The Hebrew grammatical tradition

Schippers, A.

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Grammatical activities in the field of Hebrew appeared relatively late, in a period when Hebrew was no longer spoken. Even the most colloquial Hebrew variant, rabbinical Hebrew, had died out in the second century. Hebrew had for centuries been limited to synagogal and literary use. The Bible was transmitted by the Jews from generation to generation, but the vocalization and accentuation notes had to be added as "punctuation" to the consonantal text, probably only from the beginning of the seventh century. This was at least the opinion of the Rabbinites (the mainstream of Judaism) who recognized later traditions such as the orally revealed Mishnah and the Talmud as a completion of the Written Law of the Bible.

The Qara'ites, however, were of the opinion that the Bible had been revealed in its entirety, "graven upon the tablets," i.e. "full with vowel and accent signs and not lacking in vowel and accent signs" Eškol ha-kofer (see p. 61). Consequently, they were very active in adding diacritics. This activity was called the Masorah, i.e. 'transmission' or 'numbering of the verses' (Arabic al-masirah). The first Masoretes were the Ben Aser family of whom Abu Sa'id Aharon ben Mo'leq was the most conspicuous member (first half of the seventh century).

One of the systems of vocalizing, the so-called Tiberian system, acquired priority in the Jewish world. That may be the reason that a ninth-century author even pretended that he had heard common people in the streets of Tiberias speaking Hebrew, suggesting that there was still a living tradition.

The development of philology led to the addition of diacritics and served as a foundation for the grammatical work starting in the tenth century. In the beginning writing about grammar was considered by many to be a vain activity. Grammarians tried to prove that language studies were necessary for the proper understanding of the written Word. Qara'ites and Rabbinites disagreed in their interpretations of Biblical Hebrew. Another factor which stimulated grammar was considered by many to be a vain activity. Grammar...
abundance of Arabic philological and grammatical literature was no doubt a stimulus for the Jews who occupied themselves with Hebrew. This phenomenon of the sudden renaissance of Hebrew studies in the tenth and eleventh centuries may also have been the reaction of the 3u'awbiyyah against the dominant position of the Arabic language. This movement, supported mainly by officials of Persian origin, stressed the particular values of the non-Arab peoples (3u'aw:bi) within Islam. The Jews became more aware of the value of their own culture and their holy language as well.

The Golden Age of Hebrew Grammar: The Creative Period

The first among the philologists of the Hebrew language was Sa'adiah Ga'on or Sa'adiah Ibn Yusuf (892-942), born in Faiyum (Egypt), the head of the Jewish community in Babylonia (Iraq) and the foremost personality in Rabbanite Judaism during the first half of the tenth century. He wrote the Kitab al-sab' in lafasl al-mufradah 'Book of the seventy unique words', the first to explain hapax legomena (words or roots found only once in the text) of the Bible according to their use in rabbinical literature. He also compiled the Kitab usul al-3ifr al-ibra:ni: 'Book of the Roots of Hebrew Poetry', usually referred to by its Hebrew title Agoron 'Compendium', the first Hebrew dictionary with glosses in Arabic. It consists of two alphabetic listings, according to the first and the last letters. Sa'adiah Ga'on wanted poets to use a better Hebrew. He pointed out the difference between letters that stand for the basic meaning of the word, and added letters that represent affixes. Equally important was his Kitab usul: al-ibra:niyyah 'Book of the pure Hebrew language', in which morphological questions of the Hebrew language were dealt with for the first time.

The Renaissance of Hebrew which manifested itself in the study of Hebrew grammar and the new school of Hebrew secular poetry, took place in tenth- and eleventh-century Muslim Spain. Jewish patrons emulated the courtly habits of their Muslim colleagues. Moshe ibn 'Ezra (1055-1138), himself a poet, tells us in his Kitab al-muha:darah wa-l-mu5a:karah 'Book of discussion and commemoration' about the learned men who made the revival of Hebrew possible. In the fifth chapter of his Kitab, devoted to a survey of Hebrew literature in Muslim Spain, Moshe ibn 'Ezra begins (28b) by stating that the reason for the Spanish Jews' mastery of the Hebrew language was the fact that they originated from Jews in Jerusalem, where the purest Hebrew was acquired and from where God's Law and Word had come. After the arrival of the Arabs in Andalucia (711 ce), the Jews delved deeply into Arabic science, linguistics and poetry (29b). Thereupon God revealed to them the secret of their own holy language: phenomena such as weak and additional letters were recognized. The first grammarians lived at the Cordoban court of the Jewish patron Abu: Yusuf Hasday ibn Ishaq ibn Shapru:; (915-970). About this maecenas, whose activities initiated the flowering of Hebrew Andalusian poetry, Moshe ibn 'Ezra says in his Kitab (30ab): "He firmly established the pillars of science by surrounding himself with wise men from Syria and al-Iraq. The authors of his time ... wrote admirable works. They praised him in their beautiful poems and writings in the Arabic language. In exchange, therefore, he distinguished them with his graceful gifts, while he provided all the necessary means to satisfy their wishes." One can conclude from Moshe ibn 'Ezra's sketch that the new poetical school arose at a time when there were also many linguistic activities. Linguistic and biblical Aramaic.

