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The End and the Beginning of Hebrew

The language of the Torah is a language by itself, and the language of the sages is a language by itself.

—*Babylonian Talmud*

Our account of the social history of classical Hebrew comes to an end in about 200 C.E., after the two Jewish revolts in the first and second centuries. It was an end for Hebrew, but it was also a new beginning for the Hebrew language. The revolts against Rome resulted in the displacement of the Hebrew speech communities of Roman Palestine. With the displacement of most Hebrew speakers, vernacular Hebrew waned. In a manner of speaking, this was the end of Hebrew as a living language. Yet, this was not the end of the Hebrew language: Hebrew continued as a secondary vernacular among disparate Jewish communities as well as continuing as a religious and literary language. But it was an end to the continuity of Hebrew as a living language in the land. It was the end of the continuous speech communities that stretched back more than a thousand years, from when the Israelites first settled in Canaan and then later developed a writing system for their language. At the same time, this also marked the rise of Rabbinic Hebrew

(RH) as a literary language and as a language of Jewish culture. It was this preservation and even flourishing of Hebrew as a literary language that paved the way for the rebirth of the Hebrew language as a living language almost two thousand years later.

The seminal events of the final stage of Hebrew as a living language spoken in Palestine were the two Jewish revolts. The first revolt, or Great Revolt, against Rome began in 66 C.E. and lasted until the fall of Masada in 74 C.E. The Roman quashing of this revolt was punctuated by the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, after which point Jews were no longer permitted to live in Jerusalem but did remain in Judea. A second revolt—the Bar Kokhba revolt—lasted from 132 until 135 C.E. This revolt emanated from the villages of Judea, and it also resulted in the destruction and displacement of most Judean villages.

With respect to the history of vernacular Hebrew, the decisive break was not the Babylonian exile but rather the Bar Kokhba revolt. Although the Babylonian exile was a milestone in the history of Hebrew, particularly in the literary dialect and the scribal schools, it was not a turning point. The Babylonian campaigns resulted in more than 80 percent of the towns and villages around Judah being destroyed, but a remnant of the Hebrew speech community survived. Though such minority speech communities struggle against their environment, they do survive and even thrive. Striking examples include modern Aramaic speech communities in West Asia, which have continued until this very day;¹ according to the Summer Institute of Linguistics' *Ethnologue*, about 550,000 native speakers of Neo-Aramaic dialects were living in 1994. Thus, the survival of speech communities that are not displaced is a well-known phenomenon, and we may confidently posit the survival of Hebrew speech communities into the first centuries of the Common Era. The Second Jewish revolt, however, resulted in the systematic displacement of Jewish villages in Judea. It would be a turning point for the social history of Hebrew.

The revolts were also pivotal for the writing down of the major texts in Rabbinic Hebrew. The codification of the Mishnah is usually dated to about 220 C.E. and ascribed to Rabbi Judah “the Prince” (or Judah Ha-Nasi). The Mishnah is the codification of the *Oral Torah*—literally, the “*torah* in the mouth” (תורת שבעל פה). According to the Sayings of the Fathers, “Moses received the [oral] *torah* from Sinai and passed it on to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets passed it on to the men of the great assembly” (*m. Avot* 1:1). The oral transmission is highlighted by the verbal expressions, and scholars have regarded the oral heritage of the Mishnah as the defining linguistic character of the corpus. As

such, the linguistic differences between biblical Hebrew and RH are often described as relating to a type of diglossia—namely, the distance between the written language and vernacular speech. A standard work on the history of Hebrew by Angel Sáenz-Badillos, for example, suggests that “whereas BH was the language of literature and administration, the spoken language even before the exile might have been an early version of what would later become RH.”² The demographic shift of the Jewish population from Judea to Galilee in late antiquity no doubt further encouraged the rising prominence of Aramaic. The Talmud (ca. 500 C.E.), for example, would be written primarily in Aramaic. Aramaic eventually completely replaced Hebrew as both a literary and a vernacular language.

