

Chapter Title: Hebrew in Exile

Book Title: A Social History of Hebrew

Book Subtitle: Its Origins Through the Rabbinic Period

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Published by: Yale University Press. (2013)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vm6sc.10>

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Hebrew in Exile

Linguistic subjugation (or unification, depending on one's point of view) is an important strategy in implementing political subjugation (or unification).

—Peter Trudgill

The Babylonian exile is where the waters part in the history of the Hebrew language. It marks major changes to take place in the Hebrew speech and scribal communities during the sixth century B.C.E. In a series of military campaigns, the Babylonian armies decimated Judah, burned the city of Jerusalem, and ravaged the economy of the region. The first campaign came in 597 B.C.E. At that time the Babylonians deported a large number of Judeans, including the royal family of Jehoiachin. A second campaign in 586 B.C.E. resulted in the burning of Jerusalem and the countryside. The Babylonians set up a provisional government, and in 581 the Babylonians returned and took another group of Judeans into exile. The vernacular language was not unscathed by the conquest of the land, yet it would survive. The standard Hebrew literary dialect develops in the late eighth century, and it disappears by the end of the sixth century B.C.E.

The Babylonian invasions affected the spoken and the written Hebrew languages differently. A spoken vernacular survived along with the remnant of the Judeans who remained in the land. Vernacular languages tend to survive as long as there is no physical displacement of the *speech community*.¹ Demographic upheaval would mark the beginnings of a major disruption of the Hebrew speech communities, but some Judean villages did remain in the land, and such villages continued to speak their own Hebrew vernacular. Written languages, however, require social, economic, and political infrastructures to survive. War, exile, dispersion, and economic blight signaled an end to Hebrew scribal schools. The writing of the Hebrew language lost its social location and institutional support—that is, the palace, the temple, and the marketplaces of ancient Judah. Although the infrastructure for Hebrew scribes in Judah was decimated by the Babylonians, Hebrew writing did survive in exile. In the archaeological record, Hebrew written artifacts disappear in Judah during the early sixth century B.C.E. Yet, Hebrew scribes were deported to Babylon along with the royal family, and scribes resided among the Judean royal family and its entourage in comfort in the royal citadel of Babylon while being supplied generous rations by the Babylonian government. Although the Babylonian conquests and exiles decimated the Judean people, some remnant of the scribal infrastructure of the royal family remained intact through the end of the sixth century B.C.E.

Ironically, the exile is sometimes considered the period of a great flourishing of Hebrew writing—the birth of the Bible as literature. Yet the circumstances hardly allow for such an interpretation.² The epigraphic evidence yields little indication that Hebrew even continued to be written. The exile supposedly provoked a creative burst of literary energy, and the destruction of Jerusalem led Judeans to preserve their traditions through writing. Indeed, Axel Knauf has attempted to read the town of Bethel as key to the formulation of biblical texts and the shaping of the Hebrew language. He observes that the town of Bethel is repeatedly mentioned in the Bible and argues that Bethel is an exilic and postexilic town and that its prominent mention in the Bible can only reflect the exilic and postexilic production of the Bible.³ However, this reading is based on a misunderstanding of the archaeology of Bethel. As Israel Finkelstein has pointed out, Bethel was actually destroyed in the late eighth century B.C.E. and was sparsely occupied thereafter.⁴ Therefore, Knauf's main biblical argument based on the prominence of Bethel in biblical narratives actually fits best in the late eighth century as opposed to the Babylonian and Persian periods, when the site had essentially disappeared. More generally, it should be noted that war and exile actually invite retrenchment rather than intense literary activity. The suggestion that writing was a natural response to

the attempt to preserve culture is a modern text-centric response—the reaction of our post-Gutenberg world. Ancient Israel, however, was a society of emerging textuality at the end of the Judean monarchy. Textual creation was not a natural cultural response to war, exile, economic blight, and slavery. The written Hebrew language would survive in spite of the Babylonian exile, not because of it!

