

ON THE HISTORY OF HEBREW AFTER THE FALL OF JERUSALEM

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While the history of the Hebrew language during the monarchic period may have been rather uneventful, something extraordinary appears to have happened to the language after the fall of Jerusalem.¹ Some scholars take no notice of this problem, treating all Biblical Hebrew as a single language, but most Hebraists realize there was a break.² The differences between “classical” and “late” biblical Hebrew are too important to ignore.³

The nature of the discontinuity is controversial. Are the changes due to natural language evolution, or do they reflect a different scenario? Did Hebrew die out as a living idiom and carry on purely as a literary language? Do we have to reckon with a form of diglossia, the bifurcation into high and low varieties of the language, the first one used mainly in writing—as documented in the biblical books from this period—and the second in speech? And if so, can anything be said about the spoken form of the language during the exilic-postexilic period?

Asking these questions is important, but anyone who seeks answers runs into severe problems. Notably, the absolute dates of many Hebrew texts are hard to determine. To a Hebraist, it may look as if a sea change affected written Hebrew between the time of Jeremiah (around the turn of the 7th century BCE) and the time of Nehemiah (around the middle of the 5th century), a period of approximately 150 years. The dates of the prose

¹ On the history of Hebrew, see Angel Sáenz Badillos, *A History of the Hebrew Language*, trans. John Elwolde (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). The Hebrew prose of the Pentateuch and Former Prophets is relatively homogenous, but there are a few signs of evolution, see Yoel Elitzur, “Emergence and Disappearance of Words and Expressions in Pre-Exilic Biblical Hebrew,” *RB* 129 (2022): 481–504; Aaron Hornkohl, *Diachronic Diversity in Classical Biblical Hebrew* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies and Open Book Publishers, 2024).

² See e.g. Samuel Rolles Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (New York: Scribner, 1898⁸), 505; Avi Hurvitz, *A Concise Lexicon of Late Biblical Hebrew: Linguistic Innovations in the Writings of the Second Temple Period*, VTSup 160 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 1–2. An extensive argument against the notion of a break is proposed in Robert Rezetko and Ian Young, *Historical Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew: Steps toward an Integrated Approach*, ANEM 9 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014).

³ Ronald Hendel and Jan Joosten, *How Old Is the Hebrew Bible? A Linguistic, Textual, and Historical Study*, AYBRL (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

narrative in the books of Jeremiah and Nehemiah are uncertain, however. No autographs have been recovered of either of these figures and the earliest manuscripts of the books are those that have come to light in Qumran. Both works may contain passages that were written down much later than the events they recount.⁴

In seeking answers, I will therefore take a broader view and focus on long-term developments attested in a large array of writings. Certain events cast a long shadow in the history of a people. It is worthwhile to study the long term to understand what happened in a specific period.

1. The origins of Mishnaic Hebrew I: Evidence of second-language acquisition

In a series of recent publications, Edward Cook has developed a novel approach to Mishnaic Hebrew.⁵ Noting several cases of “simplification,” in which Mishnaic Hebrew has eliminated grammatical structures and sub-systems that were operative in earlier chronolects, Cook argued that only a scenario of second-language acquisition could explain the changes in question. Mishnaic Hebrew came into being when speakers of a different language learnt Hebrew as adults and simplified—as adult learners of a second language tend to do—its grammar. They then transmitted this simplified Hebrew to the next generation and to other groups.

A series of grammatical features of Aramaic origin occurring in Mishnaic Hebrew further buttress this view.⁶ As Cook points out, the transfer of grammatical elements from one language to another is relatively uncommon in situations where speakers borrow from a foreign language with which they have come into contact. Borrowing of this type more often leads to the transfer of content words. The importation of grammatical elements from one language to another more typically happens in the course of second-language acquisition.

⁴ See e.g. Erich Zenger et al., *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2006⁶), 452–478 (Jeremiah), 263–278 (Nehemiah).

⁵ See Edward M. Cook, *Language Contact and the Genesis of Mishnaic Hebrew*, The Edward Ullendorff Lectures in Semitic Philology, Fourth Lecture (Cambridge, 2017), doi.org/10.17863/CAM.9630; idem, “The Aramaic Influence on Mishnaic Hebrew: Borrowing or Interference?” in *Hebrew Texts and Language of the Second Temple Period: Proceedings of an Eighth Symposium on the Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Ben Sira*, STDJ, 134, ed. Steven E. Fassberg (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 25–36.

⁶ In addition to the papers cited in the preceding note, see Edward M. Cook, “Mishnaic Hebrew and Second Language Acquisition,” unpublished paper (2018).

