The Hebrew grammatical tradition

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The Hebrew Grammatical Tradition

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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 synagogue 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 was self-explanatory and required no completion by Oral Law such as the Mishnah and Talmud, which were considered by the Rabbinites 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" 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-ma:ṣirah). The first Masoretes were the Ben Ašer family of whom Abu Sa'id Aharon ben Mo'leh was the most conspicuous member (first half of the seventh century).

One of the systems of vocalization, 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 grammatical studies was the activity in the field of Arabic grammar by Muslim scholars.

Further Reading

Arabic

Secondary


The first among the philologists of the Hebrew language was Sa'adyah Ga'on or Jews became more aware of the value of their own culture and their holy language daism during the first half of the tenth century. He wrote the al-'ibra:ni: 'Book of the Roots of Hebrew Poetry', usually referred to by its He­-Kita:b ufu:l al-si'r their use in rabbinical literature. He also compiled the 'Book of the seventy unique words', the first to explain lafzah al-mufradah or hapax as well.

Stressed the particular values of the non-Arab peoples {su'u:b) within Islam. The sudden renaissance of Hebrew studies in the tenth and eleventh centuries may also 'The adequate book heKita:b al-ka:fi:fi-l-luyah al-'ibra:niyyah from Jerusalem, Risa:lah 'Treatise, Epistle' to the Jewish community of tury), who dedicated his 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 Risa: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:-l-Farag Harun ibn al-Farag 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, Mu:shamil 'ala:-l-usu:l wa-l-fusu:l 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 (usu:l) 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 (gawhariyyah) and servant letters (xawa: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 halêq; part 7 with a lexicography and triliteral verbs according to the anagram system; part 8 is a comparison of Hebrew with biblical Aramaic.

Abu:-l-Farag's anagram method looks very much like that of the Arabic gramm­arian al-Xâli:li 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:-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-Mu:shamil's letter 'ayn: 'BR, 'RF, 'MR, 'SB, 'FL, 'SB. Under 'BR all the permutations of the three consonant letters are listed, namely: 'BR, 'RB, R'BR, BR', RB', 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-alfa:z '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 Eskol ha-kofer 'The cluster of campfire' (cf. Song of So­lonom 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: and Ibn Ganah (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. MoSeh ibn 'Ezra (1055–1138), himself a poet, tells us in his Kita:b al-muha:darah wa-l-mu5a:karah his Kita:bja:mi' al-alfa:z 'Book of discussion and commemoration' about the learned men who made the revival of Hebrew possible. In the fifth chapter of his Kita:b, devoted to a survey of Hebrew literature in Muslim Spain, MoSeh 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 Shapru: (915–970). About this maecenas, whose activities initiated the flowering of He­brew Andalusian poetry, MoSeh 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 MoSeh ibn 'Ezra's sketch that the new poetical school arose at a time when there were also many linguistic activities. Linguistic and
The discovery of the triradicalism of the Hebrew words and verbs by Yehudah (Abu Zakariyya Yaliya:) ben David al-Fasi: Hayyu:g (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:g wrote two monographs. He came to the conclusion that every Hebrew verbal root consisted of at least three letters (consonants). He called "alef", "yod", and "waw" as "weak" or "soft", because these letters are not written phonetically, but visible in the text. He recognized that the primae yod verb ya'asv 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 a fissiyah) of the sound verbs (e.g. pa'al, or samar). 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-afa:l i:awa:rl huruf al-l:in 'Book of the verbs with weak letters' he recognizes the following four categories of weak verbs: (1) the verba primae alef; (2) the verba primae yod; (3) the verba mediae infirmae (with a medial weak radical: yod or waw); (4) the verba tertiae infirmae (whose final radical is weak alef or he: = yod or waw). These are weak because they may be omitted in part of the paradigms. In his Kita:b al-afa:l i:awa:rl al-miblyan 'Book of the geminate verbs' Hayyu:g dealt with defective forms of verbs that have identical second and third radicals (verba mediae geminatae).

Yonah ibn Qanah (born in Cordoba c. 990) wanted to write a comprehensive and systematic grammar of Biblical Hebrew in the tradition of Hayyu:g. In his old age, after 1039, he composed the work which he had been preparing for a long time, namely the Kita:b al-tanqi:h: 'Book of detailed investigation'. The first part of this book, the Kita:b al-luma: 'Book of variegated flower beds' was a most comprehensive grammar in the tradition of Hayyu:g. The second part, the Kita:b al-usu:l '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 alef words). Each derived word is translated into Arabic.

The poets S'mu'el han-Nagid (993-1055), S'lomo ibn Gabirol (1021-1058), and Yehudah ha-Lewi (1075-1141) were also interested in grammar. S'lomo wrote a didactic poem in Hebrew on grammar called Sefer ha-`anaq 'Book of the necklace'; 98 lines from the original 400 are still extant. S'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 Maq:rat al `aru:d 'Treatise on metrics' - metrics were considered to belong to linguistics - and his Kita:b al-xa:ra:ri: 'Book of the Khazar king', in which he made important remarks on the contemporary situation of the Hebrew language.

Moše'h ibn Chiquitilla or Chicatella lived in the eleventh century. Moše'h ibn Ezra considered him "one of the principal learned men and linguists" (36b). He published a volume entitled Kita:b al-ta:bk:i:r wa-l-ta:n:i:l:8 '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 Qanah: and S'mu'el han-Nagid. He even accused Moše'h ibn Chiquitilla of being an atheist, and attacked his rationalism, he himself being a traditionalist. His writings include the Kita:b al-ta:gn:i:s 'Book of Homonyms' and the Kita:b al-afa:l: al-multaqaqah min al-asma: 'Book on the denominative verbs'.

Ibn Barun (c. 1100, Saragossa) was the author of the Kita:b al-muwa:znah bayan al-l:urah al-`ibrah:ri:nayyah wa-l-`arabiyyah '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), Joseph Qimhi: (c. 1105–1235) and his sons Dawid Qimhi: (c. 1160–1235) and Moshe Qimhi: (died c. 1190, and Yishay ben Moshe ha-Levi, called Profiat Duran (died c. 1414), Joseph 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 [aː-a; eː-e; oː-o; iː-i]. In connection with David Qimhi: we have to mention his Miktol 'Magnificence', the most widely disseminated grammar and dictionary of Hebrew in the Middle Ages.

Further Reading


Drory, R. 1988. Reshit ha-maggar'im in tel sifrut ha-yhudim 'im ha-sifrut ha-eriti, ha-me'ah ha-azri [The emergence of Jewish–Arabic contacts at the beginning of the tenth century]. Tel Aviv: ha-Qibbus ha-me'uhad.