Hebrew in the Land

Archaeological excavations and surveys have increasingly pointed to drastic changes in the demographics of the southern Levant, which underscore the impact of the Babylonian exile. The population of Judah decreased markedly during the Babylonian period because of war, exile, and flight. Yet, some people certainly remained in the land. The question remains only about the extent of demographic changes. How many villages remained unscathed by the Babylonian invasions? How many people remained in the land? The answers to these questions are critical to understanding the extent to which Hebrew would have continued to be spoken in the Babylonian (and later Persian) province of Yehud.

Recent archaeological investigations have increasingly laid bare the fury of the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, Judah, and the entire Levant. Ephraim Stern, for example, contrasts the Babylonian and Assyrian presence in Judah: “The Babylonians waged far fewer military campaigns for the domination of Palestine than the Assyrians, and the number of written sources at our disposal describing these is likewise much smaller. However, the results of the Babylonian conquest were, by all measures, far more destructive, and brought the once-flourishing country to one of the lowest ebbs in its long history.”⁵ On the one hand, the scope and ferocity of the Babylonian conquest is becoming increasingly clear with each new archaeological investigation. On the other hand, the destruction was not complete.

There was also some continuity after the Babylonian exiles. We know, for example, that the Babylonians appointed a provisional governor over the province in the town of Mizpah (five miles north of Jerusalem), which—unlike the rest of Judah—was largely unscathed by the Babylonian military campaigns.⁶ Even the Bible testifies, according to 2 Kings 25:12, that the Babylonians left “the poorest of the land to be vinedressers and tillers of the soil.” Mizpah apparently continued to serve as a regional capital, and when the Persians overthrew the Babylonian Empire, many returnees settled in this region (for example, Ezra 2:21–28; note Neh. 3:7). Some scholars have ar-

gued that too much is made of the exile as a historical event. For example, C. C. Torrey, in his work *Ezra Studies*, published in 1910, argued that the exile was essentially a fiction created by Jewish scribes of the late Persian period: "The terms 'exilic,' 'pre-exilic,' and 'post-exilic' ought to be banished forever from usage, for they are merely misleading, and correspond to nothing that is real in Hebrew literature and life."⁷ The Irish biblical scholar Robert Carroll wrote that he would like to have this sentence of Torrey's "emblazoned on all biblical history textbooks."⁸ Carroll minimized the importance of the exile: "At this juncture in history the land lost some people; very much a minority of people, even important people of status were deported. *Most people lived on in the land as if nothing, except the burning of Jerusalem, had happened.*"⁹ Hans Barstad, in his book *The Myth of the Empty Land*, has particularly emphasized the continuity in the material culture of Judah during the Babylonian period (ca. 586–538 B.C.E.).¹⁰ Though it is true that the conventional nomenclature of our academic disciplines has been framed by a biblical metanarrative that was fostered in the postexilic (or Second Temple) period, ironically, biblical narratives do not isolate the exile as a discrete historical period, nor do they actually promote the notion of the "empty land."¹¹ The biblical metanarrative would telescope the Babylonian exile into a moment in time and portray it as a watershed of historical memory. Though this metanarrative served an important rhetorical purpose for the postexilic community, it also oversimplified and even overlooked the Babylonian period (namely, the sixth century B.C.E.). More important, an overemphasis on the exile can obscure the fate of the Hebrew language. In light of these views, we need to explore the consequences of the Babylonian conquest and exiles for the demographics and social institutions of Judah in the sixth century B.C.E.

