

THE KNOWLEDGE OF LANGUAGES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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THE amount of linguistic information, direct as well as indirect, to be found in the Old Testament is fairly limited. Of course, everyone is familiar with the naming procedure described in Genesis ii. 19-20, when God brought the animals "unto the man to see what he would call them". In the creation story we thus find a hint also at the creation of language. The faculty of using language, the possession of reason, distinguishes man from animals. That Hebrew was the original language of mankind until the time of the confusion of Babel was, of course, a widespread belief (cf. *Bereshith Rabba* 18): the *Targum Yerushalmi* (Gen. xi. 1) asserts quite simply בלישן קודשא הוּוּ מַמְלִלִין דְּבַה אַתְּבְרִי עֲלֵמָא. Talmud Sanhedrin 38*b*, on the other hand, thinks that Adam spoke Aramaic, while Shabbath 12*b* finds that אין מלאכי השרת מכירין בלשון ארמי.¹

Genesis xi, especially verses 6 and 7, reflects accurately the power derived from the possession of language, the strength conveyed by ready communication, and the dire intellectual consequences to human society following upon linguistic profusion and confusion. The Lord said: "They are one people, and they have all one language . . . and now nothing will be withholden from them which they purpose to do. Let us go down and there confound their language that they may not understand one another's speech." This explanation of the diversity of languages must have answered an ancient and no doubt persistent desire to understand the perplexing problem of the linguistic barriers dividing mankind. Diversity of language is apt to engender diversity of interest and antagonism, while the possession of a common means of communication can act

¹ Cf. M. Grünbaum, *Neue Beiträge zur Semitischen Sagenkunde* (Leiden, 1893), p. 63; Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, v. 205.

as a powerful factor in the development of national consciousness. The aetiological legend of Babel reveals considerable human and psychological insight—yet it must not, of course, be taken as reflecting actual linguistic evolution.

The subject of the present paper first occurred to me when recently I had occasion to meditate upon two astounding, but apparently scarcely noticed, linguistic problems in the Old Testament—problems which have no connection with each other, save their bearing on language: First, according to 2 Kings xviii. 26, the officers of the king of Assyria must have possessed unusual polyglottal talents, for they could speak Hebrew (and apparently with considerable facility), Aramaic (then, i.e. the eighth century, a language of great international standing and range), and no doubt their native Assyrian. The actual wording of the Biblical account is pregnant with far-reaching implications to which I shall return presently. And, secondly, I have been puzzled over the language in which Samson, the Danite, would have conversed with Delilah, the Philistine.

To deal with the Assyrian officers first: I stated above that they could speak *Hebrew*, but the actual word used in 2 Kings xviii. 26 (as well as in the parallel account in Isaiah xxxvi. 11 and the condensed narrative in 2 Chron. xxxii. 18) is 'יהודית', the language of the Jews. Curiously enough, the term "Hebrew" does not occur in the Old Testament. The language of the Hebrews is called by Biblical writers either "Jewish" (so, in addition to the above passages, also in Neh. xiii. 24) or שפת כנען (Isa. xix. 18), the language of Canaan. Whether "Jewish" and "the language of Canaan" were really identical, both referring to Hebrew as has—to my knowledge—been generally assumed, is not, I feel, fully established. While the expression "the language of Canaan" might have been chosen as the one most likely to be known to the Egyptians (who are being addressed in that context), it is, to my mind, at least conceivable that this reference is to some Canaanite *lingua franca* which may have remained in oral use but was obviously excluded from written sources. The absence from the Old Testament of the term עברית is quite possibly no more than sheer accident—as must indeed be expected in a document of comparatively modest

size such as the Old Testament. The word "Hebrew", as indicating the language, is first attested in the prologue to Sirach; it later appears in the New Testament as ἑβραϊστί (John v. 2 and elsewhere), in Josephus, and, though sparingly, in the Talmud.¹

The Assyrian officers' command of Hebrew must have been excellent if they were able to address the people assembled on the wall. The effect of their words might have been serious, and thus "Elyakim . . . Shebna and Yoah said unto Rabshakeh: 'Speak, I pray thee, unto thy servants in Aramaic, for we understand it; and do not speak with us in Jewish (i.e. in Hebrew) within ear-shot of the people that are on the wall.'" The Jewish negotiators make a special point of stressing that they are able to *understand*² (not necessarily to *speak*) Aramaic, the language of international diplomatic intercourse; their knowledge of Aramaic was, therefore, not apparently a matter of course as they assume it to be in the case of the Assyrian emissaries. In any event, it is clear that at that time Aramaic was known only to a small upper layer of the Jewish population.

