

The Etymology of the Hebrew Language

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The Etymology of the Hebrew Language and its Written Modality

Before we address just the written modality of the Hebrew language let me fill in the roots of the language itself. If we want to go right back in time we would be seeing a population of Hominin man on the planet who had been here for about 500,000 years. This is accounted in Genesis 1:27. Most notably we would recognise the names of the three recent species, Cro-Magnon, Neanderthal and Denisovan Man, and we know from scientific fossil evidences found that they were not particularly prolific across the world as some may suggest, and secondly, even after 500,000 years they were still locked in their primitivism and never rose above the status of a hand-to-mouth hunter gatherer. The reason for this, according to Science, is essentially twofold. First of all their biological legacy is that they had smaller brain capacity and inadequate voice box infrastructure lacking in three critical speech and thought genes that all combined to precluded them from having articulate language. It is a powerful testament that even after half a billion years, Hominin man was not able to develop any form of civil aggregation, were not technologically savvy, and had only the use of natural products for enhancement aids in their day-to-day living.

The second reason was environmentally driven, and you will recall from the Book of Genesis that these early forms of mankind were vegetarian and therefore were held back, if I may use that expression, because they lacked the super-boosting brain and cell building powers derived from the protein in meat. Also, the climate was significantly different with no weather patterns and no precipitation. A heavy mist hung continuously in the atmosphere that provided moisture for plants which substituted for the lack of rain but importantly, it was this environment that did not support broad acre farming or even plotted orcharding. Science tells us that apart from the extreme polar points, the rest of the planet was a constant warm tropical climate and these conditions are not suitable for cropping many varieties of staple foods. So with a meagre diet and the absolute need to forage for food daily these early forms of man were restricted in their ability to step up out of their predicament.

Come forward to circa 4,000 BC and the appearance of Adam and Eve on Earth (Genesis 2:7), and everything changed for the world. From their time in the Garden at Eden Adam and Eve were the antithesis of Hominin man. They had larger brain capacity, an enhanced set of genes, high IQ, articulate speech, were technologically savvy, had horticultural skills and, were in direct dialogue with God.

If we just step over the issue of Adam and Eve's fall from grace, the impact on the world at that time from their appearance lifted mankind into a new paradigm. Science tells us that shortly after 4,000 BC there came the Metals

Mineral Age of copper and tin followed by the Bronze Age and the Iron Age. From the scriptures we see metallurgy, the fine arts, horticulture and the development of community. The advancement was quick and mankind would never return to be hunter-gatherer.

The relevance of all of this on our theme is that Adam, under tuition from God, was very adept in his language skills. He also had the capacity to retain information which Hominin man did not have, and we see Adam's nomenclature as an example of this. From Jewish scholars we are told that Genesis is made up of prose, and our studies hit a watershed moment when we realised that these early Genesis scripts were ancient song lines passed down the generations until Moses was charged with bringing literacy to Israel. However before we get too far ahead of ourselves, the language of Adam was the lingua franca of the then whole world and can be referred to as the language of God which would be termed the holy language.

Move up in history and we have the tragic circumstances that moved God to erase all of the air breathing and land dwelling forms of life. It is not the time to develop the understanding for why God did this, but suffice that it was an action of last resort to preserve the pure blood line from Eve and to shut down some very unseemingly practises that were going on.

So moving on, Noah and his family and the selected animals were saved through the ark and eventually disembarked on Mount Ararat. From there the community grew from Noah's three sons and their wives. As an aside, at least one of these daughters-in-law was of the blood line from Hominin man as current DNA research has found. The community grew to quite a population and there was still only the holy language being spoken, but because there was a continuing rogue element within man, they set about to build a tower to reach the heavens.

At this point God stepped in and stopped the construction by mixing the population's language into three forms and disrupting the continuity of communication. This divided the then world's population into three language groups. First was the existing language that remained and it was ascribed to a community under Shem. This was the continuation of the holy language and the pure blood line necessary to be carried down to Miriam (Mary). The language of Shem came to be known as Semitic. There was a community ascribed to Japheth and these travelled northward and were known as the Japhethites, and lastly there was the community that was ascribed to Ham and this community migrated southward into Egypt and the surrounding lands and spoke the language referred to as Hamitic.

These three languages were not of the same structure and in my parlance; the other two that were introduced were not of the Shemite language family.

Now moving forward into the literacy era the earliest form of Shemitic writing was based on a two-letter root form. Its construction characteristics and vocabulary linkages marks this language stream out to be unique from anywhere else in the world at that time.

As the Israelite nation (Shem) moved, it was inclined to pick up loan words from other cultures. These loan words are easily identifiable when examined because they do not conform to the Shemitic characteristics and construction.

So as linguists track the etymology of modern Hebrew, it becomes obvious when the language has, by varying degrees, assimilated with (say) the Phoenician or Syrian cultures. The greatest impacts on Hebrew language were from those languages that were, in their time, the national languages (lingua franca) however more recent discoveries have also found that Hebrew in its essence as a Shemitic based language was maintained and preserved.