One of the consequences of the Jewish revolts was the diminishing knowledge of Hebrew. On the one hand, this gave impetus to the writing down of Jewish oral tradition, beginning with the Mishnah. On the other hand, this also gave rise to allowances for those who no longer spoke or understood Hebrew. For example, according to *m. Megillah* 2:1, those who do not know Hebrew are permitted to read the scroll of Esther “in a foreign language.” The foreign language here is probably Greek, but allowances are made especially for Aramaic, which becomes an increasingly important Jewish language. Exceptions are given for the reading and translation of the Scriptures into Aramaic in the synagogue (for example, *t. Megillah* 3:41). The reading of the Aramaic translations of the Torah (that is, the Targums) in the synagogue is a practice that dates back into the Second Temple period in Galilee, but it became especially prominent after the two Jewish revolts.³

How is it that *written* texts such as the Mishnah or the Mekilta are characterized as vernacular? Indeed, we should be uneasy with *oral* characterization of *written* artifacts. In the case of RH, however, this oral description may in part be justified by the linguistic ideology of rabbinic literature. The authority of the Mishnah lay precisely in the oral character of its origin and transmission; that is, “Moses received the [oral] *torah* from Sinai and passed it on” (*m. Avot* 1:1). The authority of the Oral Torah had to compete with the written Torah—the Pentateuch—which in biblical accounts is variously penned by Moses (for example, Exod. 24:4; Deut. 31:9) or engraved on the tablets by the finger of God himself (for example, Exod. 31:18; Deut. 9:10). The Pentateuch was the quintessential written text, and the Mishnah had little room to claim authority as a written artifact. The Mishnah therefore had to claim its authority in oral tradition, and it purposefully represented itself as vernacular. The textualization of the Mishnah was a turning point for the transition of RH from a living language into a literary language.

Rabbinic Hebrew: From a Living to a Literary Language

Hebrew in late antiquity is usually called either *Rabbinic* Hebrew or *Mishnaic* Hebrew (MH). The term *RH* corresponds to the social group most closely associated with the literary preservation of the language, whereas the term *MH* relates to the major literary corpus. Rabbinic Hebrew has been divided into two periods, 70–200 C.E. and 200–500 C.E., corresponding to the Tannaim and the Amoraim. The Tannaim were rabbinic sages who flourished between 70 C.E. and 200 C.E., and the Amoraim were later sages conventionally dated between 200 C.E. and 500 C.E. This distinction divides RH into two substrata, reflecting the eclipse of Hebrew as a living language. The seminal event for this division was the Bar Kokhba revolt, which was pivotal to the fate of Hebrew as a living language. As Angel Sáenz-Badillos writes, “The decisive incident separating the two periods is the collapse of the Bar-Kochba revolt in 135 C.E., which led to the dispersal of the people of Judaea.”⁴ As sociolinguistic studies have shown, the geographic continuity of speech communities is critical to the continuation of the vernacular. Few Hebrew speech communities survived the two Jewish revolts. It usually takes two generations for language death in a displaced speech community. In the present case, the Bar Kokhba revolt meant the final displacement of most Hebrew speech communities and with it the demise of vernacular Hebrew, which is usually given a terminus of about 200 C.E. Such dates, of course, are merely approximations that bookmark the transition.

The First Jewish revolt (66–73 C.E.) had already resulted in significant displacements of Hebrew speech communities, but the Roman destruction and displacement seems to have been primarily focused on Jerusalem. Some Hebrew-speaking villages in Judea survived and continued to preserve Hebrew as a living language. However, the Second Jewish revolt emanated from Judean villages such as Bethar (modern Battir; also spelled Betar or Beitar), whose history stretched back into the First Temple period. Bethar was the last settlement to fall, marking the end of the Bar Kokhba revolt. Few Hebrew-speaking villages survived to perpetuate the indigenous speech communities after the Bar Kokhba revolt. There are indications that a small number of Hebrew-speaking communities may have existed through the fourth century C.E. For example, Rabbi Jonathan from Eleutheropolis—a town in the southern foothills of Judah—could still encourage speaking Hebrew as a vernacular (y. *Megillah* 71b). Already in the late second century C.E., Rabbi Judah the Prince had to rely on his housekeeper as an informant for Hebrew (b. *Hullin* 137b)!⁵ Vernacular Hebrew was dying, and Hebrew would have to survive as a secondary language.