Old Testament commentators have frequently asserted that in consequence of Assyria's relations with Palestine, in the last quarter of the eighth century, her officers were "*naturally* acquainted with the Hebrew tongue".³ I can find little or no warrant for this claim, for it would appear that Rabshakeh may have been specially selected for his mission on account of his exceptional knowledge of Hebrew. I am not aware of any other express evidence of Assyrians possessing a command of Hebrew, nor would the historical-political circumstances of the time encourage such an assumption. The Jewish negotiators were clearly ignorant of Akkadian, for otherwise they would have suggested that language as a means of communication—not least because a parley in Akkadian would have ensured that no ordinary Judaeans could follow the discussion. There is no detectable hint in Old Testament literature that the Assyrian

¹ Rabbinical sources prefer לשון הקודש and similar expressions.

² Rashi to Isa. xxxvi. 11 :

כי שומעים אנחנו: מכירים אנחנו אותו ול' שומעים אינטונדנ'ש בלע'ז.

³ Thus G. W. Wade in *Westminster Commentaries* to Isa. xxxvi. 11, and similarly Marti in *Kurzer Hand-Commentar zum A.T.*

language was ever known or understood even by the aristocrats or diplomatists of Israel and Judah. On the contrary, if the allusion in Isaiah xxxiii. 19 is in fact to the Assyrian language (" a people of deep speech that thou canst not perceive, a strange tongue that thou canst not understand "), it would show that Akkadian conveyed the impression of particular linguistic diversity.

Another interesting and important point emerges from this far-reaching verse in 2 Kings xviii. 26: Hebrew and Aramaic were not mutually intelligible. The Jewish negotiators' request to talk Aramaic would only have been meaningful if the people could not even grasp the gist of the discussion. Now, we know of course that Hebrew and Aramaic are not merely " dialectally " distinguished but are each of well-established and fairly clearly delimited linguistic identity. Yet, if the Masoretic text of the Hebrew and Aramaic portions of the Old Testament were a reliable guide to the actual pronunciation of these two languages in the eighth century B.C., we might suppose that their linguistic diversity would scarcely exceed that between, say, Spanish and Italian. It would not, I submit, stretch the evidence of 2 Kings xviii. 26 beyond its permissible limit if we saw here further support for the view that the Masoretic redaction of the Hebrew text appears in an Aramaicized form. The Hebrew spoken about the year 700 B.C. must have been very much more sharply differentiated from Aramaic than the Biblical texts would allow us to suppose. In other words: if the learned Rabshakeh had pronounced Hebrew and Aramaic in the manner of the Masoretic text, it is very probable that the people on the wall would have gathered at least the general sense even of his Aramaic. It is, of course, notoriously difficult to make valid and non-impressionistic statements about the degree of mutual intelligibility of two languages. A great deal depends on individual speakers and their educational level.

We are not, of course, told whether Rabshakeh and his Assyrian colleagues recognized some resemblances between Hebrew, Aramaic, and their own Assyrian, but we may well doubt that such recognition obtruded itself upon their conscious minds. The stimulus of such awareness would most probably have come from some language of entirely different structure ;

only against the background of a completely heterogeneous linguistic framework is it likely that some of the more obvious relations between kindred tongues might have been noticed. The mental operation and intellectual insight required to discover linguistic kinship are of a high order.

It must remain perplexing and astonishing that in the vast Talmudic literature matters of strictly linguistic interest occupy so negligible a place. Philological inquiry and scholarship proper never really flourished, even though the continued use, side by side, of Hebrew and Aramaic (the latter in its various and readily distinguishable dialects) would have offered a most favourable field for comparative studies. Of course, there was no dearth, either in Bible, Talmud, or Midrash, of facile etymologizing. Even comparative etymologies are not entirely unknown, but then it is easy to recognize single and chance vocabulary resemblances, while it requires considerable power of abstraction and systematization to discern similarity of morphological structure, particularly as everyone conceives of the form patterns of his own language—until convinced of the contrary—as something obvious, necessary, and universal.

It was only from the tenth century onwards that Jewish grammarians, under the impulse of Arabic philology, began to give thought to the patent resemblances of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic. Men like Sa'adia ben Yosef, Yehuda ibn Quraysh, Menahem ben Saruq and others of that period laid the foundations of comparative Semitic philology.