There are two assumptions behind critiques of the exile as a major historical event. The first assumption is that the majority of the people were left in the country at the end of the Babylonian period. In other words, the demographic picture changed very little. The second assumption is that the life of the Judean people continued in much the same way. Neither of these propositions stands up to scrutiny. In fact, the demographic changes in Judah were quite profound, reflecting a substantial depopulation,¹² and Daniel Smith-Christopher has shown in his comparative sociological studies of the exile just how far-reaching and profound the experience of exile was for ancient Israel.¹³ The land was not empty, but it was depopulated. This is a critical observation for any hypothesis regarding the continuity of vernacular Hebrew. Moreover, every cultural institution of Judean life changed. There

was no more Davidic king. There was no temple. The marketplaces changed. Most important for our purposes, the scribal infrastructure was dispersed. Both the written and spoken language would be fundamentally influenced by the *lingua franca* of these times, namely, Aramaic.

We may assume that Hebrew continued to be spoken in the Judean villages that persisted into the Babylonian and Persian periods. But just how many villages were there? And, how many new villages appeared? These questions have great bearing on the nature of the speech communities of the sixth through fourth centuries. The land was considerably more empty by the end of the Babylonian period than recent critics of the exile have realized. From archaeological surveys, a relative assessment of the population demographics can be made. For example, between the seventh century (at the end of the monarchy) and the mid-fifth century B.C.E. (mid-Persian period), there is an 83.5 percent decline in the number of settlements in the region around Jerusalem.¹⁴ This data is punctuated by evidence from tomb excavations that suggests an abrupt end to family tombs at the end of the Iron II period. The demographic decline in the number of settlements is reinforced by a similar decline in the total settled area (from 1,000 dunams at the end of the Iron Age to about 110 dunams in the Persian period)—a nearly 90 percent decline.¹⁵ The Negev region, which had flourished in the late Iron Age, experienced a similar decline, with most of the fortresses in the region destroyed and a settlement gap that lasted until the fifth century (at the earliest) and as late as the Hellenistic period at some sites.¹⁶ The Judean desert region east of Jerusalem was even harder hit, experiencing a 95 percent decline in settlement.¹⁷ Even the foothills west of Jerusalem experienced about an 80 percent decline in settlement, along with the conspicuous destruction of major cities like Lachish and Timnah, and most towns did not recover until the Hellenistic period.¹⁸ Not only was Jerusalem burned, but large cities disappeared from Judah proper. In general, there was a shift from cities to villages; excavations of cities such as Jerusalem, Lachish, and Gezer testify to great conflagrations ignited by the Babylonians in Judah.¹⁹ These results are also confirmed by the pottery assemblages and distribution patterns that changed dramatically at the beginning of the Babylonian period.²⁰ The Babylonians then largely abandoned the ravaged lands.²¹ It took centuries to recover. Resettlement began in the Persian period, but the flourishing of sites like Jerusalem would not take place until the Hellenistic and Roman periods.

Though the Babylonian invasions obviously marked a catastrophic change in the demographics, and consequently the speech communities, we must also be careful to acknowledge aspects of continuity. The most important area of continuity was the region of Benjamin and the town of Mizpah, the

seat of the Babylonian provincial government. There was also continuity to the west of Jerusalem, where 20 percent of the villages in the foothills show continued settlement into the Persian period. Such continuity in settlement would be accompanied by linguistic continuity in speech communities. That is, these small villages would have continued to speak local Hebrew dialects even if they also might have become bilingual—Hebrew and Aramaic—through contact with the Babylonian (and later Persian) administration of the region.

The scribal transition from Hebrew to Aramaic was immediate. As David Vanderhooft has pointed out, “Scribes in regional chanceries adjusted very rapidly to master the technology, including morphology and ductus, of new scripts in whatever language dominated the administrative and commercial spheres of the region.”²² He illustrates this with a couple of examples. First, one of the earliest Yehud stamp seals (dating to the late sixth or early fifth century B.C.E.) reads, *ʾhyb // phwʾ*, “belonging to Achiab, the governor.” The seal is marked as Aramaic by the use of the word for “governor” with the distinctive morphology of the Aramaic definite article, the suffixed *ʾaleph*. The Aramaic script of this stamp has some archaic letter shapes (particularly the *ʾaleph*, *mem*, and *resh*) that point to a sixth-century B.C.E. date for the transition from Hebrew to Aramaic. The use of the double divider line, //, is a stylistic feature of late Iron Age Hebrew seals. Still, there is no epigraphic evidence indicating that Hebrew script was still being used during the Babylonian period. Moreover, when we begin to see paleo-Hebrew utilized again during the fourth century B.C.E., it is a revival of the Hebrew script and “not part of the organic process of continuous usage and production that initially pushed Hebrew aside in favor of Aramaic.”²³ Aramaic script had completely replaced Hebrew in the Babylonian period.