The evidence for the continuity of vernacular Hebrew until the Second Jewish revolt comes in varied forms. For example, the Qumran documents show continuity with LBH (often in distinction from SBH) and RH.⁶ This suggests a continuity in vernacular Hebrew into the last century B.C.E. and first century C.E. To be sure, the Hebrew-speaking communities were pressured by the other socially and politically dominant speech communities—first Aramaic, then Greek, and finally Latin. The common belief is that Hebrew was most widely used as a vernacular in Judea, whereas Aramaic was used in Galilee. It is also possible that Greek became a vernacular for Jewish communities in Greco-Roman cities like Joppa or Caesarea Maritima; however, the Greek loanwords in RH are largely confined to aspects of the marketplace and Roman administration, suggesting that Greek functioned as a secondary language rather than a primary vernacular for Jewish communities.

What about written Hebrew? Hebrew was no longer an administrative language after the first centuries of the Common Era. Written Hebrew had served as a religious language—the “holy language”—as well as an expression of political ideology (for example, in the coins of the First and Second Jewish revolts). Whereas vernacular Hebrew struggled to survive the First Jewish revolt, written Hebrew struggled to survive the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E.

A primary social location for scribes was the Jerusalem temple, and the First Jewish revolt dealt a devastating blow to the Hebrew scribal communities. One alternative for Jewish scribal activity was the sectarian religious community—the Essenes—associated with Khirbet Qumran, but the site of Qumran was destroyed by the Romans in 68 C.E., and the sectarian movement seems to have ended with the destruction of the site. This sectarian religious movement was priestly in background. Both the social context of the scribes and the economic support for the scribal community would have been disenfranchised by the Jewish revolts. Scribes were primarily drawn from the priestly classes in the Second Temple period. This begins paradigmatically with the figure of the priest Ezra. Likewise, the leader and founder of the Dead Sea community, the Teacher of Righteousness, is a priestly figure. The scribal role of the priests in teaching and writing perhaps reaches its apex in the messianic figure of the priestly *Doresh Ha-torah*, the Interpreter of the Law, as described in the Dead Sea Scrolls. In contrast, the Pharisees were not known as scribes, and it is not surprising that there are no Pharisaic texts from the Second Temple period. The Jewish revolts, however, destroyed the temple and must have shifted the social location of scribes. This began a process that eventually resulted in written texts (for example, the Mishnah) produced by the rabbis (that is, nonpriests).

There are many references to the importance of education in ancient Jewish culture.⁷ For example, Josephus writes that Jews were commanded “to bring those children up in learning”—literally, the *instruction in letters* (γράμματα παιδεύειν).⁸ However, most of the allusions to early Jewish education mention not reading and writing but rather knowledge of the Torah, often acquired by hearing the recitation of texts. Thus, for example, in his *Antiquities*, Josephus relates as follows: “Let the high priest stand upon a high desk, whence he may be heard, and let him read the laws to all the people; and let neither the women nor the children be hindered from hearing” (*Ant.* 4.214). This seems to be the more typical manner of acquiring knowledge of the Torah, namely, that a priest or scribe recited it, and children memorized and repeated. Philo states hyperbolically that Jews were taught “from their very swaddling-clothes by their parents, and teachers, and instructors, and even before that by their holy laws, and also by their unwritten maxims and customs, to believe that there was but one God, their Father and the Creator of the world” (*Gaius* 115). This instruction of very young children in the Torah was aimed not at reading and writing but at memorizing and reciting. Yet there was also an emphasis on the formal and public reading of the Torah, as in the well-known example in which Jesus visited a synagogue, was given a scroll of Isaiah, and performed a public reading (Luke 4:16–24).

