The Hebrew grammatical tradition
Schippers, A.

Published in:
The Semitic Languages

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: http://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
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 consonental text, probably only from the beginning of the seventh century. This was at least the opinion of the Rabbannites (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 was self-explanatory and required no completion by Oral Law such as the Mishnah and Talmud, which were considered by the Rabbannites as writings with great authority. The Qara'ites claimed 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" 'Esḥol ḥa-kofet (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-maṣirah). The first Masoretes were the Ben Ašer family of whom Abu Sa'id Aharon ben Moše 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 Rabbannites disagreed in their interpretations of Biblical Hebrew. Another factor which stimulated grammatical activity in the field of Arabic grammar by Muslim scholars. The
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 ši’u:biyyah 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 (ši’u: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’diyah Ga’on or Sa’adyah 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 Kita:b al-sab’i:n lafsah al-mufrada h ‘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 Kita:b usul:i al-ši:r al-'ibra:ni: ‘Book of the Roots of Hebrew Poetry’, usually referred to by its Hebrew title Ageron ‘Compendium’, the first Hebrew dictionary with glosses in Arabic. It consists of two alphabetic listings, according to the first and the last letters. Sa’adyah 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 Kita:b faš:i:l layt 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 interest in linguistic problems spread quickly through North Africa. In Tahort, a town in what is now Algeria, lived Yehudah ibn Quraysh (tenth century), who dedicated his Risä:lah ‘Treatise, Epistle’ to the Jewish community of Fez. He compared Biblical Hebrew with Aramaic, Mishnaic Hebrew, Arabic and other languages such as Berber. In the East we have the work by the Qara’ite Abu:-1-Faraq Harun ibn al-Faraq from Jerusalem, the Kita:b al-ka:fi: fi-l-luyah al-’ibra:niyyah ‘The adequate book on the Hebrew language’ and the 579-page manuscript, written in Jerusalem about 1000, Muṣṣamil ‘al:la:-i usul:i wa-l-luṣ:i fi:l-luyah al-’ibra:niyyah ‘Comprehensive Book on the Roots and Branches of the Hebrew Language’. Part 1 of the latter is devoted to the ten principles (usul:i) used to determine a form in language; part 2 deals with infinitives; part 3 with the letters of the alphabet and their division into essential (šawhariyyah) and servant letters (šawa:dim; roughly the same distinction between basic letters and added ones as made by Sa’adyah, see p. 60). Part 4 deals with particles while part 5 considers many kinds of grammatical questions: gender, number, pronouns, transitivity and lexicology. Part 6 is concerned with the conjugation of the verb halèq; part 7 with a lexicography and triliteral verbs according to the anagram system; part 8 is a comparison of Hebrew with biblical Aramaic.

Abu:-1-Faraq’s anagram method looks very much like that of the Arabic grammatical al-Xalili ibn Ahmad (710–786) in his dictionary Kita:b 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:-1-Faraq 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-Muṣṣamil’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 Kita:b ja:mi’ al-alf:i: ‘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 Eṣkol ha-kofer ‘The cluster of camphire’ (cf. Song of Solomon 1:14) ‘The grape of henna’ by the twelfth-century author Y’hudah Hadassi. 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 Hayyu:q and Ibn Ġanah (see pp. 62–63).

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. Mošeh ibn ‘Ezra (1055–1138), himself a poet, tells us in his Kita:b al-muḥa:darah wa-l-muda:karah ‘Book of discussion and commemoration’ about the learned men who made the revival of Hebrew possible. In the fifth chapter of his Kita:bi: devoted to a survey of Hebrew literature in Muslim Spain, Mošeh 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 Andalusia (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 Shaprut (915–970). About this maecenas, whose activities initiated the flowering of Hebrew Andalusian poetry, Mošeh ibn ‘Ezra says in his Kita:b (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 Mošeh ibn ‘Ezra’s sketch that the new poetical school arose at a time when there were also many linguistic activities. Linguistic and
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.

