

David Téné

## Historical Identity and Unity of Hebrew and the Division of its History into Periods

§1. Has Hebrew, as against Latin, maintained its structural and typological identity and unity from its early days until now? Does Contemporary Hebrew still fit into the accepted notion of Hebrew? This problem, raised by Prof. Ben-Hayyim, is of utmost importance for Hebrew linguistics. Scholars of Hebrew throughout the centuries have continuously expressed their feeling that they knew and used one and the same language. As far as these feelings are consistent and reliable, these purely intuitive statements can be taken as part of the data accounted for in our discussion; but the *onus probandi* relies upon the objective examination of structural and functional facts.

§2. The historical identity and unity of Hebrew will be examined in this paper according to the main uses of Contemporary Hebrew, namely: a) Speaking, b) Writing, c) Reading.

§3. *Contemporary Spoken Hebrew (= CSH) and the historical identity and unity of Hebrew.*

For nearly 1700 years (200–1900 C.E.) users of Hebrew did not speak Hebrew. It was everywhere their second language and they had to learn it expressly. They lived for centuries in a state of *diglossia with multi-lingualism* (§3.1). The pronunciation of Hebrew was everywhere acquired by a process of *diaphonic identification*, as a result of which different pronunciation traditions arose (§3.2). At the end of the nineteenth century nine different pronunciation

traditions had been described (§3.3). At that time Hebrew pronunciation was the implementation of a system of *diaphonemes* (§3.4). Hebrew pronunciation at the end of the XIXth century became the background of the emergence of Contemporary Spoken Hebrew, The native, standard, spoken Hebrew of today is a phonemic system which has emerged from the diaphonic system mentioned above; salient differences between the pronunciation traditions have been eliminated, and we see a kind of clustering around their common denominator: the Sephardic pronunciation was followed for the vowels and the Ashkenazic for the consonants (§3.5). Taking into account the discontinuity of Hebrew speech, the tortuous history of Hebrew pronunciation and the sociolinguistic circumstances of the emergence of Contemporary Spoken Hebrew, one should rather doubt that Contemporary Spoken Hebrew still fits the accepted notion of classical Hebrew phonetism (§3.6).

#### §4. *Contemporary Written Hebrew and the historical identity and unity of Hebrew*

Hebrew has been written uninterruptedly for three thousand years. Whereas in the linguistic ontogenesis of native users of contemporary Hebrew speaking precedes writing, in the emergence of contemporary Hebrew, written Hebrew has preceded spoken Hebrew, and without written Hebrew of the *Haskala* period the revival of Hebrew would probably have been impossible. Contemporary written Hebrew is therefore partially independent of spoken Hebrew and the historical identity and unity problem has generally been posited on written Hebrew. There is a fundamental difference between contemporary written Hebrew and medieval written Hebrew. For 1700 years Jews used to write both Hebrew and literary varieties of their spoken vernacular. Contemporary written Hebrew, on the other hand, is the *first and main* written language of the major part of native speakers of Hebrew (§4.1). Contemporary written Hebrew, e.g., poetry, has also largely departed from medieval written Hebrew (§4.2). The study of the evolution of written Hebrew across the centuries is still in its infancy and lacks an adequate

method and an operative framework. The answer to the historical identity and unity question cannot, therefore, for the time being, be based on written Hebrew (§4.3).

### §5. *Reading Hebrew and the Historical identity and Unity Problem*

Reading and understanding ancient Hebrew brings together two anachronistic systems: the linguistic system of the author and his readers in his time, and the linguistic system of any posterior generation of readers (§5.1). Here we have an objective criterion for measuring historical unity, namely: the *linguistic notes* that accompany ancient texts read and understood nowadays. This criterion is a negative one, pointing to those places in the text where the understanding is in danger. Linguistic notes point to the discrepancies between the two anachronistic systems mentioned above. Generally, understanding texts composed before the present century has not been taken into account in the synchronic description of contemporary Hebrew. We see now that precisely here we have an objective criterion for examining the historical identity and unity of Hebrew (§§ 5.2-3). And it might perhaps be shown that precisely here the historical unity has maintained itself to the maximum, and may be due to the immense and thorough meta-linguistic activity carried out between ca. 550–ca.1230 C.E., for nearly 750 years (§5.4).

