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Corpus, Genre and the Unity of Hebrew
Aspects of Conceptualization and Methodology

Discussions about the position of Modern Hebrew in light of the assumed previous unity of Hebrew in its historical manifestations are as much influenced by cultural and national considerations as by purely linguistic ones. Differentiating between the concepts and terms 'unity' and 'uniformity' might prove helpful and instructive.

Bearing in mind different types of linguistic features and the problem of their relative weight within a given corpus, 'uniformity' must be denied to what is generally known as Biblical Hebrew. At best, a biblical sub-corpus or sub-genre would exhibit identity in a sufficiently large number of features to be conceived of as 'uniform'. Yet, since it would not be helpful to discard what has been the basis for reasoned inquiry into Hebrew for over a thousand years, i.e. the biblical corpus, we fall back onto the less stringent limitations of 'unity'. This also shapes our view as regards subsequent 'periods' in the history of Hebrew.

In spite of far-reaching differences in vocabulary, sentence-structure and semantics, morphology has proved essentially stable, providing justification for the concept of the unity of Hebrew throughout the ages. Our position is elaborated that the history of Hebrew cannot be fittingly pressed into a diachronic model of 'periodization', even though by way of short-cut such a term could be used, with some difficulty, as regards the relationshp between biblical and mishnaic Hebrew. The facts of 'medieval' Hebrew — from Gaonic times down to Enlightenment — force us to conceptualizes the entirely of Hebrew as literary sub-corpora and

their specific languages, and to view its 'unity' within that conceptual framework.

Against the backdrop of a history of more than three millennia, one ought to exercise extreme restraint in evaluating what changes present-day Hebrew may bring about in the overall picture. Typologically, changes in syntax, vocabulary and semantics may not be more enormous than, say, those in the medieval Arabicizing corpus. But morphology (and morpho-phonology) seem to begin to show cracks. It is altogether possible that in the hindsight of developments after another two or three generations, what has developed in the twentieth century will turn out to be the break-up line in the continuum of the historical unity of Hebrew.