

HEBREW IN MEDIEVAL SPAIN:
ASPECTS OF EVOLUTION AND TRANSMISSION*

La lengua hebrea en la España Medieval
Aspectos de su evolución y transmisión

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For Menaḥem Haran on his seventieth birthday

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RESUMEN: El artículo ofrece una perspectiva general de la evolución de la filología y lengua hebreas en la España del s. X, como parte de la historia intelectual de las comunidades judías en el país. El énfasis se carga en los aspectos socio-lingüísticos del proceso.

El artículo trata principalmente los siguientes temas: (a) forma y sentido —el estudio de la palabra bíblica: Menaḥem y Dunaš; (b) el modelo árabe —referencia al árabe en el estudio del vocabulario bíblico y de la prosodia: actitudes negativas y positivas; (c) aceptación de la influencia árabe y simultáneo rechazo de la asimilación al marco de la cultura árabe: irrupción de la entidad lingüística y literaria *Hebreo-Sefardí*; (d) la poesía y el vocabulario bíblico; (e) poesía y consciencia gramatical; (f) algunas líneas maestras en la formación de la prosa *Hebreo-Sefardí* (g) la gran revolución: la aparición del concepto *nah nistar* y, consecuentemente, la de la trilateralidad; y (h) la formación de la pronunciación sefardí.

ABSTRACT: The paper offers an overall view of the development of the Hebrew philology and the Hebrew language in Spain in the tenth century, as a part of the intellectual history of the Jewish communities of the country. Emphasis is being put on the socio-linguistic aspects.

The paper deals primarily with the following themes: (a) form and meaning —the study of the biblical word: Menahem and Dunash; (b) the Arabic model —relying on Arabic for the study of the biblical vocabulary and for prosody: negative and positive attitudes; (c) absorbing Arabic influence, at the same time avoiding the assimilation into the framework of Arabic culture: the emergence of *Sephardi-Hebrew* linguistic and literary entities; (d) poetry and the vocabulary of the Bible; (e) poetry and grammatical consciousness; (f) some main lines in the formation of *Sephardi-Hebrew* prose; (g) the great revolution: the emergence of the concept of 'concealed quiescent' (*nah nistar*), and, consequently, that of the trilateral roots; and (h) the formation of the Sephardí pronunciation.

Palabras clave: Hebreo. Hebreo sefardí. Filología. Lingüística. Medieval.

Key words: Hebrew. Sephardí-Hebrew. Philology. Linguistics. Medieval.

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In the present paper I shall attempt to deal with some aspects of the intellectual history of the Jewish communities of Spain in the tenth century. As the title of the paper indicates, our discussion will be focused on the history of Hebrew in these communities. My purpose is to draw a general picture, attempting to sum up the state of our knowledge of some main phases of this history, rather than to go into details. When I prepared the paper I had in mind its presentation in a congress of historians —as our congress is defined 'encuentro internacional de historiadores'— who would be interested in the sociological side of the history of Hebrew in Spain. Therefore, some emphasis will be put on socio-linguistic aspects of the theme.

There is little we know about the history of Hebrew in Spain in the two centuries that followed the Moslem conquest in 711. But in the first part of the tenth century a process that may be defined as a cultural renaissance starts in Jewish life in Spain. As in every renaissance, we can observe here a great emphasis on certain features of the national legacy combined with an extensive emergence of new, hitherto unknown, traits. The renaissance was all-encompassing: it changed all aspects of Jewish life. It would be superfluous to say that Hebrew played a central part in the renaissance. In fact, Hebrew language and literature were the main objects of the renaissance and the same time the carriers of the process.

In the history of Hebrew the Spanish period is the third in importance after the Biblical and the Mishnaic. But in the first two Hebrew was also the spoken language of the Jewish community; as is well known this was not the case in the Spanish period. What we witness in Spain is a revival of a literary language. By 'revival' we mean a process through which Hebrew became a full-fledged vehicle for the expression of an extremely wide range of literary compositions, of many genres, in religious and secular poetry, as well as in prose —Halakhic, philosophical, philological, exegetic and other. In fact, Hebrew had been used for these purposes prior to the Spanish period, but not with the same richness and vigour. And for quite a few functions —especially in poetry but also in prose— Hebrew was used in Spain for the first time. In all the functions it served, Hebrew in Spain had been formalized by distinct features. In this process of transformation that we have termed 'revival' great stress had been placed on the aesthetic side, primarily in poetry. To this point we shall come back later.

I should like to add that students of the history of Hebrew use the term 'The Return to the Bible' in order to denote the above processes of transformation and

revival. I am not sure this term fully exposes the processes that took place in Spain. It was not only that biblical Hebrew was conceived as the only sublime classical layer of the language; what prominently characterizes the revival was the attempt, successfully achieved, to combine the biblical world, as expressed in vocabulary, literary allusions and associations, with the actualities of the life of the Jewish society.

