

Chapter Title: Epilogue

Book Title: A Social History of Hebrew

Book Subtitle: Its Origins Through the Rabbinic Period

Book Author(s): WILLIAM M. SCHNIEDEWIND

Published by: Yale University Press. (2013)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vm6sc.14>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at  
<http://about.jstor.org/terms>



*Yale University Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *A Social History of Hebrew*

## *Epilogue*

*The Hebrew language can live only if we revive the nation and return it to the fatherland.*

—*Eliezer ben Yehuda*

Hebrew survived and even flourished, despite its disappearance in Palestine for almost two millennia. On the one hand, the limits of this study have been defined by the demise of the use of Hebrew as a vernacular language in the land. On the other hand, we have emphasized that our knowledge and description of Hebrew is dependent on the texts *written* in ancient Israel, Judah, Yehud, and Roman Palestina. The Hebrew language would survive the displacement of Hebrew speech communities by becoming a language of religion, piety, poetry, and trade. It survived primarily as a written language that served to bind together the Jewish Diaspora for almost two thousand years. The survival of Hebrew as a religious, literary, and trade language enabled its revival as a vernacular language in the Zionist movement of the nineteenth century and its adoption as the language of the new Jewish state of Israel in 1948. Yet, the survival and rebirth of Hebrew is, in a real sense, its second rebirth. The first challenge to Hebrew occurred with the Babylonian invasions and destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. The Hebrew language

showed resilience, surviving in spite of the widespread dispersal of the early Judean speech communities and in spite of the destruction of a social infrastructure for writing. In this respect, the Hebrew language demonstrated its strong connection to its speakers and writers.

Language death is not a new phenomenon. Many languages, ancient and more recent, have disappeared in the course of human history. The Hebrew language, however, had a near-death experience and survived—twice. This curious fact demands some investigation. This book has examined the first part of the story of the Hebrew language. It has followed the history of Hebrew from its beginnings in the land of Canaan even before David, Solomon, and the kings who came after them arrived in the land and established a nation. It has followed the language through the vicissitudes of war and peace, prosperity and poverty. The end of this story is also the beginning of another story, which ends with the second resurrection of Hebrew along with the reestablishment of a Jewish state in Israel. This second rebirth of Hebrew is certainly not unaware of the first; indeed, the coins of the new Israeli state consciously utilize the Paleo-Hebrew letters and symbols depicted on the coins of the ancient Hasmonean state. This anecdotal example serves to remind us that language survival is closely tied to group identity—in this case, both ancient and modern Jewish identity.

Throughout this book, we have emphasized the close relationship between social history and linguistic history, between society and language, and particularly between the ancient Jews and the Hebrew language. In the first chapter, we recalled the words of the early linguistic anthropologist Edward Sapir, who suggested that the history of language and culture move along parallel lines. This has proven quite true for the history of classical Hebrew. The language was shaped by the emergence of a state, by the centralization of political power, and by the rise of empires, beginning with Assyria. Hebrew was also shaped by the tragedies of ancient Judah, by the destruction of the central place of scribal activity—Jerusalem—and by the dispersal of its speech communities to the far corners of the known world. Hebrew was shaped by the languages of the foreigners who dominated the land—first the Egyptians, later the Assyrians and Babylonians, and finally the Persians, Greeks, and Romans.

Our survey has also emphasized the limited and special nature of the early history of Hebrew, namely, that it is the history of a *written* language. Grammars of ancient Hebrew have tended to focus on the linguistics of speech, even though we have no direct evidence of ancient vernacular. Of course, we may piece together glimpses of the everyday Hebrew of ancient times from all kinds of sources—the (later) Masoretic traditions, foreign translations

(like the Greek Septuagint), cognate and contemporary languages, and even archaeology. Yet this study has chosen to focus not on the phonology of ancient Hebrew speech but rather on the role of language in the social life of the Jewish people in antiquity. As it happened, it was this preservation of written Hebrew—in the Bible, in the Mishnah, and especially in Jewish prayer—that helped the Hebrew language survive the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersal of ancient Hebrew speech communities.

In the post-Roman Jewish Diaspora, Hebrew became the language of prayer and the language of the Bible. Prayer would replace the temple and sacrifice in Jewish religious life, and Jewish tradition would require males to pray three times a day and to read Torah portions weekly. In the Middle Ages, it became customary to read the Bible with commentary. Often the Torah portion would be read twice in Hebrew and then once in Aramaic, using the Targum Onqelos. Commentary included the Hebrew midrashim, and Jews were also expected to learn the Hebrew oral law (or Mishnah). In addition, the more-educated Jews would have also studied the Talmud, which is mostly written in Aramaic but requires a strong knowledge of biblical and Rabbinic Hebrew. As a result, Hebrew literacy remained unusually high in Jewish communities in spite of the fact that Hebrew was no longer an everyday vernacular. The knowledge of Hebrew was certainly important to the continuing group identity of the Jewish community in the Diaspora. One of the normal features of group identity, namely geographical location, could no longer serve as a facilitator of Jewish identity in the Diaspora, and as a result language played an even more important role for Jewish identity after the Jewish revolts in the first and second centuries of the Common Era.

The embodiment of the ideological role of Hebrew in Jewish history culminated with Eliezer Ben-Yehuda. Ben-Yehuda was a Lithuanian Jew, born in 1858, who grew up (like most Jewish children) learning Hebrew as part of his religious upbringing. He also grew up in the context of the rise of European nationalisms that began in the early nineteenth century. In the wake of the French Revolution in 1814, waves of romantic nationalism rolled across the European continent, and new countries were formed along with new national languages. Classical languages were revived in Greece and Italy. In Italy, for example, only 2.5 percent of the population could speak the standard Tuscan Italian dialect when the nation was unified in 1861. These contemporary examples gave Ben-Yehuda hope that the Hebrew vernacular could be revived and, along with it, a Jewish state.<sup>1</sup> Ben-Yehuda, inspired by these events, immigrated to Palestine and resolved to revive the Hebrew language. In 1880, he wrote in the journal *HaShahar*, “The Hebrew language can live only if we revive the nation and return it to the fatherland.” He began with

his own son, whom he named Ben-Zion (meaning “son of Zion”) and with whom he spoke only Hebrew from his infancy. Many people could speak Hebrew in Ben-Yehuda’s social circles, but none of them were monolingual. Ben-Zion Ben-Yehuda grew up monolingual, speaking only Hebrew, and became the symbol of the revival of the Hebrew language and of a new Hebrew speech community in Palestine. The events following World War II resulted in the establishment of Ben-Yehuda’s dream, the creation of both a modern Jewish state and an official language, modern Hebrew.

*This page intentionally left blank*