Linguistic scholars have also noted that during the Medieval Period (circa 500 – 1500 AD) there was some interference to the Tanakh script but have not quantified the extent of it. However in time the Hebrew common use language would fall away under pressure from Jewry being dispersed around the world. And of course in the early twentieth century Eliezer ben-Yehuda began a very weighty undertaking to re-establish a Hebrew national language that I must say was done with spectacular outcomes.

But I wish to re-emphasise that Jewish scholars over the years agree that the essence of the original “Hebrew” from its roots in the Shemitic tribe and beyond back to the original Adamic language has left an indelible water mark on the language which is still evident today even after so many iterational incursions by other cultures.

Aramaic is the term given to a group of dialects contained within the Shemitic family. Over the two thousand years in this Common Era this language has persisted and currently is spoken in several regions, each with their own idiosyncratic dialects.

Middle Aramaic came into vogue in the third century AD when the language moved out of what is referred to as Old Aramaic. Eastern Middle Aramaic carried only two of the old Aramaic languages into the modernised Middle language, whilst in the North, old Syriac moved to become Middle Syriac and in the South Jewish Old Babylonian became Jewish Middle Babylonian.

Syriac (or Middle Syriac) was the language used by those who opposed the Byzantine leadership and it hence gained footing to spread from Mesopotamia and Persia into Central Asia, India and China. Jewish writers in Babylonia between the fourth and eleventh centuries are mostly identified with the Jewish Babylonian Aramaic that was the language of the Babylonian Talmud which was completed in the seventh century. This dialect had a sister dialect spoken by the Mandaean of Iraq however it had a characteristic high phonetics but lacked a convention of spelling conformity.

Following the Bar Kokhba revolt in 135 many Jewish scholars moved from Jerusalem to Galilee which gave rise to the otherwise obscure Galilean dialect which in time became the linguistic standard for the Jerusalem Talmud in the fifth century. There were other dialect iterations of the Aramaic language and we see that these became known as Modern Aramaic, or more specifically, Modern Eastern Aramaic, Modern Central Aramaic and Modern Western Aramaic.

It is generally believed by Christian scholars that in the first century, Jewry in Judea primarily spoke Aramaic with a decreasing number using Hebrew as their first language. Many learnt Hebrew as a liturgical language. Additionally, Koine Greek was the lingua franca of the Middle East in trade, among the Hellenized classes (much like French in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries in Europe), and in the Roman administration. Latin, the language of the Roman army and higher levels of administration, had almost no impact on the linguistic landscape.

In addition to the formal literary dialects of Aramaic based on the Hasmonean and Babylonian languages, there were a number of colloquial Aramaic dialects. Seven Western Aramaic varieties were spoken in the vicinity of Judea in Jesus' (Yeshua) time. They were probably distinctive yet mutually intelligible. Old Judean was the prominent dialect of Jerusalem and Judaea. The region of Ein Gedi was the Southeast Judaeian dialect. Samaria had its distinctive Samaritan Aramaic, where the consonants "he", "heth" and "'ayin" all became pronounced as "aleph". Galilean Aramaic, the dialect of Jesus' home region, is only known from a few place names and its influences on Galilean Targumic, plus some rabbinic literature and a few private letters. It seems to have a number of distinctive features: diphthongs are never simplified into monophthongs. East of the Jordan, the various dialects of East Jordanian were spoken. In the region of Damascus and the Anti-Lebanon Mountains, Damascene Aramaic was spoken (deduced mostly from Modern Western Aramaic). Finally, as far north as Aleppo, the western dialect of Orontes Aramaic was spoken.

The surprise for me was that there were several versions of the Talmud written periodically down the history of the Israelite/Hebrew nation and I don't see this as mere coincidence. By these ancient works at the hand of God's dedicated servants the language issues, if I may so refer to them, were trackable and therefore the original language was never lost as it transitioned through the times.

But the overwhelming fact about the transitions of the languages is that whatever dialect it was, it always remained within the Shemitic family and also retained its indelible water mark and its intrinsic power to convey God's spoken word. And whilst some schools have been persuaded that the original Word of God has been lost in the mire of a muddy pond of confusion leaving us with a linguistic kaleidoscope where Hebrew has been lost, the fact is God is bigger and smarter and wiser than anything that man or devil can conceive to cut off the holy words of God's language.

The essence of God and his truths are still in the Hebrew language we have today. Even after subjecting the biblical Hebrew to translation and transliteration the living word of God still maintains its integrity and can be intercepted by our spiritual eyes and understanding. In simple terms this means that the Tanakh and Bible we have today are most definitely the Word of God.

I must say though that there is a principle of God at play here. Spiritual understanding is a fruit of believing by faith in the living word of God. Understanding of the spiritual message is stopped by non-belief and it can never be the other way around. We must first believe before God conveys to us an understanding of what we are reading.

So if you do not believe that Genesis for instance is the living word of God that has been passed down the generations in oral form until the fledgling Israelite nation attained literacy, and then by God's unfathomable power he transcended all language barriers and His Word continued on its journey until it came down to us today in its written modality, then understanding will be allusive until the belief issue is resolved.

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