### §6. *The major periods of the History of Hebrew*

On the assumption that Hebrew has kept structural and typological identity and its historical unity, it is suggested here to divide its history into six periods, according to two criteria: 1) the spoken languages that have accompanied the knowledge of Hebrew, 2) diglossia.

According to the first criterion, the history of Hebrew shows three large periods:

a) *Ancient Hebrew (AH)*. From the beginning of its documentation until the end of the second century C.E. In this period Hebrew was a spoken as well as a written language.

b) *Medieval Hebrew (MH)*. Between 200–1900 Hebrew was a second language used in reading at school and in the synagogue and was used in writing together with other languages used by Jews.

c) *Contemporary Hebrew (CH)*. From 1900 onwards Hebrew is used again as the first and principal language in speaking, writing and reading.

According to the *diglossia* criterion, the first two periods can be divided further.

*AH* can be divided into two parts:

1. *Early Ancient Hebrew (EAH)* in which we have diglossia without bilingualism. This situation lasted until the destruction of the Temple (586 B.C.E.);

2. *Late Ancient Hebrew (LAH)* in which we have diglossia with Hebrew-Aramaic bilingualism, lasting from the return from the Exile until the end of Ancient Hebrew (ca. 200 C.E.) when Hebrew ceased to be a first and spoken language.

The long Medieval Period can also be further divided into two:

A. *Early Medieval Hebrew (EMH)* in which the main centers of Hebrew knowledge and usage were in the realm of one spoken vernacular. This situation prevailed between 200–1150 C.E.;

B. *Late Medieval Hebrew (LMH)* in which the main centers of knowledge of Hebrew were spread throughout the realm of different spoken vernacular (1150–1190).

3. *EMH, Part I (200–800)* in which the main centers of the knowledge of Hebrew — Eretz-Israel and Babylonia — were both in the realm of spoken Aramaic. We have here diglossia with Aramaic-Hebrew bilingualism.

4. *EMH, Part II (800–1150)* in which the main centers of the knowledge of Hebrew — from Babylonia and Yemen through Eretz-Israel and its neighbors to North Africa and Spain — were in the realm of spoken Aramaic. We have here diglossia with Arabic-Hebrew bilingualism.

At any rate, in the *EM* period, it was a cognate Semitic language — Aramaic first, Arabic later — that functioned as the spoken vernacular of the Jews and accompanied the knowledge of Hebrew

in the main centers of Jewish life. It is in the *EM* period that the Masoretic text of the Bible was established as a textual norm, that the translation of the Bible first into Aramaic and then into Arabic was carried out as a norm for the understanding of the Bible read in the synagogue, and that a complete descriptive grammar and dictionary of Biblical Hebrew was compiled in Arabic, which then became of normative value throughout *MH*.

5. *Late Medieval Hebrew (LMH)* in which the main centers of the knowledge of Hebrew were spread in the realm of different spoken vernaculars. It lasted between 1150 and 1900. Besides the diglossia with Arabic-Hebrew bilingualism already mentioned, we have diglossia with Romanic-Hebrew bilingualism in Medieval *Romania*, diglossia with Old German-Hebrew bilingualism in the Rhinelands that spread eastwards in Central and Eastern Europe and later became Yiddish, etc., and diglossia with Aramaic-Hebrew bilingualism in Kurdistan (where the borders of contemporary Turkey–Iraq–Iran meet), and finally, diglossia with Persian-Hebrew bilingualism in Iran. At the beginning of this period the descriptive grammar and dictionary of Hebrew was translated into Hebrew, and no later than 1230 we have a complete grammar and dictionary of Biblical Hebrew compiled in Medieval Hebrew. At the end of the Medieval period the *Haskala* movement (1781–1882) has changed the linguistic situation of the Jew in Central and Eastern Europe: on the one hand we find linguistic and cultural assimilation together with the obliteration of Hebrew, particularly in Western and Central Europe, and on the other hand, we find a secular Hebrew education and literature particularly in Eastern Europe. It is against the background of this new situation that the idea of a *renaissance* of Hebrew was born within the framework of Jewish nationalistic thought and action.

6. *Contemporary Hebrew (CH)* — From 1900 onwards we have in Eretz-Israel a community of native speakers of Hebrew. Nowadays it is the first and principal language of some 2 million native speakers of Hebrew.