To turn now to the question of the language in which Samson and Delilah, Israelites and Philistines, would have communicated. Despite the close connections, albeit hostile, that existed at times between these two nations, the Old Testament is silent on this point. To interpret this silence as encouraging the assumption that that language must have been Hebrew would only be acceptable if the Old Testament otherwise revealed much interest in the linguistic situation in Canaan. True, there is the well-known verse in Nehemiah xiii. 24 where Nehemiah finds Judaeans married to Philistine ("Ashdodite") women and half their children speaking Ashdodite and quite unable to speak "Jewish". But otherwise there is a most remarkable dearth

of knowledge as regards the language of the Philistines. L. W. Batten's supposition (I.C.C. to Ezra and Nehemiah, p. 300) that "from the free intercourse between Israelites and Philistines in the early days we would infer that their languages were mutually intelligible" is devoid of any basis in fact. The Philistines were a non-Semitic people hailing from Caphtor,¹ and whatever their original language was it is unlikely to have been intelligible to the Hebrews.

The Philistines were probably the most important people among a wave of migrants, generally seafarers, who left their homes in the North-Eastern Mediterranean and settled along the coast of Canaan some time in the twelfth century B.C. The Ugaritic discoveries, the decipherment of the Mycenaean documents, and other recent accretions to our knowledge of Near Eastern archaeology and history have clearly shown the profound connections between the Aegean area and the Semitic coastal plains of Syria and Palestine.² The Philistines, who occupied the shores of Southern Palestine, imported a highly developed political organization in the form of five federated city-states (Gaza, Ashkelon, Ekron, Ashdod, and Gath), considerable skill in agriculture and warfare, and a greatly advanced material civilization. In contrast to the Semites living in the area of their new habitat they were and remained uncircumcised, 'arelim, as the Old Testament repeatedly points out.

There are some traces of their non-Semitic tongue: *seren* (the head of their city-states) is probably related to the Greek *τύραννος*, *qoba'* or *koba'* "helmet", *lappid* "torch" from *λαμπάς* (*λαμπάδος*),³ etc. At the same time, it is virtually certain that they soon abandoned their Indo-European native tongue and adopted a Canaanite language, though it would be

¹ Cf. Wainwright in *J.J.S.* vii. 1-2 (1956), 91. See also the same author's *Caphtor-Cappadocia* in *Vetus Testamentum*, vi (1956), 199 ff., and further bibliography there. However, the Philistines' provenance from the area of the Eastern Mediterranean seems to me sufficiently well established.

² See especially C. H. Gordon's pioneering work in this field. Among others, his *Introduction to Old Testament Times* (pp. 108 ff.) and *Homer and Bible* (*H.U.C.A.* xxvi, 1955) might be mentioned. Cf. also W. F. Albright's *Archaeology of Palestine* (Pelican), pp. 113 ff.

³ Some further indications in Gordon, *H.U.C.A.* 1955, pp. 60 ff. Cf. now also Yadin in *Sefer Tur-Sinai* (1960), p. 96.

quite impossible to determine its precise identity. A glance at an historical map shows to what extent the Philistines and their Hebrew, and especially Danite, fellow-inhabitants of Palestine must have been in constant touch in the *Shefelah*, the lowlands. C. H. Gordon has rightly pointed out that they must have become "linguistically Canaanitized, so that interpreters are never needed to facilitate relations between Semitic Hebrews and Indo-European Philistines".¹ It is, however, improbable that they spoke Hebrew in the sense in which we understand that term; much rather must we think here of שפת כנען, a Canaanite *lingua franca*, that was widely understood by the nations of Canaan.

Samson was not the only one who preferred Philistine wives; we have already heard of Nehemiah's stringent measures against mixed marriages with Philistines (xiii. 23 ff.). The Ashdodites had apparently particularly close relations with the Hebrews and became to them the Philistines *par excellence*.² Through Philistea passed much of the trade and many of the cultural contacts with the Mediterranean world, and most of these communications must have been conducted in some mixed Canaanite *patois* of which the Old Testament tells us nothing at all. The historical and political conditions in Canaan are very likely to have encouraged the evolution of such a *Mischsprache*.

