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The Historical Units of Hebrew and Mishnaic Hebrew Research

Z. Ben-Hayyim's lecture on "The Historical Unity of Hebrew and its Periodization — How should it be done?" formulates several conclusions. The main conclusion is that the written Hebrew language throughout all its history is a unified language. This unity is upheld, in his view, by the morphological unity of the language, and especially that of the verb. Ben-Hayyim formulates two further important conclusions: 1) If the history of Hebrew language is to be divided into periods (primarily because of the need to organize teaching and research), he is of the opinion that the division should be based on a purely linguistic criterion: the relationship of the written language to the spoken (according to this he proposes four periods for the history of Hebrew); 2) regarding periodization, his most important (and surprising?) claim is that Biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew comprise one unit (one period).

Even though I agree with the fundamentals of Ben-Hayyim's thesis, I, nevertheless, wish to raise three questions concerning this last point.

1) Are the grammars of Biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew identical? It is true that there is much common to the grammar of the two periods, but it is well-known that certain linguistic features are found in the Bible which have no continuation in Mishnaic Hebrew (e.g. forms with waw consecutive: **וַיַּעַל**, **וַיִּקָּם**, **וַיַּעֲלֵה**; jussive forms: **יַעַשׂ**, **יִקָּם**, etc.; *yaqtula* future forms: **אֲשַׁמְרֶה**, **וְנִלְכֶה**, etc.; the forms **תִּכְתְּבוּן**, **יִכְתְּבוּן** are also not found in Mishnaic Hebrew). Moreover: Mishnaic Hebrew reveals new linguistic features which are not found in the Bible (e.g. the nominal formulation **פַּעֲלֵן/פּוֹעֲלֵן** to indicate

practitioners of a certain profession or possessors of a certain characteristic, such as קובלן/קבלן, קופדן/קפדן, רוצחן/רצחן; or the participle form נתפעל instead of Biblical מתפעל and others). The grammatical base is indeed the same for the two periods but there are nevertheless two distinct grammars and not one.

2). Can the Tannaitic language really be considered as the continuation of Biblical Hebrew? Many linguistic features of Mishnaic Hebrew reveal clear chronological development, which puts it later than Biblical Hebrew (and any grammar book supplies many examples), though there are indications that the “younger” Mishnaic Hebrew reflects features even more ancient than Biblical Hebrew. (One example: the third person feminine singular form in the perfect of *lamed-yod* verbs is in the Mishnah of the pattern פִּעְתָּ, e.g., עָשָׂתָּ, בָּנָתָּ; in the Bible we find, by contrast, עָשְׂתָּהּ, בָּנִיתָהּ. This last example is the result of a later analogy which assimilated the ancient forms, בָּנָתָּ, עָשָׂתָּ verbs to the regular pattern פִּעְלָהּ.)

There is support for the assumption that a process of (artificial) unification took place which further bridged the gaps between Biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew.

3). When and how did the Tannaitic language as such become crystallized as a written language? The language reflected in Tannaitic literature did not emerge spontaneously as a written language.

Its process of evolving continued for several hundred years, since the end of First Temple times. The earliest *mishnayot* reflect a language closer to the Bible than the major part of the Mishnah which was compiled by Rabbi Judah Hannasi in the beginning of the 3rd century of the common era. In general, the slow emergence of the language of the Tannaim as an independent language brought about the creation of a literary language which bridged the Biblical and Mishnaic periods and greatly obscured their distinguishing features. When the language of the Tannaim had already become an independent language, because it did not last long as a separate written language due to the destruction of the spiritual centers of Judea, its independent existence was also obscured.

Afterwards for a period of hundreds of years since the final compilation of tannaitic literature and up to our day, processes continued which lessened (all over again?) the gap between Biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew.

These three questions call into question the concept that Biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew constitute one unit. Ben-Hayyim is right in his determination of a unifying morphological principle between the two units, but the issue of unity which he treats of must now be seen in a different light.