In Cook's approach, then, Mishnaic Hebrew is a living variety of Hebrew that came into being when a group of Aramaic speakers acquired Hebrew as a second language. These language learners appropriated all the content words of Hebrew, while at the same time they unconsciously imported into their speech grammatical features and structures of their native language. As this new form of the language crystallized, it was transmitted to a later generation for whom it was their native tongue. Later, this form of speech spread to other groups.

Similar scenarios are known to have produced many languages of the world, notably Middle Arabic dialects, Afrikaans, and different varieties of Creole.

Cook's hypothesis raises important historical questions. Who were those adult Aramaic speakers who learnt Hebrew as a second language and durably influenced the history of the language? When did this process happen, and how does it fit into the history of Hebrew as a whole? Before addressing these questions, however, it is worthwhile pondering the strength of the linguistic evidence. The material Cook has gathered is impressive on its own. Moreover, additional evidence can be found.

Evidence of "simplification"

When populations go through the process of shifting to a different language—in a scenario of conquest, where the conquered are forced to speak the language of the conquerors, or in a scenario of migration, where migrants need to learn the language of the country to which they have moved—they tend to simplify the acquired language. Structures and subsystems that are at once hard to learn and of limited communicative benefit may be under-used or disappear completely from the speech of the learners. As time passes, the simplified structures may continue in the native language of following generations. In certain cases, the new, simplified, "dialect" may then spread to other groups who are not related to the original second-language learners among whom it was created.

Mishnaic Hebrew is not an artificial *Mischsprache*.⁷ The rich and vibrant idiom that underlies the Mishna and early midrashim must have been native to most of those who used it. Nevertheless, a comparison of Biblical Hebrew (BH) to Mishnaic Hebrew (MH) shows that many grammatical features of the former completely disappear from the latter. This happens to an extent that is not expected in natural language evolution.

⁷ In this way, Cook's approach differs essentially from that of Abraham Geiger, *Lehr- und lesebuch zur Sprache der Mischnah* (Breslau, 1845).

Cook's prime exhibit is the verbal system. Multiple changes bring about a significant simplification in the transition from BH to MH:

- The infinitive absolute, which is used in various functions in BH, disappears in MH.
- Special modal forms, such as the long imperative, the cohortative, and the jussive, which are frequent in BH, similarly vanish without a trace in MH.
- The omnipresent “conversive” tenses of BH, *weqatal* and *wayyiqtol*, are virtually unattested in MH.
- A development not mentioned by Cook is that of the passive *qal*. While the passive *qal* is well represented in BH, it is absent from MH.
- Another case of simplification is the disappearance of specific forms for 2nd and 3rd plural feminine forms of the imperfect in MH, where the masculine forms of BH are used for both genders.⁸
- Another verbal feature that falls by the wayside between BH and MH is the so-called paragogic *nun*.

All these features occur hundreds of times in the Biblical corpus.⁹ Their disappearance in MH implies a momentous transformation of the language.

Admittedly, verbal systems evolve over time: old forms fall from use and new forms spring up with new functions. Nonetheless, the conjoint disappearance of all these features remains striking.

Still other instances of simplification may be added from the domain of *nominal morphology*. Part of the inflection of the noun still operative in BH does not carry over into MH:

- Directional *he* is frequent in BH but it survives in MH only in specific adverbs such as הוֹצֵא “out” and מַטָּה “downward.”

⁸ M. H. Segal, *A Grammar of Mishnaic Hebrew* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1927), 71, §153.

⁹ An Accordance search found 667 occurrences of the infinitive absolute in the biblical corpus, 7999 of *wayyiqtol*; 3950 of *weqatal* (some of which are to be interpreted as *w-* + *qatal*), 409 of the cohortative; 362 of the jussive, 260 of the long imperative. All these numbers are bound to be approximate.

• The adverbial ending *-am* remains functional in BH, note חֲנָם “freely, gratis” from חֵן “grace,” יוֹמָם “by day” from יוֹם “day,” and רֵיקָם “emptily” from רֵק “empty.” In MH the ending lives on in some petrified expressions such as אֲמָנָם “verily” and מִתְּנָת חֲנָם “a free gift.” It is no longer recognized as an adverbial ending, however: רֵיקָם (רֵיקָן) is not used as an adverb but as an adjective.¹⁰

The changes involved are quantitatively less important than those in the verbal system. Still, the fact that the direction of developments in nominal morphosyntax mirrors developments in the verbal system would seem to be significant.