The seeds for the revival were sown in the East, in Babylonia, by Sa'adia. He called for a revolutionizing change in the attitude of the Jewish community to Hebrew, emphasizing the need for correct and elegant expression in poetry and prose, as well in oral articulation. It was Sa'adia who introduced the concept of צְרוּרָה (Arabic *faṣāḥa*), as an essential feature of Hebrew culture. In the evolution of Hebrew language and literature in Spain, this concept had been a component of the highest order.

It is a demanding task indeed to draw a full picture of this revival, unique in its kind and scope in the history of Hebrew until the revival of the Hebrew language and literature in the Land of Israel in the late nineteenth century (although the latter involved all domains of the language while the former related in the main to the written side). Such a picture will have to include the discussion and analysis of a number of themes. In addition this picture should show how these themes relate to each other. Within the scope of our paper, it will be possible only to deal briefly with some of these themes —those which have played the most important role in the revival.

The main theme we shall start with is that of form and meaning; our first topic within the framework of this theme will be the study of the biblical word, the beginnings of biblical lexicography in Spain.

Interpretations of the biblical text were to be found in the Halakhic and Midrashic literature and were evidently transmitted orally in the teaching of the Bible in the communities of Spain. But there was no book of reference that could be used by the student of the Bible for finding out the meaning of a certain word —primarily, of course, of the words that do not occur frequently. Such a reference book, clearly arranged and succinctly presenting the meaning would lay down the foundations for a widespread understanding of the biblical word, thus becoming a first-rate instrument in the revival process.

The task of preparing the much-needed reference book was achieved by Menahem Ben Saruq. The appearance of his *Mahberet* (its original name, *sefer pitronim* ["Book of Solutions"], concretely indicates its purpose) marks the

beginning of the Hebrew cultural revival in Spain. It was an event of prime significance, which placed the study of the biblical Hebrew on new foundations. The very fact that a dictionary for biblical Hebrew could be written in Hebrew proved the vitality of the language.

Menahem's achievements have all the more to be appreciated if we consider the fact that at his time the concept of the trilateral root did not exist. Menahem had, therefore, to create his own methodology for the arrangement of the entries, finding no fault in establishing, in addition to lexemes which are clearly trilateral, also bi-literal or uniliteral roots.

For the notion of the root, the common formal denominator of words that he considers to be semantically related, Menahem uses the term יסוד "base"; occasionally he admits that this 'base' remains unknown¹; in such a case the semantic value must be entirely determined by context. The 'base' is the head of the entry; it consists of those letters that are shared by all the words which are included in the entry.

Menahem was well versed with interpretations suggested to biblical verses and words by his predecessors, his attitude to former interpretations being critical². He is thus not a compiler, but a scholar possessing an independent approach. We should also note that Menahem systematically introduced into the realm of Hebrew linguistic thought an important semantic notion: that of homonymy —the possession of a number of meanings by the same root. As a rule, an entry which has more than one meaning is subdivided into semantic categories (מחלקות), פנים (מראות, עניינים). This, needless to say, was a step forward in the development of the semantic study of biblical Hebrew.

The history of the Andalusian school of Hebrew philology, which flourished during a period of about two hundred years (from the mid-10th century until the conquest of the southern area of Spain by the *muwahhidun* in 1148), thus begins with a breakthrough in the study of biblical Hebrew. But it was not only in the practical and methodological sides of his dictionary that Menahem's work exerted lasting influence. He also established significant, basic principles, for the study of language (in this particular case, of course, Hebrew). These principles, set up in his introduction to the *Mahberet*, may be summarized as follows:

1. See, e.g., the entry אחלי (Mahberet, p. 36*): אחלי לפני הנביא אשר בשמרון (II Kings 5,3); אחלי יכונן דרכי (Ps. 119,5); אבל פתרונם לפי ענין שניהם שים בפתרונם ואין להם דמיונות ולא נודעה יסודותם.

2. See *Mahberet*, Introduction, p. 61.

(1) language is a system of sounds that carry meaning. Therefore, special attention should be given to pairs (or, in some cases, groups) of words that differ in one sound only (to use modern terminology: one should stress the importance of the phonemic structure of language).

(2) but language is not merely a system of communication: its aesthetic aspects are not to be neglected. Menahem does not deal specifically with these aspects; of importance is to note, however, that he begins the definition of his purpose in writing the dictionary with the words לשון יהודית —"to present the elegance of Hebrew"³.

It is to the elegance of the language, its purity and correctness, that the study of meaning (mentioned in the continuation of the definition) is linked. This linkage of elegance (form) to denotation (meaning) is also evident in Menahem's treatment, in the introduction, of certain phonological traits (*dagesh* and *rafe*): the function of these phonological traits is, elegant performance (that is, absolutely correct pronunciation) on the one hand, and distinction of meaning on the other⁴.