Of course, scholars have long termed Hebrew itself a "mixed language".³ The justification for this appellation need not be disputed, but one may doubt that it contains much of linguistic value, for in the sense in which this is true of Hebrew it applies to most languages. It has long been realized that Hebrew did not enter Canaan with the Hebrews; an early form of Hebrew or an Hebraic language had been spoken by the Semitic inhabitants of the country, the population which was conquered and partly dislodged by Joshua. This is attested by the evidence of place-names and the Canaanite glosses of the Tel el-Amarna letters. Many of these documents were written by Canaanites and,

¹ *Introduction to Old Testament Times*, p. 108.

² Cf. Wellhausen, *Israelitische und Jüdische Geschichte* ⁸, pp. 179 ff.

³ See esp. Bauer and Leander, *Historische Grammatik der Hebräischen Sprache* (Halle, 1918), p. 19.

though composed in a vulgar form of Akkadian, they are full of Canaanite expressions and forms.

The Old Testament is, of course, explicitly or more often implicitly aware of the long linguistic history of Canaan. I leave out of account here the Aramaic portions of Daniel and Ezra, but even in Genesis (xxxi. 47) there is a hint of linguistic consciousness when Jacob calls the "heap of witness" גַּלְעָד but Laban, the Aramaean, calls it in his language גַּר שְׁהָדוּתָא. The solitary Aramaic verse in Jeremiah (x. 11) is, according to the Targum, meant to be the contents of the message which the members of the Golah (Jer. xxix) are to convey to their Babylonian captors. The text-critical and linguistic difficulties created by this verse need not detain us in the present context.¹

References to the languages of Israel's Canaanite predecessors and neighbours can be counted on the fingers of one hand: In Deuteronomy ii. 11 we are told that the Moabites called the giants *Emim*; similarly, the Ammonites (Deut. ii. 20) named them *Zamzummim*—both expressions which throw little or no light on their respective languages. Fortunately, we know a little more about the Moabite language from the famous Mesha stone which commemorates the Moabite king's victory over Israel (2 Kings iii. 4) about the year 830 B.C. From this important inscription it is clear that Hebrew and Moabite must have been mutually intelligible, for the language of the stone (and one must naturally judge cautiously on the basis of one single document) differs only very slightly from that of the Old Testament, while its style shows a quite remarkable resemblance with comparable Biblical narratives. Naturally, from the consonantal skeleton which alone has been transmitted it is impossible to say how the language might have sounded in its spoken form—just as the Masoretic pointing is scarcely a reliable guide to the pronunciation of Hebrew in the ninth century B.C. There is no discernible development in the Masoretic pronunciation of Hebrew, and the pointing applied to the consonants makes Deborah talk in very much the same manner as, say, Daniel a millennium later. But even if we allow for considerable dialectal variants that are not apparent in the consonantal texts of the

¹ See Kautzsch, *Gramm. d. Bibl.-Aram.*, p. 21.

Old Testament and the Mesha stele, respectively, we need not hesitate to assert that Hebrews and Moabites could communicate without undue difficulty. This impression is borne out very fully by the Book of Ruth, for neither of the two Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah, seems to have found it hard to understand their Judaeen relatives.

In Deuteronomy iii. 9 we are informed that Mount Hermon was called *Siryon* by the Sidonians and *Senir* by the Amorites. It might be worth noticing that these two names are distinguished only by the metathesis of *n* and *r*—but otherwise the linguistic value of this information is very limited. The same is, unfortunately, true of King Hiram of Tyre's dissatisfied appellation, אֲרָץ כְּבוֹל, for the cities which Solomon had given him (1 Kings, ix. 13). Tyre and Sidon, mentioned already in the Amarna letters, were important Phoenician seaports which maintained close commercial relations with Palestine. Their Phoenician speech could almost certainly be understood by their southern neighbours.

The odd non-Semitic word can also be found in the Old Testament, especially in its later layers; I am here thinking of a few Persian expressions, especially in the books of Esther and Daniel. Egyptian is quoted in Genesis xli. 43 and 45; both phrases appear to be genuine, the former an exclamation (perhaps "attention!") and the latter the Egyptian version of Joseph's name.

