this approach only makes sense when talking about the homophone type of kri and ktiv.

We can thus see two emerging opinions. One, of the ritvah and meiri, is that these kri and ksiv are the reason why this word can be interpreted both ways. The other opinion is that the word lo can always be interpreted either way in theory. Thus, the kri and ktiv

serves as a guide telling us when the correct understanding is contrary to the normative one.

(Perhaps the reason why the pasuk in kohelet did not have a kri and ktiv is because, although it was being darshened as such, reading it with an aleph was still peshat, unlike in these cases. Another issue needing explaining is if the ibn ezra is correct that it is a guide and kri is ikkar, why was the tanna in sotah unsure?)

Indeed, there is external support that lamed aleph was an alternative spelling for lo lamed vav. In the dead sea scrolls, that spelling is used many times.

Understanding lo as a spelling variant is interesting for a few reasons. Another common kri and ktiv is the word naarah, spelled without the final hey. It is possible this too is a variant, and the kri is a guide.

In fact, the idea of words having variant spellings is very common in the torah, aside from lo actually having a third spelling of lamed hey, we have an example of a variant so ubiquitous, that it is not even listed as a kri and ktiv in the masoretic notes: the word hee. Aside from the 11 places enumerated in avot dirabi natan, the word hee is spelled the same way as the word hu, hey vav aleph. From sefer Yehoshua and onward, it is spelled the normal way.

The explanation behind it is simple. In language, there is a phenomenon of silent letters, or words that are spelled differently than they are pronounced. This is not related to a specific word or text, but is a feature of the language itself. A great example is the English word “colonel”, pronounced Kernel. It would seem that in biblical times, at least prior to yehoshua, there were two different spellings of the word hee, one with a vav

and one with a yud. Over time, the spelling became more standardized and after *sefer yehoshua* *hi* is always spelled with a yud. When the *torah* writes *hee* with a vav and means it with a yud, it is not that the *kri* is a different word from the *ktiv*, but that the *kri* is explaining how the *kri* is supposed to be pronounced, like if someone would write *colonel* and then in parentheses write (pron. *Kernel*).

This is surprisingly similar then to the alternative we gave to the *Abarbanel*. Different dialects are similar to the idea of linguistic spelling variants.

The final type of *kri* and *ktiv* is the *malei* and *chaser*, or more inclusively, variances in *nikkud*. While the *gemara* (*kreisus/makkos*) does use the words *kesiv* and *kri* regarding this phenomenon, it is never in the *Talmud* given the formal title *kri* and *ksiv*, and in fact has a special name reserved for it: *mikrah* and *mesores*.

The *mikrah* is analogous to the *kri*, and *mesores* to the *ksiv*. There is a debate amongst the *tannaim*. Some say *yesh eim lamikrah*, some say *yesh eim lamesoret*, and some say *yesh eim laze ulaze*. Yet the debate, as *tosfos* in *sukkah* explains with various proofs, is only which is given supremacy, but all agree that both are important.

A few points must be made. It is quite clear that there is a tradition going back for both *mikrah* and *mesoret*, and that doubts played no role here. Yet it is not clear if these are even relevant to the discussion of *kri* and *ksiv*. These cases are never listed in the *Masoretic* notes as *kri* and *ksiv*, and unlike other *kri* and *ksiv* don't differ at all in spelling but only in *nikud*. And the fact that this same *machlokes* never comes up by any *kri* and *ksiv* (to my knowledge), is very telling that it is a related, but different, phenomenon,

There is one pasuk with both a kri and ksiv and a mikrah and mesoret, and indeed the two seem to interact, with the kri making sense with the mikrah and the ktiv with the mesoret (read pasuk). Yet the kri and ksiv here is of the lo variety, which itself may be a special case. Thus, while all must agree these are an ancient tradition, whether they have a bearing on how to understand regular kri and ksiv remains unclear.

In summary, we have three major opinions for kri and ksiv, that of rashba, Radak, and abarbanel. Furthermore, another opinion seems to exist regarding some homophone kri and ktiv.