A third area where simplification can be observed is that of *function words*: grammatical items, usually short ones, expressing meanings that are not always easy to define, but that are, nevertheless, material in guiding listeners/readers through the text in which they occur. Several function words of BH simply do not continue into MH: e.g. inferential אֲפֹאֵל, the politeness particle בִּי, exclamatory הִוֵּי, asseverative מְאֹד, “very,” פֶּן “lest,” as well as כִּי, which is used almost 4000 times in various functions in BH but virtually absent from MH.¹¹ In other cases, BH uses two expressions more or less synonymously only one of which survives into MH:

- BH עִם, אִתְּ “with” — MH עִם “with”¹²
- BH גַּם, אֲף “also” — MH אֲף “also”¹³
- BH תוֹךְ, בְּתוֹךְ with prepositions: “in/to/from *the midst of*” — MH תוֹךְ with prepositions: “in/to/from *the midst of*”
- BH מַדּוּעַ, לָמָּה “why” — MH לָמָּה “why”

Note also the first-person pronoun:

- BH אֲנִי, אֲנֹכִי “I” — MH אֲנִי “I”

¹⁰ Moshe Bar-Asher, “On Several Linguistic Features of Qumran Hebrew,” in *Hamlet on a Hill. Semitic and Greek Studies Presented to Professor T. Muraoka on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, OLP 118, ed. M. F. J. Baasten and W. Th. van Peursen (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 72–93, in particular 72–82.

¹¹ The particle does occur in set expressions such as לֹא כִּי אֲלֵא “not so, but” and interrogative וְכִי, but it is not found in the functions it has in BH.

¹² Cook “Mishnaic Hebrew and Second Language Acquisition”; Niek Arentsen, “Diachrony and Second Isaiah: The Preposition אֵת and Aramaisms,” *VT* 68 (2019): 511–525.

¹³ Christian Stadel, “The use of גַּם and אֲף in Qumran Hebrew,” in *Hebrew Texts and Language of the Second Temple Period*, STDJ 134, ed. Steven E. Fassberg (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 310–328.

In still other instances, a group of BH function words of similar meaning is replaced with a single new item:

- BH *בֵּה, פֹּה, הֵנָּה* “here” — MH *כֵּאן* “here”
- BH *אֵיפֹה, אֵיכֹה, אֵיזֵה* “where” — MH *אֵיכָן/הֵיכָן* “where”

Note also that exceptive expressions are construed with a bewildering variety of function words in BH: *אֲדָ, רַק, אִם, כִּי, וְזֹלָתִי, מִבְּלִעְדִּי, בְּלֹתִי*, while in MH two items cover this function, *אֲלֵא* “but” and *חוּץ מִן* “except.”

As Cook has argued, massive simplification is not expected in natural language evolution. It is, however, abundantly paralleled in languages that went through a process of second language acquisition. While children learn the language of their parents more or less completely, adult learners tend to take shortcuts.¹⁴ In a situation where a group of adults needs to learn a second language this may lead to the formation of a new “dialect,” a form of the target language that is not identical in all details to that of its native speakers. Under the right circumstances, such a “dialect” may become the native language of a following generation, the children of the adult learners. Subsequently, it may spread to other groups, including native speakers of the target language.

Evidence of “interference”

Independent evidence showing that MH emerged in a process of second language acquisition is afforded by grammatical elements borrowed from Aramaic. Recent work on “languages in contact” has shown that two scenarios should be distinguished: borrowing, and interference.¹⁵ *Borrowing* happens when speakers of a given language adopt words or expressions from a language with which they have come into contact. In this situation, the most common type of loans are content words, notably nouns. In certain cases, verbs can be borrowed as well, as can interjections and short locutions such as English *okay* or *bye* in French or German. Borrowing of grammatical items and structures from an adstrate language happens only when the contact between the two languages is drawn out over a

¹⁴ Jeff Siegel, “Pidgins/Creoles and Second Language Acquisition,” in *The Handbook of Pidgin and Creole Studies*, ed. Silvia Kouwenberg and John Victor Single (Chichester: Blackwell, 2008), 189–218, in particular 194.

¹⁵ Haspelmath proposes to keep the term “borrowing” for any type of transfer from one language to another and to use “adoption” and “imposition” for the distinct scenarios by which the transfer happens, see Martin Haspelmath, “Lexical borrowing: Concepts and issues,” in *Loanwords in the World’s Languages. A Comparative Handbook*, ed. Martin Haspelmath and Uri Tadmor (Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter, 2009), 35–54, in particular 36.

long period and involves extensive bilingualism. *Interference* is the process by which speakers import elements from their native language into a language they have learnt, or are learning, as grown-ups. Here the most common type of transfer is that of grammatical elements: the content words are those of the second language (sometimes called the “lexifier”), but the grammar is that of the learners’ first language.

All through its history, Hebrew has been in contact with Aramaic adstrates and many Aramaic loanwords have been identified. What is presently of interest is that MH also has a sizable number of grammatical features that are not native to Hebrew but have been imported from Aramaic. Cook points to the following features:

- The construction consisting of the adjective עָתִיד “ready,” the preposition ל and the infinitive to express the future without deontic connotations.
- The limitation of pronominal suffixes on infinitives to the expression of the direct object.
- The use of the composite conjunction עַד שְׁלֹא “before.”