Private ownership and study of texts was quite limited. For example, the cost of scrolls in antiquity meant that private ownership was prohibitive; even synagogues may not have owned an entire collection of the biblical scrolls. It is no coincidence that the most commonly quoted books in the New Testament are Deuteronomy, Psalms, and Isaiah and that they are also found in the most copies in the Qumran caves. Education involved the reading of these scrolls by a teacher and memorization by students. Limited education in “letters,” namely, the ability to do public recitation along with memorization of the Torah, was part of the general education of Jewish boys. As a result, Hebrew would survive its demise as an everyday vernacular. It would continue as a religious language and could serve as a trade language within the Jewish Diaspora.

Tannaitic Hebrew (RH₁) is mainly known from literature that records the words of the Tannaim as well as the last of the *zugot* (Hebrew, “pairs”). The *zugot* refer especially to five pairs of rabbis at the end of the Second Temple period, culminating with Hillel and Shammai (that is, the period from 150 B.C.E. to 30 C.E.). They are followed by the Tannaim, that is, the sages who lived between 70 and 200 C.E. Tannaitic literary texts include the Mishnah, the Tosefta, and the Tannaitic midrashim (including Mekilta, Sifra, and Sifre). Still, it is an oversimplification to label RH₁ as a vernacular. First of all,

the corpus consists of literary texts. Second, the compilers of these rabbinic texts were educated elites who studied in schools.

The problem of describing literary texts like the Mishnah is highlighted when we compare it to epigraphic discoveries like the Bar Kokhba texts. Such epigraphic discoveries represent a closer representation of aspects of vernacular Hebrew in late antiquity. To be sure, they are still texts, but they are not generated by educated elites, and they reflect the more mundane interactions of daily life. Textual artifacts represent a less standardized form of RH₁, but for this reason they are also an important control for the description of the Hebrew of late antiquity. Perhaps the best illustration of the vernacular influence in the Bar Kokhba texts is assimilation and syncopation. In the Bar Kokhba documents, we find assimilated forms such as *ʿnpšh* (ענפשה), instead of *ʿl npšh* (על נפשה), “on his own behalf,” which is known from both SBH and RH. This is simply a reflection of the speech patterns. Likewise, syncopated forms such as *mmrh* (ממררה), instead of SBH *mʾmrh* (מאמררה), “his statement,” reflect vernacular speech more than standardized spellings found in literary texts. Such examples remind us that although RH₁ may draw upon vernacular, it comes to us as a textualized and standardized vernacular.

The displacement of Hebrew speech communities after the Bar Kokhba revolt eventually led into a second stage of Rabbinic Hebrew, namely, Amoraic Hebrew (RH₂). As RH₂ represents a stage when Hebrew was no longer a living language in Palestine, it stands outside the scope of this study, which has been framed by the social history of Hebrew as a daily language in the land of Palestine. Amoraic Hebrew covers the sages of the Talmud who flourished from the time when the Mishnah was codified until the codification of the Talmud (about 500 C.E.). The Amoraic rabbis were active in both Palestine and Babylon. In addition to the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds, their writings included midrashim such as Midrash Rabba. These writings reflect the eclipse of Hebrew as a vernacular language and the increasing influence of Aramaic upon the written Hebrew literary language. Hebrew remained important for the Jewish Diaspora, but it was important as the language of the Torah, the (former) temple, and the Jewish liturgical tradition. Hebrew was the “holy language,” but it was no longer the everyday language.

Language and Jewish Identity in the Roman World

The Hebrew language continued to be a flashpoint for Jewish identity in the Roman world. Although Aramaic was the dominant language in Jewish Palestine during the first centuries C.E., Hebrew continued to be used and even predominated in certain contexts. In the Jewish Diaspora, Greek would

become a Jewish language. Indeed, Greek translations of the Bible were even found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Nevertheless, Hebrew was still a cornerstone of Jewish identity. For example, the brief inscriptions from Masada dealing with “priestly shares” are predominantly written with Hebrew morphology, especially using the Hebrew definite article *h-*.

