ABSTRACT

THE SYSTEM OF EXCEPTIONS:
ON THE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF GRAMMATICAL KNOWLEDGE IN MEDIEVAL ASHKENAZ

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For the past century and a half, the vast majority of scholarship in medieval Hebrew linguistic thought has focused on the Spanish school, while relegating Ashkenazi grammarians to the position of 'disseminators' or 'preservers' of linguistic innovations which originated in Spain and Provençe. This paper presents a unique feature prevalent in Ashkenazi linguistic texts which classifies Hebrew grammar according to a system of nested rules and exceptions pertaining to the different homophonous vowel signs (e.g., *qameṣ* and *pataḥ*, *ṣere* and *segol*). The product of this elaborate system, which I call the System of Exceptions, is a complete grammar organized not according to parts of speech and their organic modes of inflection and derivation (as in Spanish grammars) but rather according to rules pertaining to the application of homophonous vowel signs.

Various works spanning the 13th–16th centuries are examined, in which the system was employed, prior to its abandonment in favor of the structures of the traditional Spanish school of grammar. The textual and linguistic analysis of these texts indicates an absorption of the grammatical categories developed by the Spanish and Provençal schools, reconfigured to fit the new system of nested rules and exceptions. Tracing the system's origins, it is suggested that the System of Exceptions grew out of masoretic notes (mostly lexical) which indicated the proper vocalization of words that could be vocalized in various ways. These notes were collated into lists organized by the different vowels, and later on structured into comprehensive rules and sets of exceptions.