Hebrew in the Babylonian Court

The fate of the Hebrew scribal infrastructure follows the monarchy into exile. According to the biblical account, “King Jehoiachin of Judah gave himself up to the king of Babylon, himself, his mother, his servants, his officers, and his palace officials” (2 Kings 25:12), and he was taken to Babylon in about 597 B.C.E. The book of Kings ends by narrating the eventual release of Jehoiachin:

In the thirty-seventh year of the exile of King Jehoiachin of Judah, in the twelfth month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, King Evil-merodach of Babylon, in the year that he began to reign, released King

Jehoiachin of Judah from prison; he spoke kindly to him, and gave him a seat above the other seats of the kings who were with him in Babylon. So Jehoiachin put aside his prison clothes. Every day of his life he dined regularly in the king's presence. For his allowance, a regular allowance was given him by the king, a portion every day, as long as he lived. (2 Kings 25:27–30)

The biblical account of the fate of Jehoiachin and the royal family was essentially corroborated by an archive of 290 clay tablets discovered in the 1930s during excavations of the ancient city of Babylon.²⁴ These tablets date from the years 595 to 570 B.C.E. and list payments of rations in oil and barley to prominent political prisoners of Nebuchadnezzar's military campaigns. One implication of the payments "to Jehoiachin, king of Judah" (*ana 'ya'ukinu šarri ša KURyaḥudu*) described in the cuneiform tablets excavated in the Ishtar Gate is that the royal scribes of Judah worked within the Babylonian administration. Jehoiachin was treated as royalty, even though he was under house arrest by the Babylonians. Rations were supplied to Jehoiachin, the princes of Judah, and the royal Judean entourage. One representative text (Babylon 28178) may be translated as follows:

6 liters (of oil) for J[eh]oiachin, king of the land of Judah
 2½ liters for the five princes of Judah
 4 liters for the eight men of Judah

According to the Babylonian lists, the five young Judean princes had an attendant named Keniah, who received the supplies for them. The royal entourage included "eight men of Judah." Presumably, some of these were the servants, officers, and palace officials who surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar and were placed under house arrest in Babylon along with Jehoiachin. This royal entourage may have lived in the southern citadel of Babylon.²⁵ Jehoiachin and his exiled administration probably served as royal counsel, providing information as required about their homeland, which was in a remote region of the Babylonian Empire. We may assume that the support afforded by the royal administration in the Babylonian court allowed some Judean scribes to perpetuate their craft.

The exile thus represented both continuity and change for the written Hebrew language. There was continuity in the royal court along with its scribes who were brought into exile. Indeed, these royal scribes must have been responsible for the composition and preservation of biblical literature. There are telltale signs of scribal activity during the exilic period; for example, the fate of the exiled king Jehoiachin is the central theme of the end of the book of

Kings: 2 Kings 24–25 is essentially an exilic appendix to the book of Kings. The ending focuses on the fate of the two last Judean kings—Jehoiachin and Zedekiah—beginning with Jehoiachin’s exile to Babylon and ending in the last verse with the king of Judah dining at the table of the Babylonian kings. This appendix has the exiled royal scribes telling Jehoiachin’s story. This is just one example, but it illustrates the continuity of the royal scribes in writing and preserving Hebrew literature.