If Menahem's *Mahberet* was the first Hebrew dictionary written in Spain (and practically the first dictionary of Hebrew, in the true sense of the word, ever written), then the disputations of Dunash ben Labraṭ (Heb. *Teshuvot*) should be regarded as a significant supplementary treatise to this dictionary. Written in a sharp polemical strain, this treatise includes alternate (and usually correct) glosses to Menahem's entries, and also, as we shall see, an exposition of a fundamental principle of Hebrew lexicography. We might mention in passing that Hebrew scholars and exegetes of the Bible have used for generations both Menahem's *Mahberet* and the *Teshuvot* of Dunash as major reference tools.

Dunash makes about a hundred and eighty observations with regard to the entries included in the *Mahberet*. His criticism is directed, in the main, towards matters of form and meaning. He accepts Menahem's definition of the 'base'; however, in a comparatively large number of cases, he rejects Menahem's determination of the 'base' of certain words. Dunash also offers semantic corrections to the entries.

3. The full text of this definition reads: להעמיד, לצחצח לשון יהודית על תוכן יסודותו ועקר שרשיו, להעמיד משקולת שכל וקו לשון לימודים, לבאר פיתרוני מיניהם כהקות משפט ולפרש תוצאות עניינים למחלקותיהם, ולהורות פני המלה פני מליצתה, להורות האותיות הנשרשים והבאים לשרש תוך

(*Mahberet*, p. 1*, lines 17-20).

4. See *Mahberet*, pp. 12*-13*.

The most significant contribution that Dunash made to development of Hebrew lexicography in Spain was the emphasis he placed on the importance of Arabic for getting at the true meaning of Hebrew words⁵. The importance Dunash attributes to comparing Hebrew with Arabic and relying on Arabic was for him a matter of principle. Menaḥem's view (although only implicitly expressed) is that the Hebrew word should be interpreted only from within, by analyzing the lexical system of Hebrew and through an effort to arrive at a full understanding of the context. Dunash also naturally relies on context, but in contrast to Menaḥem he regards Hebrew as intrinsically comparable to Arabic; therefore, recourse to Arabic is a must. He also remarks that Menaḥem himself inadvertently bases his interpretation of biblical words on their Arabic cognates. Let us bring here the following passage:

והבאת בחלק אחד: לבוש הרוגים מטועני חרב עם: טענו את בעירכם, ופתרת אותם לשון עמס ומשא המה. ואין לעמס ומשא במטעני חרב ענין. ואומר כי פתרון מטעני חרב מהלשון העברית כמשמעו בלשון הערבית. ואם תאמר: מה לנו ולדמות הלשון העברית ללשון הערבית אשיבך: הנה גם אתה פתרת דברים כמשמעם בלשון הערב, כמו: ואל אישך תשוקתך, באמרך בפתרונו תאותך וחמדתך... ואם אין פתרון אלה המלים כמשמעם, הם ישפטוך לדמות הלשון העברית ללשון הערבית. והנני אערך לך מקצת דברי העברית אשר פתרונם כמשמעם בערבית, להודיעך כי שתי הלשונות דומות זאת לזאת, אבל יש ביניהם בדברים חילוף באותות עין בגימל, וסמך בשין, ושין בתו, וזין בדלת וחית בכף. התבונן בהם, פן תיכשל בחילופיהם⁶.

The question at stake, however, was not merely linguistic in nature, namely, comparing Hebrew with Arabic. The debate closely touched upon a matter of highly significant problem in the process of the Hebrew revival in Spain, that of the attitude to Arabic and to Islamic culture in general.

There is ground to believe that problems of principle, methodological and practical, pertaining to the revival, were discussed, and quite vehemently so, in the philological schools founded by the great masters of the first generation of the revival, Menaḥem and Dunash. The writings of the Dunash, Menaḥem's disciples and Dunash disciples bear evidence to these debates.

5. For a discussion of this topic and bibliography see Maman (1984: 181-185).

6. Dunash, *Teshuvot*, pp. 88*.

A fundamental issue was whether accepting Arabic as a helpful tool and its adoption as a model in the revival should be considered legitimate from the Jewish point of view, all the more so advocated. More specifically: should the use of Arabic for finding the true meaning of the biblical word be recommended? At the core of this topic was the status of the text of the Bible vis-à-vis that of the Qur'ān. In Islam, the principle of the uniqueness and inimitability of the Qur'ān in form and content (*'i'jāz*), was of primary significance; basing the interpretation of the biblical text on the language of the Qur'ān would mean that, when Hebrew and Arabic are compared, the Qur'ān would appear linguistically superior to the Bible. This conception could not, of course, in principle be accepted by the Jewish community. The opponents of the acceptance of Arabic as a tool and a model must have felt uneasy with this problem, albeit they could not publicly express their opinion⁷. The proponents, on the other hand, have not apparently attributed weight to this consideration.