Hebrew was emblematic of the Jewish revolts, as can be seen in a variety of ways. The most well known, of course, are on artifacts of the incipient Jewish state, namely, the use of Paleo-Hebrew script and Hebrew language on Bar Kokhba coins.

Especially revealing is the shifting emphasis toward Hebrew in textual artifacts. It is generally acknowledged that Aramaic was increasingly important in Jewish Palestine during the first centuries C.E. Yet, in certain contexts, Hebrew reasserted its ideological importance to Jewish identity. This is striking in the textual artifacts from the Bar Kokhba revolt. As Yigael Yadin observed, “It is interesting that the earlier documents are written in Aramaic while the later ones are in Hebrew. Possibly the change was made by a special decree of Bar-Kokhba who wanted to restore Hebrew as the official language of the state.”⁹ This is especially striking because the main language at the end of the Second Temple period was Aramaic. For example, the three letters from Masada are all written in Aramaic, which is also the language of the administrative dockets.¹⁰ Because of the similarity between Hebrew and Aramaic, certain linguistic features serve as markers for the Hebrew or Aramaic language. The interchangeability of Hebrew and Aramaic is nicely illustrated by the telltale use of definite articles—Hebrew with the prefix *h-* and Aramaic with a suffix *-ʔ*; although the Aramaic suffixed *ʔaleph* is most common, the Hebrew prefixed *heb* occurs six times. Another linguistic marker is the word for “son”; both the Hebrew *bn* and the Aramaic *br* are used in personal names, even though the Aramaic is dominant. Aramaic had become the vernacular and administrative language, but Hebrew was being revived under the auspices of the Bar Kokhba administration.

Already in the Mishnah, Aramaic received an equal footing with Hebrew as a sacred language. For example, we read in *m. Yadayim* 4:5:

The Aramaic (passages) that are in Ezra and Daniel impart uncleanness to hands. The Aramaic (passages contained in Scriptures) written in Hebrew, or a Hebrew (passage) written in Aramaic or (passages written in Paleo-) Hebrew letters do not impart uncleanness to hands. (Holy Scriptures) impart uncleanness to hands only if written in (square) Assyrian characters, on parchment, and with ink.

Scriptural texts were believed to impart uncleanness because they were sacred. In the above passage, the critical issue is not the language (Hebrew or Aramaic) or the writing system (Paleo-Hebrew or square Assyrian—that is, the typical Aramaic Jewish script) but rather the language in which the text was originally written. The archaic Hebrew script (which at that time was being used by the Samaritans) actually disqualified a text from being sacred. In Qumran manuscripts, the Paleo-Hebrew script (for example, contrast *ʿ*, *b*, *d* in Paleo-Hebrew א ב ד with square script נ ב ד) was employed especially to write the sacred name of God. This is in contrast to the rabbinic viewpoint, where Paleo-Hebrew actually becomes profane. The Aramaic (or Assyrian) script is the sacred script, and the Aramaic language is sacred for those passages (Gen. 31:47; Dan. 2:4b–7:28; Ezra 4:8–6:18; 7:12–26; Jer. 10:11) that were written in Aramaic. In fact, the very presence of Aramaic in the Hebrew Bible proved to the rabbis that it too was a sacred language. The Amoraic phase of RH would be much more heavily influenced by Aramaic.