The exile, however, also marks the beginning of change for the Hebrew language. Hebrew was not one of the languages of the Babylonian or Persian administrations. Akkadian was the prestige language of the Babylonian court, and Aramaic would serve as an administrative language for both the Babylonian and Persian kingdoms. Not surprisingly, the Judean scribes that are said to have worked as Persian administrators were trained in Aramaic. In the court of Babylon, the Hebrew language was a cultural legacy; it was not an administrative language. Eventually, when the exiles began to return to Jerusalem, Hebrew would continue to be written—but written with dramatic changes. First of all, Hebrew would be written with Aramaic script. Indeed, this change might be compared to later Jewish languages like Yiddish, Ladino, or Dzhidi—namely, languages that mix script and grammar. In each of these cases, however, we have a dialect that is essentially local—German for Yiddish, Spanish for Ladino, and Persian for Dzhidi—using the Hebrew alphabet. After the exile, in contrast, we have Hebrew written with Aramaic letters. The mixture of language and script nevertheless creates an inevitable linguistic influence.

Akkadian Influence

During the Babylonian period there was the possibility of direct and extended contact between Hebrew scribes and the Mesopotamian “scribal school” (that is, the *edubba*). Hebrew scribes were actually living in the Babylonian court, as we can surmise from cuneiform documents. The most telling example of this contact was the borrowing into Hebrew of the Neo-Babylonian month names, which became the standard names in the Jewish calendar.²⁶ Indeed, according to the Jerusalem Talmud, the Jews “carried the names of the months back with them from Babylonia” (y. *Rosh HaShanah* 1:56d).

Earlier and later periods were not nearly as conducive to direct Akkadian linguistic influence. For example, the Judeans were under Assyrian influence for more than a century (from the mid-eighth through the late seventh centuries B.C.E.); however, there is little to suggest direct contact with the *edubba*.

Rather, the Assyrians sent scribes and administrators who utilized Aramaic as a scribal language. Mankowski, in his study *Akkadian Loanwords in Biblical Hebrew*, points to a large number of apparent loanwords in biblical Hebrew that are mediated through Aramaic, which he calls *trans-Akkadian* loans.²⁷ These are not Akkadian loanwords into Hebrew, even though their origin is Akkadian. Moreover, the Judeans would also have come to know Assyrian literary forms, such as Assyrian vassal treaties, through the Aramaic language rather than from Akkadian cuneiform. By the Persian period, Akkadian was no longer the language of the empire, since the Achaemenid Empire used Aramaic as its administrative language. Old Persian was the language of the Achaemenid rulers, and Akkadian was relegated to the status of a scholastic language of little interest to the Jews. Much earlier, in the second millennium B.C.E., Akkadian was the main writing system used in Canaan, but this predates the formation of the Judean and Israelite kingdoms and the development of the alphabetic writing system. It seems unlikely that much scribal or literary tradition can be traced to this very early period. Rather, the primary period for direct contact between Hebrew and Akkadian scribes was the sixth century B.C.E.

How should we categorize the dozens and dozens of Akkadian loanwords in Hebrew? Direct influence of Akkadian on Hebrew began in the Neo-Assyrian period. The most obvious linguistic reflex of Akkadian on Hebrew was in the use of loanwords and calques. Terms for the calendar, for example, are *culture words* (*Kulturwörter*), namely, words with high degrees of mobility that can transcend a specific time and place. Several words come to Akkadian from Sumerian and then make their way into Canaanite and Hebrew. One example of this is the word for “palace,” from Sumerian É.GAL to Akkadian *ekallu* to Hebrew *hykl* /hékāl/ [הֵיכָל], although in Hebrew *hykl* also has a semantic shift from “palace” to “temple,” with the former typical of SBH and the latter typical of LBH. For the present purposes, however, we are interested not in etymological origins but rather in the language from which the term is borrowed, namely, Akkadian. Most of these terms (for example, *ekallu*) were borrowed from Akkadian into Aramaic, so that Aramaic became the vehicle through which they were transmitted. Even though a number of items on this list (adapted from Rabin) may be regarded as doubtful, the sheer number is nevertheless impressive. It testifies to the pervasive influence of Akkadian, especially in the realm of scribal traditions (for example, technical terms, treaty forms, and traditional texts used for education, like Gilgamesh or *Enuma Elish*). Another form of linguistic influence may be discerned in the adoption of Assyrian literary genres. Most prominently, the use of the treaty genre to structure the book of Deuteronomy has long been