Menaḥem ibn Saruq (born c. 915, Tortosa) lived at the court of Hasday ibn Shaprūṭ. His lexicon of the Hebrew language, the Mahberet 'Book, Compendium', was believed to be a step forward compared with Sa'adīya Ga'on's dictionary. Menaḥem differentiated between roots (y’sod, ‘iqqar, šorēk) and the paragogic or added element (tosefit 'addition', mštar‘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 Menaḥem 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.

Menaḥem's critic, Dunai ibn Labrat (a name of Berber origin; born c. 925 in Morocco; educated in Baghdad by Sa‘adya), established himself in Cordoba, at the court of Hasday ibn Shaprūṭ. Dunai ibn Labrat's criticisms were directed mainly against the identification of roots by Menaḥem and against the meanings he attributed to words, which often entailed theological consequences. Dunai's criticisms of Menaḥem unleashed a polemic between the pupils of Menaḥem and of Dunai. The pupils of Menaḥem also criticized the new metrics introduced by Dunai ibn Labrat (a name of Berber origin; born c. 925 in Morocco; educated in Baghdad by Sa‘adya), established himself in Cordoba, at the court of Hasday ibn Shaprūṭ. Dunai ibn Labrat's criticisms were directed mainly against the identification of roots by Menaḥem and against the meanings he attributed to words, which often entailed theological consequences. Dunai's criticisms of Menaḥem unleashed a polemic between the pupils of Menaḥem and of Dunai. The pupils of Menaḥem also criticized the new metrics introduced by Dunai ibn Labrat (a name of Berber origin; born c. 925 in Morocco; educated in Baghdad by Sa‘adya), established himself in Cordoba, at the court of Hasday ibn Shaprūṭ. Dunai ibn Labrat's criticisms were directed mainly against the identification of roots by Menaḥem and against the meanings he attributed to words, which often entailed theological consequences. Dunai's criticisms of Menaḥem unleashed a polemic between the pupils of Menaḥem and of Dunai. The pupils of Menaḥem also criticized the new metrics introduced by Dunai 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 Yehudah ha-Levi (p. 63).

The discovery of the triradicalism of the Hebrew words and verbs by Yehudah (Abu: Zakariyya Yaliya:) ben David al-Fasī: Ha’yuu:gu (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. Ha’yuu:gu wrote two monographs. He came to the conclusion that every Hebrew verbal root consisted of at least three letters (consonants). He called alef, yod, waw and he: 'weak' or 'soft', because these letters are not written phonetically, but visible in the text. He recognized that the primate yod verb ya’sav has three radicals, and not two, as earlier grammarians would say on the basis of the sometimes invisible yod. He also discovered the concept of compensatory lengthening (Arabic madd 'lengthening') from the basic forms (Arabic afliyyah) of the sound verbs (e.g. pa‘al, or šamār).

To represent the verbal forms he uses the root p-‘-l (inspired by the similar use of f-‘-l in Arabic). In his Kita:b al-af‘a:l ʕawa:t huru:f al-‘l:n 'Book of the verbs with weak letters' he recognizes the following four categories of weak verbs: (1) the verba primate alef; (2) the verba primate yod; (3) the verba mediae infirmae (with a medial weak radical: yod or waw); (4) the verba teriæae infirmae (whose
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 (1090-1164), Ibn Parhon (twelfth century), Y'hudah ibn Tibbon (c. 1120-c.1190), Josef Qimhi: (c. 1105-1235) and his sons Dawid Qimhi: (c. 1160-1235) and Moshe Qimhi: (died c. 1190, and Yishaq ben Moshe ha-Levi, 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; u-u; o-o; i-i]. In connection with David Qimhi: we have to mention his Mikhlof 'Magnificence', the most widely disseminated grammar and dictionary of Hebrew in the Middle Ages.

Further Reading


Drory, R. 1988. Re:tit ha-maggai'im et sifrut ha-yudit 'im ha-sifrut ha-'aravit ba-me-ah ha-'asrit [The emergence of Jewish-Arabic contacts at the beginning of the tenth century]. Tel Aviv: ha-Qibbus ha-me'udah.