Another issue of importance concerned the question whether it is *linguistically* legitimate to adopt the Arabic model. In the first generation of the revival the discussion around this point centered around the quantitative meter of Hebrew poetry. Dunash, the leader of the school which definitely advocated the use of Arabic, for lexicographic purposes as well as with regard to the adoption of the principles of the quantitative meter, did not find any shortcomings, linguistic, socio-linguistic, or methodological, in having recourse to Arabic. He certainly regarded the Arabic model positively, seeing in its adoption a way leading to innovation and enrichment. In the writings of Dunash there is no explicit expression of his outlook on this problem; but a succinct presentation of his views on the desirable relationship of Hebrew literature to Arabic literature is found in the writings of his disciple, Yehudi ben Shishat (or Sheshet). Yehudi quotes his master as having said:

וגן עדנך יהו ספרי קדושים ופרדסך יהו ספרי ערבים

"Your garden of Paradise should consist of the sacred books and your orchard should be composed of books of Arabs"⁸.

7. It is of interest to note that at a later period Moshe ibn 'Ezra briefly refers to the Jewish attitude to the *'i'jāz*; after succinctly presenting the nature of the concept and its standing in the Islamic world, he says: "ואלרד אליהם ליס ממא נרץ בה" but it is not our business to refute them (the Moslems)": *Kitāb al-Muhādāra*, p. 37, l. 40.

8. Yehudi ben Sheshet, *Teshuvot*, p. 17*.

We here witness a clear, unambiguous statement the meaning of which is self-evident: for the Jewish intellectual knowledge of *both the Hebrew classical heritage and Arabic literature are essential. Both cultural components stand on equal ground.* The adoption of the Arabic model is thus not only legitimate —*it is imperative.*

An expression of such a view at the beginning of the renaissance was a great innovation indeed. We touch here upon an aspect well known from the history of renaissance movements: the conflict between the old and the new elements. It appears that the school that Dunash founded adhered to a fundamental line of thought and action, that was based on the following principle: in the socio-linguistic circumstances of life in Spain, the Hebrew culture emerging in the peninsula *must follow a pragmatic and productive path.* The acquisition of certain components borrowed from Arabic culture is definitely positive as long as it supports the revival, as to both contents and form. The feeling of the school of Dunash that the new features it had introduced into the scanning of poetry are innovations of importance, which improves the quality of verse, is clearly expressed in Yehudi's words. Praising Dunash on his achievements he says:

כי יסד לנו יסוד לא הוסד בימי אבותינו ושם בשירות גבולות קצובות
לדבק אותן בלבבות⁹.

The approach advocated, and strongly fought for, by the school of Dunash was adopted by the Jewish community, from the second generation of the Andalusian school on. Generally speaking, one would say that this positive attitude towards contact with Arabic marks the following phases of the revival, making the developing Jewish culture *an open, rather than segregated, system.*

In the first generation, however, there was a state of severe conflict among Jewish intellectuals regarding the attitude towards contact with Arabic. One has to remember that linguistic aspects of culture were a matter of prime standing in Jewish life. Menahem's disciples and protagonists came out with a battle of defense: the metrical innovations introduced by Dunash constitute a menace on the quintessence of Hebrew —its purity and perfectness are at risk. Hebrew is structurally different from Arabic; therefore, the transplantation into Hebrew of Arabic structural features is destructive, since it would undermine the foundations of Hebrew¹⁰. Moreover, it would demolish the legacy of the past¹¹. But the

9. *Teshuvot*, p.17*.

10. See TTM, p. 4*, 12*-13*.

orthodox, conservative school could not win. This would have been against the nature of normal development, in contradiction to the course of history. Although voices against accepting Arabic influence were not infrequently heard, with the defeat of the conservative school of Menahem the history of Hebrew in Spain proceeds along lines which were based on taking Arabic, as well as certain aspects of Islamic culture, as a nourishing source.

The age of 'Abdu-Rahmān III, who reigned for almost fifty years (912-961), created appropriate conditions and an encouraging ambience for the amalgamation of Arabic linguistic and literary components into Hebrew culture. It was a period of tolerance, the Caliph stressing the importance of co-operation among the various ethnic groups in his kingdom. In his court Hisdai ibn Shaprut, the great patron of Hebrew men of letters, held a prominent position. Time was thus ripe for the development of a close relationship between Jews and Moslems. The process of drawing from the wells of Arabic, in the domain of literature and that of language, the two being, of course, intertwined, proceeded at a fast rate, constantly gaining ascendancy. Hebrew prose became, to some extent, arabicized; the use of the quantitative meter of Hebrew poetry, which was patterned on the principles of Arabic meter, became widespread; new genres, borrowed from Arabic poetry were used by Hebrew poets —*but Hebrew culture was not assimilated into the framework of Arabic culture*. Jewish intellectuals were well acquainted with the major works of Arabic literature¹², at the same time preserving and promoting their own literary legacy. Both language and literature developed full force, becoming entities of a special kind, *Sephardi-Hebrew*. Historical processes may be judged by the fruits they yield; this holds good also for evolutions in the fields of language and literature. From this point of view the revival brought about growth and expansion, extension of scope and widening of variety, maturity and fulfillment. In literary and linguistic achievements resulting from a contact with another culture, no other period in Jewish history is comparable to the Golden Age.