Abu:-l-Farag's anagram method looks very much like that of the Arabic grammarian al-Xalici ibn Ahmad (710-786) in his dictionary Kitab al-ayn. This dictionary is not arranged alphabetically, but by groups of sounds, probably under Indian influence, starting with the consonant combinations with the Arabic letter 'ayn. Abu:-l-Farag started by explaining all the root combinations containing the Hebrew consonant letter 'ayn, subsequently dealing with other consonant combinations. The following roots are found in the extant remnant of al-Mustamili's letter 'ayn: 'BR, 'RF, 'MR, 'SB, 'FL, 'SB. Under 'BR all the permutations of the three consonant letters are listed, namely: 'BR, 'RB, 'B'R, 'BR', 'R'B. Among other Qara'ite works are David ben Abraham al-Fasi:; s extensive dictionary of Biblical Hebrew in Arabic, called Kitab: ja:mi' al-alafs zar 'Comprehensive book of sounds' and two grammatical texts: the anonymous book Me'or 'ayin 'Eye Light' or 'Enlightenment of the Eye', composed at the end of the eleventh century and the Ekel ha-kofer 'The cluster of campfire' (cf: Song of Solomon 1:14)/'The grape of henna' by the twelfth-century author Y'hudah Hadasii. The former work does not seem to have been influenced by the Andalusian Rabbanites and has a completely different grammatical system, whereas the latter is heavily influenced by the Andalusian grammarians Hayy:u:q and Ibn Gana:h (see pp. 62-63).

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poetic activities stimulated and influenced each other. Hebrew poets rivaled the Arabs in their poetry and adopted the ideal of distilling the purest poetic language from the Hebrew of Holy Scripture.

M'nahem ibn Saruq (born c. 915, Tortosa) lived at the court of Hasday ibn Shaprut. His lexicon of the Hebrew language, the Mahberet 'Book. Compendium', was believed to be a step forward compared with Sa'adyah Ga'on's dictionary. Menahem differentiated between roots (y'sod, 'iqqar, šorēk) and the paragogic or added element (tosefēt 'addition', mašār'tim, 'servants') within the Hebrew word (see p. 60).

This differentiation, however, already appears in the writings of the Tiberian Masorete Aharon ben Aler (see p. 59) and of Sa'adya ha-Ga'on (p. 60). But M'nahem did not possess the theoretical foundations to discover the weak consonants. For him any consonant that could disappear during the flexion of a root does not belong to its basis, but is an added consonant. By means of this empirical process, he admits a large number of monoconsonantal and biconsonantal roots. Contrary to the widespread custom of writing scientific works in Arabic, his dictionary was written in Hebrew. It was therefore widely disseminated in Europe.

M'nahem's critic, Dunas ibn Labrat (a name of Berber origin; born c. 925 in Morocco; educated in Baghdad by Sa'adyah), established himself in Cordoba, at the court of Hasday ibn Shaprut. Dunas ibn Labrat's criticisms were directed mainly against the identification of roots by M'nahem and against the meanings attributed to words, which often entailed theological consequences. Dunas's criticisms of M'nahem unleashed a polemic between the pupils of M'nahem and of Dunas. The pupils of M'nahem also criticized the new metrics introduced by Dunas in the poetry of the new Hebrew Andalusian school. This criticism of the inadequacy of the Arabic meters for Hebrew poetry was to be repeated later by Y'hudah ha-Lewi (p. 63).

The discovery of the triradicalism of the Hebrew words and verbs by Yehudah (Abu: Zakariyya Yahya:) ben David al-Fasi: Hayyu:| (c. 930–c. 1000; born at Fez, lived in Cordoba) was revolutionary for Hebrew grammar. He hoped that, by the correct philological knowledge of Biblical forms, the holy language would be used again by scholars and poets just as in antiquity. Hayyu:| wrote two monographs. He came to the conclusion that every Hebrew verbal root consisted of at least three letters (consonants). He called αλεφ, υδη, ωω and he: "weak" or "soft", because these letters are not written phonetically, but visible in the text. He recognized that the πριμας γυδ verb yaśav has three radicals, and not two, as earlier grammarians would say on the basis of the sometimes invisible ωω. He also discovered the concept of compensatory lengthening (Arabic madd 'lengthening') from the basic forms (Arabic aşliyāh) of the sound verbs (e.g. pa'al, or šamar). To represent the verbal forms he uses the root ρ-ι- (inspired by the similar use of f-ι in Arabic). In his Kita:b al-αληf[a:]l šawaːt huruːf al-ι:in 'Book of the verbs with weak letters' he recognizes the following four categories of weak verbs: (1) the verba primae αλεφ; (2) the verba primae γυδ; (3) the verba mediae infirmae (with a medial weak radical: γυδ or ωω); (4) the verba tertiae infirmae (whose final radical is weak αλεφ or he: = yod or waw). These are weak because they may be omitted in part of the paradigms. In his Kita:b al-αληf[a:]l šawaːt al-mibīlayn 'Book of the geminate verbs' Hayyu:| dealt with defective forms of verbs that have identical second and third radicals (verba mediae geminatae).