After the Jewish revolts, symbols of Jewish nationalism were regarded with great contempt. Consequently, the speaking of Hebrew, even among speech communities that might have survived the two Jewish revolts intact, would have been greatly discouraged. The speech communities in Jerusalem and in Judea more generally were most disrupted by the Jewish revolts. Doron Bar notes that the uprisings were local and had an impact on “Judaean sites such as Kiryat Sefer, Hurvat Zikhrin, or Horvat Itri, villages that were inhabited by Jews until the second century and destroyed during the Bar Kokhba revolt.”¹¹ In contrast, the number of settlements in Galilee actually increased during this time, many new settlements appeared, and others saw an expansion, “with farms extending into villages, and villages into small towns.”¹² Some part of this growth and expansion must be seen as a direct result of the Jewish uprisings. The shifting demographics also meant a significant disjunction for the Hebrew speech communities that had remained in Judea.

The autonomy of Judea had a direct impact on language usage and language change. As Catherine Hezser points out, “In places with relatively clear cut geographical boundaries inhabited by people who all share the same mother tongue, a phenomenon which is especially prevalent in rural communities, contact with native speakers of another language tends to be very limited and is often restricted to trade situations only.”¹³ The autonomy of Judea before the Jewish revolts of the first and second centuries C.E. resulted in limited interaction between Jewish Palestine and the greater Roman world. Autonomy lent itself to the preservation of Hebrew-speaking communities. The Jewish wars dispersed the Hebrew speech communities, and Hebrew

had to survive outside of autonomous Hebrew-speaking communities. From these changes to the Jewish communities of Roman Palestine sprang a textualization of vernacular Hebrew and the rise of Aramaic as a sacred language for the Jewish people.

History of the Study of Rabbinic Hebrew

The study of Rabbinic Hebrew itself has an interesting history, reflecting a deep-seated language ideology within the Jewish community through the ages. During the incipient stages of the study of Hebrew grammar in the Middle Ages, Jewish scholars first began the scientific study of Hebrew grammar, usually focusing on biblical Hebrew. Important early Jewish scholars, such as Saadia Gaon and Ibn Janah, often cited rabbinic textual examples in expounding Hebrew grammar; however, RH was not an object of study itself but a means to understand the biblical text. The important medieval grammarian Menahem ben Saruq even argued that RH was an entirely different language.¹⁴ Ben Saruq and his disciples argued that RH was a faulty and incomplete language that was inferior to biblical Hebrew, and they reserved the description of “holy tongue” for the Bible. Still, their position was a minority position. Most medieval grammarians had a more positive view of the grammatical and especially lexicographical contributions that RH could make to the study of Hebrew. The focus of medieval grammarians was the Bible itself, and the debate was merely over the role of RH in the grammatical description of biblical Hebrew.

The critical study of Rabbinic Hebrew began only in the eighteenth century. The primary questions were about the character of RH, its relationship with biblical Hebrew, and its nature as a living language. The classic work of Avraham Geiger, *Lehr- und Lesebuch zur Sprache der Mischnah*, published in 1845, set the agenda for the study of RH for the next century. Geiger believed that RH was a continuation of biblical Hebrew, but he also argued that RH was *not* a spoken language but rather an artificial creation. His oft-quoted conclusion was that “Hebrew had accordingly ceased to be a living language. It remained, however, like Latin in the medieval ages, a religious vernacular of scholars during the period of the Temple.”¹⁵ Geiger thought that Aramaic was the vernacular language of Palestine and that RH was invented by the rabbis based on both Aramaic and biblical Hebrew. This touched off a rather heated debate among Jewish scholars in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The lines of this debate were largely drawn ideologically, between the Reform and Conservative Jewish communities. The work of Moshe Se-

gal, *A Grammar of Mishnaic Hebrew*, first published in 1927, was a watershed in the debate. Segal began with a long introduction defending MH as a living language and downplaying its reliance on Aramaic, and this viewpoint eventually won general acceptance. Segal's arguments were further confirmed by Hebrew documents subsequently discovered in the region of the Dead Sea. The most well known of these new documents were the Dead Sea Scrolls. Perhaps most critical to our understanding of vernacular Hebrew were the Bar Kokhba letters, which concern matters of everyday life. Although Segal's argument that MH was a living language has become the consensus, he understated the influence of Aramaic.¹⁶ Aramaic had a profound influence on the evolution of the living Hebrew vernacular during the Second Temple period and into late antiquity.