11. See TTM, p. 15*.

12. For the twelfth century this is well illustrated by Moshe Ibn 'Ezra's use of Arabic sources in his book *Kitāb al-Muḥādāra wal-Mudhākāra*. For a recent treatment of this subject see Dana (1991).

The cultivation, foremost in poetry, of the aesthetic aspects of language (*ṣaḥot*) reached a peak never attained before in the history of Hebrew. As recitation of poetry was widespread, primarily in social gatherings, its aesthetic evaluation became part and parcel of the cultural load of the Jewish intellectual. We should not, however, overlook the existence of difficulties, psychological and practical.

Throughout the Spanish period, Hebrew has been facing a formidable task: it had to prove that it can compete with Arabic in providing the needs of the communities on all levels of expression, to show that the means it possesses for this purpose are practically sufficient and aesthetically acceptable, and may be compared with those that Arabic provides.

This emotive attitude towards the status of Hebrew vis-à-vis Arabic as well as the practical sides of this issue are expressed in quite a few works of Hebrew writers. It may be exemplified by passage from Yehuda Alḥarizi's introduction to his *Taḥkemoni*. In this passage Alḥarizi explains the reason why he had been motivated to compose the book: "when I saw the work of al-Ḥariri (the celebrated author of the Arabic *maqāmāt*) the heavens of my joy were rolled together and the rivulets of my mourning flowed, because every nation is concerned for its speech and avoids sinning against its tongue, whereas our tongue, which was a delight to everybody is considered a brother of Cain (meaning Abel, Heb. *hevel*, "vanity")... therefore I compiled this book in order to display the force of the sacred tongue to the holy people"¹³.

Poetry, religious as well as secular, and rhymed prose, for which the aesthetic, not the communicative, function, was a main one, were composed, almost exclusively, in Hebrew. To explain this fact a number of theories have been proposed¹⁴. The one I would deem most acceptable is sociolinguistic: it was imperative to show that Hebrew is as capable as Arabic to serve as a medium for producing beautiful poetry, the summit of elegance in language¹⁵. In its aesthetic and social functions Hebrew poetry had to fulfill for the Jewish society the role that Arabic poetry played for the Moslem. In a way, this was the implicit response of the Jewish community to the Moslem concept of *'i'jāz*: the relationship that had been formed between Hebrew poetry and the Bible was parallel to that existing

13. The translation brought here is that of Halkin (1963:235).

14. For an exposition of these theories see Drori (1988:52).

15. This is Halkin's interpretation, later elaborated by Drori (1988: 51-54).

between Arabic and the Qur'ān: in both languages poetry strove, so to say, to reach an unattainable linguistic standard, that of the Bible and the Qur'ān.

The composition of poetry in Hebrew had an immense impact on the development of the literary language. It was primarily expressed in the emergence of a new poetic diction, namely in the formation of a language fabric suitable for creating the poetically required relationship between form and substance. For the creation of this fabric biblical Hebrew served as a model of excellence, of elegance, that cannot be surpassed.

The Arabic model provided, in addition to the quantitative meter, a multitude of poetic genres and patterns, numerous concepts regarding aspects of life and behaviour, and a number of semantic borrowings (to the Arabic influence on the language of prose we shall come later). All these components had been harmoniously integrated into the Hebrew fabric. The contact with Arabic, in literature and language on the one hand and the consistent and bold attempts to exhaust the potentialities inherent, in substance and form, in the text of the Bible, on the other, have opened unprecedented ways of promoting creativity. But the consequences of the contact with the Arabic literary tradition could have been fruitfully incorporated in the Hebrew fabric, *only because the latter had a most stable, highly prestigious and inspiring foundation —the Bible.*

In the domain of language, enrichment was achieved primarily through semantic developments: numerous biblical words have acquired additional meanings. Results can be seen of semantic processes such as metaphor, metonymy, similes, ellipsis, specification of meaning and the like. What is relevant to point out is that these processes not unfrequently appear to emerge in an organic way, *being derived by a deep and thorough acquaintance of the biblical text, the relationship to this text being like the one a poet would have to a literary layer of the language of his own time.* Thus, one observes, not only the aspect of the return to the Bible was involved in the revival, but also an aesthetic canonization and integration of the biblical language within the framework of culture. What Sa'adia Gaon demanded as a prerequisite for his generation —the beginning of the tenth century— was fully achieved in the revival in Spain, starting at the middle of the century. Historical and sociological factors, primarily the way in which Jewish-Moslem relations had developed, made the realization of Sa'adia's vision possible¹⁶.