recognized as borrowing from Assyrian vassal treaties.²⁸ Derivative to the adoption of the Assyrian vassal treaty was the borrowing of legal concepts that were calqued into Hebrew. As William Moran has pointed out, the concepts of the “knowing God” and “loving God” in Deuteronomy borrow from Assyrian treaty language.²⁹ The influence of Akkadian upon SBH suggests contact between Mesopotamian and Canaanite scribal schools.

There are historical limits to the influence of Akkadian on Hebrew. Although Akkadian did not completely disappear as a language until well into the Hellenistic-Roman period, it was already being supplanted as a diplomatic language by Aramaic in the eighth century B.C.E. After the Persian conquest of the Babylonian Empire, Akkadian was merely a scholastic language, and Aramaic was the administrative language. Akkadian texts were copied and passed on, but little literature was written in Akkadian. In sum, Akkadian could no longer directly influence Hebrew in the Persian and Hellenistic periods. Rather, Akkadian influence was confined to the context of the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires’ administrations. Indeed, it was the Assyrians who established an elaborate administrative and economic infrastructure throughout the Levant, which would have been the necessary mechanism through which Akkadian influenced the Hebrew language. And it was the Babylonians who hosted Judean scribes in their capital city. As a result, Akkadian loanwords are essentially part of the SBH strata of Hebrew. In contrast to Akkadian, Persian loanwords are limited to LBH; that is, they are found in biblical books composed in the postexilic period (fifth to second centuries B.C.E.; see further discussion in chapter 8). Aramaic influence, in contrast to Akkadian and Persian, is much more difficult to pinpoint chronologically.³⁰

Was There an “Exilic” Hebrew?

The traditional periodization of Hebrew has been divided according to the Babylonian exile. Some scholars have even added an “Exilic Hebrew” as an intermediate stage. The sixth century did bring an end to Standard Biblical Hebrew. Yet, languages do not disappear overnight. It is a process. It usually takes about two generations for a language to die out. For Standard Biblical Hebrew, this process began in the sixth century with the Babylonian invasions. Two generations would take the process until the end of the sixth century B.C.E.

Standard Biblical Hebrew continued to be used through the sixth century B.C.E. For example, several biblical texts were likely composed or edited in the late sixth century—parts of the books of Kings, Jeremiah, Zechariah, and

Haggai—and these texts continue the tradition of Standard Biblical Hebrew. As for Ezekiel, it seems better to ascribe its idiosyncratic aspects to linguistic register (for example, priestly language) rather than diachronic development (namely, so-called exilic Hebrew). There is a limited continuation of the Hebrew scribal tradition that went into exile with the royal family. Some scribes apparently also fled to Egypt. The urban centers in Judah, however, were decimated. Although a center for Babylonian administration would survive north of Jerusalem in Mizpah, its focus would be on imperial administration, where Aramaic would have been the writing system. Though some Hebrew writing survived after the Babylonian conquest of 586 B.C.E., it was a much more circumscribed scribal tradition, as the infrastructure for Hebrew writing in the exile was quite restricted.