In all three cases, features that exist in BH are recombined in a way that mimics Aramaic structures. Although the usages clearly diverge from BH, the speakers who initiated them were in all likelihood unconscious of the fact that they were following Aramaic patterns. Other examples of the same type could be listed, such as the use of מָה שֶׁ (cf. Aram. מַא זִי) in independent relative clauses, already signaled by Gesenius,¹⁶ or the composite preposition מִן חוּץ מִן (cf. Aram. בַּר מִן) “except” mentioned above. Note also the following function words, all of which owe something to Aramaic:

- כֹּאן “here” (Aram. כֹּא; BH see above)
- אֵיכֵן/הֵיכֵן “where” (Aram. אֵיכֹא; BH see above)
- כְּבָר “already” (Aram. idem; no precise equivalent in BH)
- אִלּוּ “if” (Aram. idem; BH לוּ)
- אֲלָא “but” (cf. Aram. אֲלֵא, אֲלָא הֵן “if not, except, but”)

¹⁶ Wilhelm Gesenius, *Geschichte der hebräischen Sprache und Schrift* (Leipzig: Vogel, 1815), 36.

Function words are the last type of words to be borrowed in an adstrate situation, but in MH several of them were imported from Aramaic, often instead of genuine Hebrew items.¹⁷

MH is characterized by an in-depth refashioning of grammatical features and structures on the basis of Aramaic. The most reasonable way to explain this phenomenon is by postulating that Hebrew went through a phase of second-language acquisition. Aramaic speakers learnt Hebrew as adults and while doing so imported grammatical constructions and function words from their native language into their second language.

Simplification and interference are distinct processes. As such they strengthen the argument for the view that MH reflects a phase of second-language acquisition in its genealogy. At the same time, it is easy to see that the two processes partly overlap:

- features that disappear from Hebrew in the simplification process are also absent from Aramaic, e.g. the infinitive absolute, and the “converted” tenses
- features reflecting interference from Aramaic supersede multiple Hebrew forms, thus contributing to the simplification of Hebrew.

The cumulative force of these data cannot easily be dismissed. Each single instance of simplification can be paralleled from natural language evolution, and each single grammatical item borrowed or calqued from Aramaic could be accounted for as *ad hoc* Aramaisms of bilingual speakers or writers.¹⁸ When they are taken together, however, they strongly suggest a momentous transformation in the history of the Hebrew language. Languages do change, but left to their own devices, their vocabulary will change more than their grammar. It is not normal for a natural language to lose large portions of its grammar over a relatively short period. Nor do we expect a language to borrow a whole series of function words and grammatical constructions from a different language. The differences between biblical and Mishnaic Hebrew testify to a drastic process that deeply affected the internal structure of the language.

2. The origins of Mishnaic Hebrew II: Questions of Chronology

¹⁷ Note Hans Henrich Hock and Brian D. Joseph, *Language History, Language Change, and Language Relationship. An Introduction to Historical and Comparative Linguistics* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2009²), 245: “The most successful resistance to borrowing is offered by basic vocabulary (...) function words essential in syntax, such as the demonstrative pronouns this and that, the definite article the, or conjunctions like and, or, if, and when.”

¹⁸ Cook, “Borrowing or Interference?” 29.

Seeking a possible historical setting for the process he hypothesizes, Cook cautiously proposes situating the emergence of MH in the late second to early first century BCE.¹⁹ In the aftermath of the Maccabean revolt, the Hasmonaeans incorporated populations falling under their control into Judaism by force. These populations may well have been speakers of Aramaic, and some of them may well have found it opportune to learn Hebrew, which was spoken by the leading classes in the Hasmonaean kingdom. Thus, they could be the adult learners of Hebrew who developed the simplified Hebrew, with a large portion of Aramaic grammar, that eventually spread to other groups and is known to us, in a somewhat later version, as Mishnaic Hebrew.

Cook's case for an origin of MH in the Hasmonaean period is well argued. It is hard to accept nonetheless. A date around the turn of the second century BCE is simply too late to accommodate the evidence.

MH becomes fully visible in the Mishna and contemporary Tannaitic Midrashim, which are by common consent dated to the early third century CE. The early Rabbinic sources incorporate, again by common consent, earlier material, some of which goes back to the first century BCE. This time span would fit Cook's hypothesis: if MH emerged in the Hasmonaean period, one would indeed expect it to be attested from the latter half of the first century CE onward. However, as several scholars have pointed out, a large array of evidence shows that some form of MH was around well before the mid-second century BCE.²⁰

Early attestations of characteristic features of MH

Particularly convincing are grammatical features characteristic of MH that show up sporadically in writings predating the Hasmonaean period.²¹ A good example is the occurrence of חוץ מן "except" in Ecclesiastes.