16. See Fleischer (1989:21).

Elegance (Hebrew *ṣaḥot*, Arabic *faṣāḥa*) in language led to rhetoric structuring (Hebrew *melīṣa*; Arabic *balāḡa*), first and foremost in poetry. To achieve high standards of rhetoric, new ways of creating a figurative poetic language had to be sought. Thus, semantic developments were closely linked with rhetorical requirements.

The impact of Arabic on poetic language is disclosed primarily in the appearance of semantic borrowings, resulting from a process of extending the semantic range of certain Hebrew words by transplanting into it a meaning extant in their Arabic counterparts. These semantic borrowings are prominent mostly in literary concepts and symbols. Thus, e.g., Hebrew *zēman*, the primary meaning of which is "time" acquired also the additional meaning of "fate". Both the primary and additional meanings exist in Arabic *zamān* and *dahr*. This process, needless to say, enriched the conceptual framework of Hebrew poetry.

The development of Hebrew prose in Spain took a course utterly different from that of the poetic language. As mentioned above, the use of Hebrew for communicative purposes encountered serious problems. Well known are the words of Yehuda Ibn Tibbon (1120-ca.1190) concerning these problems. He treats this topic in his introductions to two works he had translated —Baḥya Ibn Paquda's *ḥovot ha-levavot* ("Duties of the Hearts") and Yona Ibn Janāḥ's grammar *Sefer ha-riqma*. Reviewing the history of Jewish writing in Arabic, he concludes in saying that "it is simply impossible to express the thoughts of our hearts succinctly and eloquently in Hebrew as we can in Arabic which is adequate, elegant and available to those who know it"¹⁷.

With the passing of time and the opening of new horizons for the Jewish intellectuals in the theoretical and speculative domains of study —such as philosophy, medicine, philology and linguistics, the need for a suitable Hebrew style and an appropriate terminology were more acutely felt. Recourse to Arabic solved the problem of exposing new theories and divulging learning. Poets who composed exceedingly beautiful poetry, Shelomo Ibn Gabirol and Yehuda Hallevi, wrote in Arabic philosophical works of utmost importance. It was also in Arabic that the works of the two greatest philologists of the Spanish period, Yehuda Ḥayyūj and Yona Ibn Janāḥ, saw light.

It is, however, worthy of noting that at the first stage of the revival Hebrew was the main vehicle for prose writing. Menahem's dictionary, the disputations of

17. Halkin's translation (1963:235).

Dunash and the disputations of the disciples of these two philologists were all written in Hebrew. In the same period, Hisdai Ibn Shaprut sends to the Jewish king of the Khazars and to the Byzantine Emperor letters written in Hebrew¹⁸. These are remarkable facts. Are they to be explained as resulting from the desire of the intellectuals of this generation to show that Hebrew could well function as a communicative medium? Perhaps. We should, however, remember, that at that time the need for speculative and theoretical writing was not as deeply felt as later on.

The main line according to which Hebrew prose developed in Spain —whether in original Hebrew writing or in translations from Arabic— is that of planting numerous traits derived from an Arabic adstratum into a Hebrew stratum. Through this process of blending a special style of prose evolved, crystallizing in the twelfth century in the extraordinary achievements of the greatest medieval translator, Yehuda Ibn Tibbon. In the vocabulary the impact of the Arabic adstratum is evidenced primarily in loan-translations (e.g. 'eykhut "quality" from 'eykh "how", reflecting the morphological relationship of Arabic *kayfiyyah* to *kaifa*) and in semantic borrowings (e.g., the verb *hibber*, originally "(he) united, brought together", received an additional meaning —"he composed, wrote (a book)", reflecting a semantic range extant in Arabic *'allafa*, which includes these two meanings). In addition, there was also a borrowing of words from Arabic (e.g. *qoter* "diameter", Ar. *qutr*; *merkaz* "centre", Ar. *markaz*), but on a much more limited scale than loan-translations and semantic borrowings. The borrowed words (unless they were most technical terms, like names of plants) had been fully integrated into the morphological system of Hebrew, having acquired normal Hebrew patterns. The influence of Arabic is considerably noticeable in the domain of syntax, in which new structures arise¹⁹.

The twelfth and thirteenth centuries were the Great Age of Translations and Translators, led by the school of the Tibbon family, four generations at least of which had produced in Provence important translations of works of Jewish authors, originally written in Arabic. *No period in the history of Hebrew had witnessed such extensive and productive projects of translation from any language.* The style created by this school (sometimes called the Tibbonite school) brought

18. See Fleischer (1989:21) and the bibliography given there.

19. For a detailed and thorough presentation of the salient features of Hebrew prose in Spain see Sáenz-Badillos (1988: 239-254); Goldenberg (1971).

highly significant works in such important domains as philosophy and philology within the reach of the Jewish intellectual who had no way of reading their original versions. Although for readers who did not know Arabic quite a few of the loan-translations and semantic borrowings from Arabic must have created non-negligible difficulties, and their meanings had to be learned; but in the course of time they became normal elements of the Hebrew fabric of scholarly and scientific writing. The Tibbonites gave up elegance for accuracy and faithfulness in the rendering into Hebrew of the Arabic originals. In sum, the importance of their achievements for the development of the scholarly and scientific styles of Hebrew cannot be stressed too far.