Yonah ibn Qanaḥ (born in Cordoba c. 990) wanted to write a comprehensive and systematic grammar of Biblical Hebrew in the tradition of Hayyu:|. In his old age, after 1039, he composed the work which he had been preparing for a long time, namely the Kita:b al-taːqiːr wa-l-taːmː6 'Book of detailed investigation'. The first part of this book, the Kita:b al-lumaːt 'Book of variegated flower beds' was a most comprehensive grammar in the tradition of Hayyu:|. The second part, the Kita:b al-waːlːaːl 'Book of the roots', contains a complete vocabulary of Biblical Hebrew, without personal or place names. The letters are listed under their Arabic equivalents, following the order of the Arabic alphabet (according to roots, geminates coming before tertiae αλεφ words). Each derived word is translated into Arabic.

The poets Š'mu'el han-Nagid (993–1055), Š'tomo ibn Gabirol (1021–1058), and Yehudah ha-Lewi (1075–1141) were also interested in grammar. Š'tomo wrote a didactic poem in Hebrew on grammar called Se:fer ha-ˀanaq 'Book of the necklace'; 98 lines from the original 400 are still extant. Š'mu'el han-Nagid is reported to have written some comments on grammatical works and a dictionary of Biblical Hebrew. Yehudah ha-Lewi wrote his Maqaːlat al-ˀarːuːd 'Treatise on metrics' - metrics were considered to belong to linguistics - and his Kita:b al-xazːarːi: 'Book of the Khazar king', in which he made important remarks on the contemporary situation of the Hebrew language.

Mošeḥ ibn Chiquitilla or Chicitella lived in the eleventh century. Mošeḥ ibn Êzra considered him "one of the principal learned men and linguists" (36b). He published a volume entitled Kita:b al-taːkiːr wa-laːt niːlːb 'The Book of masculine and feminine genders'.

Y'hudah ibn Bal'am or Bil'am also lived in the eleventh century. Apparently he was born in Toledo, but settled down in Seville after the Christian conquest of Toledo. He was gifted with a polemical spirit and criticized Sa'adyah Ga'on, Yonah ibn Qanaḥ and Š'mu'el han-Nagid. He even accused Mošeḥ ibn Chiquitilla of being an atheist, and attacked his rationalism, he himself being a traditionalist. His writings include the Kita:b al-taːqiːr wa-l-taːmː6 'Book of Homonyms' and the Kita:b al-αληf[a:]l al-mustaːqaːqāh min al-asːaːl: 'Book on the denominative verbs'.

Ibn Barun (c. 1100, Saragossa) was the author of the Kita:b al-muwaːzah baːnay bayn al-luːyah al-ˀifraː niːyːah wa-l-ˀarːabiyyah 'Book of comparison between the Hebrew and the Arabic language'. In this work he mentions nearly all the preceding linguists and also Arab grammarians. It contains a section on the comparative grammar of Arabic and Hebrew, and a lexicographical section. In the latter he presents the biblical roots which have an equivalent in Arabic in pronunciation and meaning.
The Second Period of the Grammarians of Hebrew: The Period of Dissemination

In this period the grammarians of Hebrew were less original than their predecessors. But philosophical linguistic questions still troubled them: they developed ideas about the essence of language and its epistemological nature, thoughts about the origin of language and the reason for the multiplicity of the languages, the links between language and climate, the question whether language was natural or conventional, and of whether it was created or pre-existent (Zwiep 1995).

After the Christian reconquest of some territories and the expulsion of the Jews from Muslim Spain by the Almoravids and Almohades, most Jewish intellectuals lived in Christian Spain and Provence, where the knowledge of Arabic was declining. They therefore translated most of the grammatical works from Arabic into Hebrew. The Hebrew versions were disseminated all over Europe. The translators tried to express in concise Hebrew the findings of Hayyug and Ibn Ganarh. Adaptations for Western Europe were made by Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–1164), Ibn Parhon (twelfth century), Y'hudah ibn Tibbon (c. 1120–c.1190), Josef Qimhi: (c. 1105–1235) and his sons David Qimhi: (c. 1160–1235) and Mošeh Qimhi: (died c. 1190, and Yišaqa ben Mošeh ha-Le:wi, called Profiat Duran (died c. 1414). Josef Qimhi: is especially worth mentioning because of his vowel theory. Instead of the traditional seven 'kings' (vowels), he opted for five contrasting pairs of long and short vowels [a:-a; e:-e; i:-i; o:-o; u:-u;]. In connection with David Qimhi: we have to mention his Mīkol ‘Magnificence’, the most widely disseminated grammar and dictionary of Hebrew in the Middle Ages.

Further Reading


Drory, R. 1988. Re:šit ha-magga' in lel sifrut ha-yhudim 'im ha-sifrut ha-aramit ba-me'ah ha-azirī [The emergence of Jewish–Arabic contacts at the beginning of the tenth century]. Tel Aviv: ha-Qibbus ha-me'udah.