¹⁹ The emergence of MH in the Hasmonaean period was argued already by Joseph Klausner in 1923, and has been embraced by several other scholars, notably Chaim Rabin, "The Historical Background of Qumran Hebrew," in *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 4, ed. Chaim Rabin and Yigael Yadin (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1965²), 144–161, in particular 157, and more recently Daniel Machiela and Robert Jones, "Was There a Revival of Hebrew during the Hasmonean Period? A Reassessment of the Evidence," *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 12 (2021): 217–80.

²⁰ Segal, *Grammar*; Rabin "Historical Background"; Richard C. Steiner, "A Colloquialism in Jer. 5:13 from the Ancestor of Mishnaic Hebrew," *JSS* 37 (1992): 11–26 (with references to many other scholars); Moshe Bar-Asher, *Studies in Classical Hebrew* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 232.

²¹ Most of these were collected in Driver, *Introduction*, 474–475, 484–485, 506–507. Driver lists grammatical features alongside content words such as תלמיד "student" and צריך "need."

Eccl 2:25:

כִּי מִי יֹאכַל וּמִי יַחֲוֶשׁ חוּץ מִמֶּנִּי

“For who can eat and who can feel except I?”²²

This is the only attestation in the Hebrew Bible of this composite preposition, which is found over 100 times in the Mishna. As was pointed out above, it is a calque, or loan-translation, from Aramaic *בְּר מִן* “except” (lit. “outside of”). As such it is most probably to be regarded as an instance of interference, possibly due to second-language acquisition. Ecclesiastes elsewhere uses BH *כִּי אִם* “except,” an expression not found in MH, except in quotations of biblical verses.²³ The profile of *חוּץ מִן* “except” in Ecclesiastes is not that of a recent innovation in Hebrew that happens to be attested here for the first time. Instead, this appears to be an element of a different variety of Hebrew, a crossover from the spoken language into a literary text. This assertion may seem moot at this point, but it will gain in substance when we consider the notion of diglossia in section 4. Ecclesiastes’s language stands between BH and MH, not because it comes halfway in the process that led from the one to the other, but because it mixes elements of the two.

A single item proves little. There are, however, many more items with a similar profile. A concentration of such features is found in Ecclesiastes, but other late books of the Hebrew Bible also contain some of them. Additional early sources attesting grammatical items otherwise known almost exclusively from MH are Ben Sira and, indirectly, the Septuagint.²⁴

• Function words:

- 1) *אֵי* “woe” (Eccl 4:10; 10:16). In BH, “woe” is expressed by the interjection *אֵי*, while only *אֵי* is used in MH (e.g. Kelim 17:16). In addition to the two verses in

For our purposes, however, grammatical elements are more significant than content words. While the latter could be explained as borrowings by Hebrew speakers from an adstrate or superstrate language, the former are indicative of the type of scenario envisaged by Cook.

²² Many commentators prefer reading *מִמֶּנִּי* “apart from him (i.e. God),” with a few Hebrew manuscripts, Septuagint and Peshitta (see BHS). Although the variant implies a special usage of *חוּץ מִן*, this has no bearing on the present argument. In classical Hebrew, the notion “apart from (God)” is expressed with *מִבְּלִעְדֵי* “except” (2 Kgs 18:25).

²³ See e.g. Eccl 3:12; 5:10.

²⁴ For the use of the Septuagint as a witness to the existence of proto-MH see Jan Joosten, “Biblical Hebrew as Mirrored in the Septuagint: The Question of Influence from Spoken Hebrew,” *Textus* 21 (2002): 1–19.

Ecclesiastes, the MH particle is attested indirectly by the Septuagint, where the proper name **אִי־קְבוֹד** “No glory” is rendered *Ὀὐαὶ βαρκαβωθ* “Woe Barkaboth” (1 Sam 4:21). In the great Isaiah scroll from Qumran, **אִי** is substituted for **אִי־י** in Isa 6:5. The particle **אִי** “woe” may reflect interference from Aramaic. Note, however, that it is attested in Aramaic only in later dialects.²⁵