The sources for Rabbinic Hebrew present some difficulties. These begin with the fact that printed texts reflect a tendency to harmonize RH toward biblical Hebrew.¹⁷ For example, printed texts invariably spell the word for "man" according to its biblical orthography *ʾdm* (אָדָם), whereas early manuscripts indicate that the spelling was *ʾdn* (אָדָן), reflecting the Aramaic influence on Hebrew that exchanged final *m* for *n*. Another example of this tendency is the personal name Lazarus, known from the New Testament and spelled in first-century inscriptions without the initial *ʾaleph*, *lʿzr* (לֵעֶזֶר), instead of the SBH form *ʾlʿzr* (אֱלִיעֶזֶר), "Eliezer"; all the printed early rabbinic texts, however, harmonize the spelling with biblical Hebrew. Such examples could be multiplied. They reflect the language ideology of the later Masoretic scribes and grammarians that generally regarded biblical Hebrew as the more "correct" form. More generally, it reflects the golden-age fallacy that assumes that older forms of language are better and more correct.

The scientific study of biblical Hebrew flourished in the medieval period, yet the opinion of medieval Jewish grammarians about Rabbinic Hebrew was the subject of some debate. Some, such as Menachem ben Saruq, regarded RH as a completely different language. Others, for example Saadia Gaon, emphasized the importance of RH as a source for clarifying the Bible, especially hapax legomena. For the most part, however, medieval grammarians did not consider RH a topic worthy of study, and the scientific study of RH began only in the early nineteenth century C.E. Rabbinic Hebrew was associated with Jewish life outside of the land and the nation, whereas biblical Hebrew was idealized as the language of the Jewish nation and state. In this respect, language ideology had an important role in shaping the history of the study of Hebrew long after the destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersal of the Hebrew-speaking communities in the land.

Commonly Proposed Features of Tannaitic Hebrew

The typical corpus for early Rabbinic or Tannaitic Hebrew (RH₁) would begin with the Mishnah. In addition, the Tosefta and the Tannaitic midrashim (including Mekilta, Sifra, and Sifre) are usually included in the corpus of Tannaitic texts. Inscriptions are an important external control to this description of RH₁, and the Bar Kokhba texts in particular bring a new perspective to late-antique Hebrew. Typically, features of RH₁ would be limited to Mishnaic texts, but here we have included some features found particularly in late-antique-Hebrew inscriptions. The inscriptional material gives a richer perspective on Hebrew in late antiquity.

Some commonly proposed linguistic features of Tannaitic Hebrew (RH₁) include the following:

1. Changes to the verbal system. As E. Y. Kutscher noted, “The most revolutionary change between BH and MH occurred in the area of tenses and moods.”¹⁸ In general, the verbal system shifts from being primarily aspectual (as in SBH) to being more tense oriented.¹⁹ The beginnings of these changes can already be observed in LBH (as noted in chapter 7). Notable aspects include: (i) the SBH active participle is used with personal pronouns to generate a simple present tense and is regularly spelled *plene*, as in *qwr* (קורא), “read,” or *wmr* (אומר), “say”; (ii) the word for “future,” *tyd*, is used in the verbal construction *tyd l-VERB* (VERB-לִּיְתֵד) to create the future tense; (iii) increased use of auxiliary verbs such as *byh* (היה), “to be”; *hthyl* (התחיל), “to begin”; *hlk* (הלך), “to go”; (iv) regular use of periphrastics, namely, the use of the verb *byh* (היה), “to be,” + active participle to express habitual action; (v) adverbs are used with auxiliary verbs followed by the preposition *l-*, “to,” and infinitive verbs such as *ršyy* (רשׁי), “permitted”; *hyyb* (הייב), “bound”; *sryk* (צריך), “need” (e.g., *sryk lqrw* “need to designate” or *sryk lhpryš* “need to separate,” Dem. 4:3); and (vi) disappearance of SBH verbal forms such as the *waw* consecutive, infinitive constructs with *b-* and *k-*, and special forms for the jussive and cohortative. At the same time, we have the appearance of new conjugations like the *Nitpa’al* and the *Nuf’al*.
2. *Plene* spelling. Standardized use of *waw*, *yod*, *ʿaleph*, and *heh* as vowel letters. The letters *waw* and *yod* are frequently doubled when they represent the consonants.