An important translator of the period was also Yehuda Alharizi (1170-1235). In contrast to the Tibbonites, he strove for elegance, sacrificing accuracy for it. His style is literary, disclosing numerous traits of biblical Hebrew. Arabic influence is extant, but on a more limited scale.

Within the scope of this paper we can only touch upon some limited aspects of Hebrew prose writing in the period in question. We must, however, mention the rise of an utterly different type of style, that of Mishnaic Hebrew: Maimonides' great legal code, *Mishneh Torah*, is written in an elegant, refined, type of Mishnaic Hebrew, in the texture of which some features of biblical Hebrew had been incorporated. He definitely showed that the style of this important layer of Hebrew, the language of the Mishnah, can be employed as a first-rate medium for writing prose, although prose of a distinct, in the main legal, type.

Thus, standards have been established in prose and poetry, both performing significant social functions, the former a communicative one, the latter an aesthetic.

The development of Hebrew philology and linguistics had ties mostly with the domain of poetry. It would be superfluous to say that the discipline of rhetoric—essential for writing poetry—required a thorough knowledge of grammatical rules, down to their minutiae and detailed specifications. In principle, deviations from these rules would be regarded grave faults (certain leniency being allowed, codified in the category of *licentia poetica*). The strict keeping of grammar was primarily relevant for the realization of the meter, but not exclusively so. The grammatical correctness of the language of the great poets was constantly under the inspection of the scrutinizing eye of fellows to the art and the educated public

in general²⁰. The verse poets produced became, for members of the following generations and occasionally in the poets' own lifetime, a standard of perfect Hebrew²¹.

Drawing a line of demarcation between the history of Hebrew poetry and that of Hebrew philology and linguistic thought would be inappropriate. The two go hand in hand. Both Menahem and Dunash, proclaiming the revival in their works, wrote poetry. Other men of stature of the Spanish period, to mention only Shemuel Hannagid, Ibn Gabirol, Moshe Ibn 'Ezra and Abraham Ibn 'Ezra, combined in their work poetry and philology. *In fact, in no other period in Jewish history were poetry and philology that close as in the Spanish.*

Developing in a course of about a century (950-1050), Hebrew philology and linguistic thought in Spain have attained their peak in the work of Yona ibn Janāh. Three stages may be discerned in the development of the field during this period, which is definitely the formative century in its history. These stages may be roughly equated with three successive generations of philological and linguistic study²². In the first, the generation of Menahem, Dunash and their schools, philological interest is focused primarily on providing the tools for a systematic acquaintance with the biblical lexicon; in addition linguistic concern is centered around the feasibility of implementing Hebrew phonology for the adoption of the newly introduced quantitative meter (see above, pp. 8-9).

The controversy with regard to this adaptation gave birth to a concept which is to be considered a turning point in the history of Hebrew linguistic thought: that of the 'concealed quiescent' (*nah nistar*)²³.

The theory of the 'concealed quiescent' originated under the influence of Arabic, in the orthography of which a constant distinction is made between short vowels and long ones; but its emergence should not be taken only as a result of the contact between Hebrew and Arabic. The primary aim of this theory was to explain the relationship between the Tiberian vocalization (*niqqud*) and the

20. An anecdote of interest is told by Yona Ibn Janāh about a verse of his teacher, the poet Yiṣṣaq Ibn Mar Sha'ul. Yiṣṣaq used in a poem, because of the constraint of meter, the form קרְב לְבִי "the inside part of my heart". The form קרְב, as a construct of קרְבָּ, was regarded faulty by numerous scribes, who, when copying the poem, changed the word קרְב into קרְבָּ (the latter word is semantically close to the former, and suits the pattern of meter). See Ibn Janāh, *Sefer hariqma*, pp. 276-279.

21. Cf. Pagis (1976:19).

22. For a division of the Andalusian period into sub-periods see Eldar (1989).

23. For bibliography of studies on this concept see Morag (1990:219, footnote 63).

Palestinian pronunciation, which the Spanish communities had adopted. In other words: its purpose was to bridge the gap between the actual pronunciation (in which *qameš* and *šeri* were equal to *pataḥ* and *segol* respectively, and which possessed two phonological values for the *qameš* sign [*qameš gadol* and *qameš qatan*]) and the *niqqud*. The acceptance of this theory, upon which distinction between long and short vowels had been made, had a lasting effect on the development of Hebrew philology and linguistic thought, as well as on the teaching of Hebrew. The Kimḥis school conception of Hebrew phonology is based on the theory of the 'concealed quiescent'.