- 2) **אִי־יָהּ** “which” (Eccl 2:3; 11:6).²⁶ Except in Ecclesiastes, **אִי־יָהּ** means “where” in BH.²⁷ In MH it always has the meaning “which” (e.g. Ber. 6:4). The Septuagint too reflects the MH usage, rendering practically all cases of BH **אִי־יָהּ** with forms of *ποῖος* “which, what kind of.”²⁸ The change in meaning of this composite pronoun is almost certainly due to Aramaic interference, even though the Aramaic evidence is again later.²⁹
- 3) **אֲנִי** “we” (Jer 42:6). Instead of the usual **אֲנִי־הֵנּוּ** or the minority form **נִהְיֵנוּ**, Jeremiah once uses **אֲנִי** for the first-person plural pronoun. The short form is found 22 times in Qumran Hebrew, alongside 22 attestations of **אֲנִי־הֵנּוּ**. Mishnaic Hebrew uses **אֲנִי** exclusively. The origin of the short form is obscure. It is not due to Aramaic influence.
- 4) **אִלּוּ** “if” (Esth 7:4; Eccl 6:6).³⁰ While BH generally uses **לִי** to express conditions incapable of fulfilment, Esther and Ecclesiastes use **אִלּוּ** instead. The latter is the only one of these particles attested in MH. The particle derives from Aramaic.
- 5) **אֲפִלּוּ** “even if.” In Num 16:14, the Septuagint translator has read **אֲפִלּוּ** as MH **אֲפִלּוּ**:

MT “Moreover (**אֲפִלּוּ**), you have not (**אִלּוּ**) brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey”

LXX “Even if (*εἰ καὶ*) you had led us into a land flowing with milk and honey”

In Hebrew, the composite particle is attested hundreds of times from the Mishnah onward, but not in earlier sources.

- 6) **אֶצֶל** with verbs of motion (Dan 8:7, 17; 2 Chron 28:15). In Biblical Hebrew, this preposition is generally used to express static proximity to a person or an object, “beside.” Only in three passages in LBH is it used to express motion, “to, toward.” MH uses the particle in both meanings equally. The semantic extension in Hebrew

²⁵ See the online Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon (CAL): <https://cal.huc.edu/>

²⁶ The feminine **אִי־יָהּ** is not attested in Biblical Hebrew (but note Jer 4:7).

²⁷ In Esth 7:5 both meanings are possible.

²⁸ See 1 Sam 9:18; 1 Kgs 13:12; 22:24; 2 Kgs 3:8; Isa 50:1; 66:1; 6:16; Job 28:12, 20; 38:19; 2 Chron 18:23.

²⁹ See CAL.

³⁰ Note that in Eccl 6:6 4Qqoh reads **אִלּוּ** instead of **אִלּוּ**.

may be due to association of אֲצֵל with Aramaic לְוֵת, which is used in both meanings.

- 7) בְּאֶשֶׁר ל (Jon 1:8) and בְּשֵׁל “because of” (Jon 1:7, 12; Eccl 8:17). The composite particle consisting of the preposition ב, the relative particle, and the preposition ל is attested 22 times in the Mishna. It is a loan-translation (calque) of Aramaic בְּדִיל.
- 8) הִרָה גבר (הִרִי) “behold.” In Job 3:3, the Septuagint translator rendered הִרָה גבר (MT הִרָה גבר, “a man-child is conceived”) as Ἴδου ἄρσεν “Behold a man-child,” הִרָה גבר.³¹ In the spelling הִרִי, this presentative particle is attested 635 times in the Mishna. It is absent from the Hebrew Bible, where הִנֵּה is used instead. It occurs a few times in inscriptions from Masada from the time of the first revolt, always spelled הִרָה.³²
- 9) בְּאַחַד “together” (Isa 65:25; Eccl 11:6; Ezr 2:64; 3:9; 6:20; Neh 7:66; perhaps 2 Chr 5:13).³³ Alongside the normal BH adverbs יַחַד or יַחְדָּו, some late books of the Bible use בְּאַחַד. The phrase is common in Rabbinic Hebrew from early prayers onward.³⁴ In the earliest manuscripts of the Mishna it takes the form בְּאַחַת.³⁵
- 10) כְּבָר “already” (Eccl 1:10; 2:12, 16; 3:15; 4:2; 6:10; 9:6, 7). Originally, BH did not have an adverb meaning “already.” At some point, the Aramaic adverb כְּבָר was adopted, the earliest attestations being those in Ecclesiastes.³⁶ It is frequent in MH (e.g. Nazir 9:5).
- 11) יוֹתֵר “more” (Eccl 2:15; 6:8, 11; 7:11, 16; 12:9; Esth 6:6). Apart from these instances in Ecclesiastes and Esther, BH does not have an adverb meaning “more.” The adverb is attested also in Ben Sira (e.g. Sir 3:23) and in Qumran Hebrew (e.g. 1QpHab 7:7). Morphologically, יוֹתֵר is a *qal* participle of the root *ytr* “to remain, to be left over” (see 1 Sam 15:15), but its usage as an adverb may reflect interference from Aramaic יַתִּיר (*yattīr*) “more, exceedingly,” which is attested from Official Aramaic onward.
- 12) מִקְצָת “some” (Neh 7:69; Dan 1:2). After the occurrences in LBH, מִקְצָת is attested a few times in the Qumran writing *Miqsat Ma’ase Ha-Torah* (e.g. MMT

³¹ See Takamitsu Muraoka, *A Greek-Hebrew/Aramaic Two-way Index to the Septuagint* (Leuven: Peeters, 2010), 58.