3. Final *mem* and *nun* appear to be almost interchangeable. This results, e.g., in the conflation of independent pronouns that were differentiated in SBH by a final *mem* on the masculine and *nun* on feminine forms, e.g., the masculine and feminine forms *ʔm/ʔn* (אתָ/אתְּ), “you,” and *hm/hn* (הֵם/הֵן), “they.”
4. Irregular orthography. Gradual weakening of the Semitic gutturals whereby the laryngeal and pharyngeal graphemes are interchanged; the confusion of *bgdkpt* letters; interchange of sibilants, e.g., the interchange of *šin* and *samekh* in words like *sbr* (שָׁבַר), “break.”
5. Drift between *h* (ה) and ʔ (א). For example, in the Bar Kokhba texts we find the verbal forms *nqrh* (נִקְרָה) instead of SBH *nqrʔ* (נִקְרָא), “called”; *mwdʔ* (מִוֹדָא) instead of SBH *mwdh* (מִוֹדָה), “acknowledge”; and *mʕʔ* (מִצִּיָּא) instead of SBH *mʕwh* (מִצִּוָּה), “command.” The appearance of the *ʔapʕel* verbal stem (with preformative *ʔaleph*) instead of the typical SBH *hipʕil* is also noteworthy in this respect. Nonverbal forms include *mhrʔ* (מְהִרָא) instead of SBH *mhrh* (מְהִרָה), “quickly,” and *ʕpynʔ* (שִׁפִּינָא) instead of SBH *ʕpynh* (שִׁפִּינָה), “ship.”²⁰
6. Assimilation and syncopation. In the Bar Kokhba documents, we find assimilated forms such as *ʕpʕšh* (עִנְפִּשָּׁה) instead of SBH *ʔnpʕšh* (עַל נִפְשָׁה), “on his own behalf,” and syncopated forms such as *mmrh* (מִמְרָה) instead of SBH *mʕmrh* (מִאֲמִרָה), “his statement.” This seems to reflect vernacular speech more than the standardized spellings found in the Mishnah.
7. Several SBH pronominal forms—1cs *ʔnky* (אֲנִכִּי) and 1cp *ʔnhnw* (אֲנַחְנוּ)—are no longer attested; instead, we find 1cs *ʔny* (אֲנִי) and 1cp *ʔnw* (אֲנִי).
8. Aramaic influence in the 2ms and 2fs pronominal suffixes, spelled *-k*, presumably pronounced /**-āk/* (2ms) and /**-îk/* (2fs); e.g., *mnk* (מִנְךָ), “from you,” and *bʕlyk* (בְּעִלְיִךָ), “your husband,” instead of SBH *-k(h)* and *-k(y)*.
9. Increased use of the relative pronouns, particularly *š-* (שֶׁ), “that, which.” In addition, the genitive particle *šl* (שֶׁל) to form genitival constructions; the demonstrative pronouns; masculine singular *zh* (זֶה), “this”; feminine singular *zw* (זֶה), “this”; and plural *ʔw* (אֵלֶּה), “these”; and the demonstratives *hlh* (הֵלֶּה), “this,” and *hll* (הֵלֶּלֶּה), “these.”
10. Use of the noun *ʕsm* (עֲצָמָה), “bone” + pronominal suffix as a reflexive pronoun, e.g., *ʕsmy* (עֲצָמִי), “myself,” or *ʕsmw* (עֲצָמִי), “himself.”
11. Increase in loanwords from Greek and Latin.