The evidence for an exilic, or “transitional,” Hebrew is particularly associated with the book of Ezekiel and has been gathered in two books by Avi Hurvitz and his protégé, Mark Rooker.³¹ Rooker points to thirty-seven linguistic features of Ezekiel that may be described as more typical of Late Biblical Hebrew; however, this is far fewer late features than Persian/Hellenistic works like Chronicles or Esther. Certainly, there are transitional and idiosyncratic aspects to the language of Ezekiel, but it is not necessary to understand them as purely diachronic. Other sixth-century works, such as Isaiah 40–66 or Zechariah, do not exhibit the same transitional aspects to their language. From a diachronic point of view, the Babylonian period is a problematic linguistic period, because it technically lasts less than fifty years (586–539 B.C.E.). Fifty years is too short a period to be linguistically meaningful based on the type of sources that we have. To be sure, there are transitional elements of the language of Ezekiel, but given the limited corpus, it is difficult to accede to the argument that the exilic period constitutes its own stage in the history of the Hebrew language.

Hebrew writing does seem to survive through the sixth century, beginning with the scribes who went into exile with the Judean court. Some of these scribes presumably returned to Jerusalem with the Judean leaders in the late sixth century B.C.E. Indeed, scholars have pointed to the postexilic prophetic books of Zechariah, Haggai, and Malachi as undermining the traditional periodization of SBH and LBH. This analysis can be furthered to include texts like the so-called Second and Third Isaiah (that is, chapters 40–66), which are widely thought to be late exilic or early postexilic in date.³² These books are written in Standard Biblical Hebrew. Such studies point to the flawed nature of a linguistic classification that creates periodization according to the Babylonian exile, that is, a classification that would end SBH in

586 B.C.E. The end of SBH is not straightforwardly tied to the Babylonian exile, because Hebrew scribes survived the exile and continued to transmit and even create Hebrew literature.³³ Languages, or in this case, scribal traditions, do not abruptly end. The Babylonian exile marked the beginning of the end of the SBH scribal tradition, but the tradition lasted through the sixth century B.C.E.

The spoken Hebrew language would not have disappeared with the destruction of the temple, and the revival of written Hebrew would not necessarily correlate with the Edict of Cyrus or a rebuilding of the temple in the early Persian period. What would be the turning points in the history of classical Hebrew during this period of social, political, and demographic upheaval? The fate of SBH lies with the fate of its scribes and the social institutions that propagated Hebrew. Standard Biblical Hebrew saw a slow demise that began with the Babylonian invasions of Jerusalem. The scribes who created SBH did not disappear with the Babylonian invasions, but these events meant that the SBH scribal institutions were not sustainable. Hebrew scribes were carried into exile. Some perhaps fled to Egypt. By the end of the sixth century B.C.E., SBH had disappeared.

Standard Biblical Hebrew

Scholars have observed both the homogeneity and the diversity of biblical Hebrew. Grammars of biblical Hebrew essentially describe Standard Biblical Hebrew. The degree of homogeneity allows us to speak about “biblical Hebrew” and to write useful introductory grammars. However, scholars have also noted elements in the diversity of biblical Hebrew and have developed categories like “late,” “early,” or “northern” to account for aspects of this diversity.

Despite these categories, it has been observed that biblical Hebrew is not diverse enough to account for a millennium of linguistic history—that is, from 1200 to 200 B.C.E. Perhaps the most radical assessment was made by Fredrick Cryer, who argued that “the OT was *written* more or less at one go, or at least over a relatively short period of time, so that the texts quite naturally do not reveal signs of significant historical differentiation.”³⁴ This is overstating the homogeneity of biblical Hebrew.³⁵ At the same time, there is some homogeneity in biblical Hebrew. This reflects a horizon for the collecting and editing of many biblical traditions, one that seems to span from 725 to 500 B.C.E., and the language of these texts may be described as SBH. To be sure, there were literary traditions that preceded this period—written

in Archaic Biblical Hebrew—but these are preserved only in a few poetic texts. Likewise, there are some texts (for example, Chron., Ezra, Neh., Esther, Dan., Eccles.) that were written and edited in the Persian and Hellenistic periods (presumably after 400 B.C.E.), and these make up the corpus of Late Biblical Hebrew, but the largest portion of biblical literature belongs to SBH. As a result, descriptions of SBH can be found in the standard grammars of biblical Hebrew.