³² See Uri Mor, *Judean Hebrew: The Language of the Hebrew Documents from Judea between the First and the Second Revolts* (Jerusalem: Academy of Hebrew Language, 2015), 260 (Hebrew).

³³ Hurvitz, *Concise Lexicon*, 138–141.

³⁴ See the Academy of Hebrew Language’s online database Ma’agarim: <https://maagarim.hebrew-academy.org.il/>

³⁵ In the printed editions the form בְּאַחַד is used, see Segal, *Grammar*, 139.

³⁶ The word is next found twice in the Hebrew fragments of Tobit retrieved from Qumran (4Q200 f4:3, 5).

C27), and then frequently in the Mishna and other Rabbinic texts. It is a loan from Aramaic מן קצת “some of,” attested from Official Aramaic onward.

- 13) עד אֲשֶׁר לֹא “before” (Eccl 12 :1, 2, 6). Instead of classical טָרָם, Ecclesiastes uses עד אֲשֶׁר לֹא, which is also found in 4Q270 f6iv:19.³⁷ The compound expression is a loan translation from Aramaic.³⁸ In MH it turns up in the form עַד שְׁלֹא.
- 14) שְׁלֵמָה “lest” (Cant 1:7 ; cf. אֲשֶׁר לְמָה Dan 1 :10).³⁹ In classical BH, “lest” is פֶּן, but in late BH we find a few cases of שֵׁ or אֲשֶׁר + לְמָה instead.⁴⁰ The composite conjunction is a loan translation (or calque) from Aramaic דִּי לְמָא (see e.g. Ezra 7:23). In MH the contracted form שְׁמָא (שְׁמָא) is frequent.⁴¹

• Morphological features

- 15) *Piel* of hollow verbs (וְחִיבְתֶּם Dan 1:10; קָיָם etc. Ezek 13:6; Psalm 119:28, 106; Ruth 4:7;⁴² Esth 9:21, 27, 29, 31, 32). The forms with *yod* import a feature of Aramaic grammar. They are exceptional in BH, but frequent in MH.
- 16) *Qal* participle of הָיָה “to be” (Eccl 2:22; Neh 6:6). In BH, the participle of הָיָה occurs only once, הוֹיָה (Exod 9:3). Instead of this regular form, LBH has הִיָּה: the vocalization is Hebrew but the use of the root הוה betrays interference from Aramaic.⁴³ The form הִיָּה is the normal one in MH (e.g. Šabb. 6:6).
- 17) Short forms of the imperfect of the verb “to be”: יְהוּא (Eccl 11 :3), אֶהְיֶה. The verbal form יְהוּא “they will be” is unique in the Hebrew Bible, but corresponds to the normal form in MH.⁴⁴ Unfortunately, the text of Eccl 11:3 is not entirely secure (see BHS). An additional example is provided by the Septuagint. In Jer 1:6; 4:10; 14:13; 32/39:17, the Old Greek translates the Hebrew particle אֶהְיֶה as ὁ ὢν “the being one.” This surprising rendering probably reflects a different vocalization: אֶהְיֶה “I am, I will be.”⁴⁵ This form too is frequent in Mishnaic Hebrew. Short forms

³⁷ The corresponding passage in the Genizah manuscript reads עַד לֹא (CD 10:10), see Cook 2021, 29.

³⁸ Cook, “Borrowing or Interference?” 29.

³⁹ F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, “Late Linguistic Features in the Song of Songs,” in *Perspectives on the Song of Songs / Perspektiven der Hoheliedauslegung*, BZAW 346, ed. Anselm C. Hagedorn (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005), 27–77, in particular 59.

⁴⁰ In the spelling שְׁמָה this is attested in CD 15:11; note that the corresponding passage in 4QD^a reads לְמָה instead.

⁴¹ See Miguel Pérez Fernández, *An Introductory Grammar of Rabbinic Hebrew*, trans. John Elwolde (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 231.

⁴² Driver, *Introduction*, 455.

⁴³ The root הוה “to be” is attested twice in Hebrew poetry (Gen 27:29 ; Isa 16:4). For Qumran Hebrew, see Elisha Qimron, *A Grammar of the Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 2018), 219.

⁴⁴ The short forms are attested also in the Bar Kochba letters and similar documents, see Mor, *Judean Hebrew*, 207.

⁴⁵ Joosten, “Mirrored in the Septuagint,” 16–18.

of the verb “to be” do occur in Aramaic, but they are rare.⁴⁶ This feature is unlikely to reflect Aramaic influence.