A notable facet of Biblical interest in foreign nomenclature is the frequent endeavour to cite titles of alien dignitaries in their indigenous form. In Exodus xv. 15 אֲלוֹפֵי אֲדוֹם "the dukes of Edom" and אֵילֵי מוֹאָב "the mighty of Moab" are, according to the Septuagint, the ἡγεμόνες and ἄρχοντες of those two nations, although both terms occur, of course, in different connotations as well. We have already seen that the heads of the five Philistine city-states are invariably termed *seren*. Whether there is an attempt at accurate nomenclature in Joshua xiii. 21, is not quite certain. In Ezekiel xxiii. 6 פְּחוֹת and סְגָנִים are loan-words from Akkadian, "district governors" and "prefects". The former is generally used of military officers under the kings of Assyria or of governors of the Persian kings; the

latter appears frequently in a similar connotation but is also applied to Jewish officials. Thus it occurs in the Elephantine papyri describing the heads of the Jewish community there. In the books of Esther (i. 3 ; viii. 10, etc.) and Daniel (iii. 2, etc.) we meet a fair number of Persian titles which lend an air of authenticity and local colour to the Biblical narratives.

A few miscellaneous and random references to language matters deserve a mention in this context : In Ezekiel iii. 5-6, it is affirmed that the prophet is sent to the house of Israel and not to **עַם עֲמֻקֵי שִׁפָּה וְכִבְדֵי לִשׁוֹן** whose words he cannot understand. The rendering " a people of deep lip and heavy tongue " is, of course, literally correct, but I doubt that the inference of many commentators¹ that this represents an allusion to the guttural speech, at least to Hebrew ears, of some of Israel's neighbours finds support in the linguistic situation. As far as we know, this verse can only refer to either Assyrian or Aramaic, and all the evidence we possess suggests that these two languages were less rather than more " guttural " than Hebrew itself. The A.V.'s translation of " a people of strange speech and hard language " seems to me to reflect the position accurately. Similar expressions occur in Isaiah xxxiii. 19 (as I have already mentioned before) and in Exodus iv. 10, though Moses' **כִּבְד לִשׁוֹן** has a different connotation.

While other Canaanite tongues, such as those of Moab, Tyre, or Sidon, are never assumed to present any real difficulty of mutual intelligibility, languages of a different group altogether are recognized as " unknown ". One need only think of Psalm lxxxi. 6, where Egyptian occurs as a language " which I do not know ".

Whereas the bulk of the Old Testament is, of course, written in Hebrew—apart only from a few chapters in Aramaic—it has sometimes been held by commentators and scholars that in a few cases the Hebrew version might be a translation from some other language. This problem is, of course, never far from the mind of the New Testament scholar who is constantly forced to consider the possibility of an Aramaic or Hebrew *Vorlage* of the Greek text, but the student of the Old Testament can usually be sure

¹ E.g. Cooke, *Ezekiel*, in I.C.C., p. 39,

that he is at least dealing with the original—whatever the text-critical problems might be. But already Ibn Ezra, in his commentary to Job ii. 11, had played with the idea that the peculiar difficulties of the book of Job might result from its being a translation.¹ Tur-Sinai (Torczyner) has endeavoured to show,² with great ingenuity and learning, that the speeches of Job, his friends, and of God display not only an Idumaeian or Aramaic veneer but are actual translations into Hebrew from an Aramaic original. In many instances textual difficulties can only be resolved by reconstructing the Aramaic text which formed the basis of certain mistranslations. Similar considerations, though on a much smaller scale, may possibly apply to other parts of Wisdom literature (op. cit. p. 111).

Finally, some serious work ought to be undertaken, in the light of modern linguistic notions, on the question of dialects and colloquialisms in the Old Testament. The material is certainly far from being abundant, but more can be said than repetition of the hackneyed story of *shiboleth*—*siboleth*. External sources have shown us that the language of the Old Testament was by no means a phenomenon *sui generis*: the Ugaritic epics or the Moabite victory stele of Mesha have underlined what had long been suspected by all who study the Old Testament dispassionately. We must now endeavour to shed more light on dialect geography and the influence of social stratification on the Hebrew of Biblical times. But one of the most important desiderata remains the continued quest for the type of Hebrew and its pronunciation employed during, say, the period of the kings of Israel and Judah. In recent years fresh impetus has been given to this work by the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, by renewed study of the pronunciation of Hebrew by the Samaritans, and by the recognition that the sum total of pre-Masoretic materials may well place the study of Hebrew on a different basis altogether. I need hardly add that in this scheme of things the place of comparative Semitic linguistics can scarcely be overstated.

¹ וחז"ל אמרו כי משה כתב ספר איוב והקרוב אלי כי הוא ספר מתורגם על כן הוא קשה בפירוש כדרך כל ספר מתורגם.

² Most recently in the English version of his commentary on Job, esp. pp. xxx ff. and 110 ff.