The theme of second generation is phonology and morphology. This generation saw the establishment by Yehuda Ḥayyūj of the principle of the trilateral root. This principle directly resulted from the concept of the 'concealed quiescent', which was clearly exposed and elaborated by Ḥayyūj. The establishment of the trilateral root as the base of the Hebrew morphology revolutionized Hebrew grammar, lexicography and linguistic thought.

The third generation saw the full integration of all branches of linguistics—phonology, morphology, syntax—in Yona Ibn Janāḥ's *kitāb al-luma'* (in Yehuda Ibn Tibbon's translation: *sefer ha-riqma*), as well as the appearance of a high-standard comprehensive dictionary, his *kitāb al-'uṣūl* (*sefer ha-shorashim*). Technically, the two books constitute two parts of one work, which Ibn Janāḥ named *kitāb al-tanqīḥ* (*sefer ha-diqduq*), but in fact each has an independent standing. *Kitāb al-tanqīḥ* is a work of the highest order, an *opus magnum* indeed, for all generations of Hebraists. Outstanding are the author's conception of the inter-relation existing between philology and linguistics; not less striking his proficiency in combining a profound analytical approach with a masterly synthesis. The century starts with the appearance of a dictionary, Menaḥem's *Maḥberet*, and ends with that of another, but Hebrew philology and linguistic have fared a long way in the meanwhile.

But not only did Ibn Janāḥ accomplish a task that for the first generation would seem undreamt of, his work greatly enhanced the prestige of Hebrew philology and linguistics in the Jewish world. With his *kitāb al-tanqīḥ* these domains of knowledge *attained unprecedented stature, their position in the unified field of science of the time becoming remarkably and unquestionably recognized*. Combining formal considerations with theoretical and speculative methods of argumentation, he showed that the distinctive features of his domains of occupation are, to non-negligible extent, philosophical, not technical, in nature.

The 'Science of Language'²⁴ is not to be looked down upon, an attitude he found to be prevalent among certain Talmudic scholars of his time²⁵; just the other way around: it is "a tool for any purpose and a gate for anything that is being examined"²⁶ —that is to say that the 'Science of Language' is a *sine qua non* for all branches of learning and research. In addition, it is also essential for the very understanding of the Bible and thus for the performance of religious duties.

Before concluding, I shall try to deal briefly, most briefly indeed, with the oral transmission of Hebrew in the Jewish communities of Spain. Proficiency in the reading of the Bible, (primarily the Pentateuch, The Haftarat, the Psalms and the Five Scrolls [Megillot], and to a somewhat lesser extent, in that of post-biblical texts) had been for centuries an obligatory requirement for the acceptance of the Jewish individual in his community. The correct pronunciation as well as the traditional melodies used in the recitation of the biblical text were transmitted orally from one generation to another. The phonological, morpho-phonemic and morphological features of the language that are not represented in the orthography had to be learned by way of ear and mouth; this was a fundamental part of the Hebrew education given to every Jewish child, in all communities. But the communities varied as to the nature of their orally-carried traditions of Hebrew, the variance reflecting aspects of their particular history.

We do not possess sufficient information to enable us to draw a complete and continuous outline of the history of the oral transmission of Hebrew in Spain. What we can definitely say is that at certain stage of this history, there crystallized in Spain a tradition, the components of which had originally belonged to two distinct traditions, the Tiberian and the Palestinian²⁷. The vowel system of this amalgamated tradition possessed a number of distinct Palestinian features; but other phonological traits, such as gemination and stress patterns, were in accordance with the Tiberian rules. The morphology, was also Tiberian in the main.

What is of importance to note is that in Spain a phonological structure of orally-transmitted Hebrew had been solidified and canonized for generations: the

24. The term Ibn Janāh uses for this concept is *'ilm al-luḡah* (or *'ilm al-lisān*).

25. Ibn Janāh, *Sefer Hariqma*, p. נ', lines 15 ff.

26. *Ibid.*, p. ו, lines 1-2.

27. For the evidence we possess for the various traditions of Hebrew (including the Babylonian) in tenth century Spain, see Morag (1990:213 ff.).

Sephardi tradition. Since by the introduction of the contrast between long and short vowels a theoretical solution for the discrepancy between the pronunciation and the *niqqud* had been found, the grammatical framework for the morphological structure of the language was also stabilized. The Sephardi tradition was accepted by all Jewish communities of the Mediterranean basin and the Middle East —with the exception of the Yemenite— and was current also in Ashkenaz probably until the twelfth century. It is this tradition, in pronunciation and grammar, that had been accepted as the one upon which the revival of Hebrew at the end of the nineteenth was founded. Viewed historically, the Sephardi tradition of Hebrew is a significant part of the legacy bequeathed to generations to come by the Jewish communities of Medieval Spain.

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