- 18) כְּמוֹת “as, like.” Before suffixes, and sometimes in other constellations too, the preposition כְּ takes the form כְּמוֹ in BH. In MH, alongside the BH form, we find the form כְּמוֹת. The additional *taw* is probably due to influence of Aramaic כְּמוֹת. MH כְּמוֹת appears to be reflected in the Septuagint of Zech 5:3.

MT every one that stealeth shall be cut off as on this side *according to it* (כְּמוֹתָהּ); and every one that sweareth shall be cut off as on that side *according to it* (כְּמוֹתָהּ).

LXX every thief will be punished *until death* (ἕως θανάτου) from this and everyone who swears will be punished *until death* (ἕως θανάτου) from this.

The rendering “until death” suggests that the translator read כְּמוֹתָהּ instead of כְּמוֹתָהּ and parsed this as כְּ + מוֹת “death” + suffix.⁴⁷ If so, the Septuagint here attests to the existence of a form documented in Hebrew only centuries later.

• Syntax

- 19) אֲשֶׁר-אֵת heading an independent relative clause (Jer 27:8 [MT plus]; Zech 12:10; Eccl 2:12; 4:3).⁴⁸ In biblical Hebrew, אֲשֶׁר-אֵת normally indicates that the clause functions as the direct object of a transitive verb. In a few cases in late books, it appears to introduce independent relative clauses in other syntactic roles. The syntax of Jer 27:8; Zech 12:10; Eccl 2:12; 4:3 has been treated as faulty or irregular. However, the “nominative” function of אֵת + relative particle (אֲשֶׁר in the Mishna) is attested many times in the MH. It appears, then, that the cases enumerated must be understood as occasional slips into the vernacular. This feature is not dependent on Aramaic.

- 20) מֶה-אֲשֶׁר heading independent relative clauses (Eccl 3:15, 22; 6:10; 7:24; 8:7; 10:14).⁴⁹ Elsewhere in BH, simple אֲשֶׁר suffices to build an independent relative clause (e.g. Exod 6:1). The later syntax occurs once in Ben Sira (Sir 3:22) and a few times in Qumran Hebrew (e.g. 1QMysteries 1:1:4). It is found well over a

⁴⁶ DNWSI 273 (Palmyrene), 274 (Jewish Aramaic).

⁴⁷ Whether the reading reflected in the Septuagint was written in the source text or existed only in the translator’s imagination is hard to know; it is also immaterial.

⁴⁸ See Nili Samet, “Non-Accusative ’t and the Syntactic Profile of Late Biblical Hebrew,” VT 70 (2020): 1–18. Samet finds this type of syntax also in Jer 38:9, 16, but these cases seem dubious. The second one has אֵת as the *ketiv* only, which may be a textual error; in any case, the relative clause is not independent since it has a nominal antecedent. Jer 38:9 is another case where אֲשֶׁר-אֵת figures in the Masoretic text but is not reflected in the Septuagint. The syntax is confused here and the function of the clause introduced with אֲשֶׁר-אֵת is uncertain.

⁴⁹ Gesenius, *Geschichte*, 36.

hundred times in the Mishna. The addition of the interrogative pronoun reflects interference from Aramaic.

- 21) לְ expressing movement to a definite location.⁵⁰ As Ernst Jenni has shown in his book on the preposition *lamed*, movement toward a definite location is usually expressed with לָ in BH.⁵¹ Only in relatively late books do we find לְ in this function. In MH, the function is never expressed with לָ, always with לְ.
- 22) אֵין + separate pronoun (Neh 4:17). Where the particle אֵין “there is not” is followed by a pronoun, typically in negated nominal or participial clauses, the pronoun always, 99 times, takes the form of a pronominal suffix, except in Neh 4:17:

אֵין־אֶנְחֵנוּ פִּשְׁטִים בְּגָדֵינוּ

we were not taking off our clothes.

The same syntax is found twice in the Qumran texts (4Q372 fl:18; 11Q19 35:7) as against some 20 occurrences of the particle with a pronominal suffix.⁵² The use of the separate pronoun in this constellation is typical of MH, although the suffix pronoun also occurs a few times.⁵³ The later syntax is not due to Aramaic influence.

This list is not exhaustive, but it suffices for our present purposes.⁵⁴ Each single example could be disputed: some of the MH elements in the biblical text might be due to secondary rewriting by scribes more familiar with MH than with BH; the cases reflected in the Septuagint may be due to accidental resemblance, not real familiarity with the MH features. However, alternative explanations hardly account for the entire list. On the whole,

⁵⁰ Examples with “to Jerusalem”: Jer 3:17 (MT plus); Ezr 1:3, 11; 2:1; 3:8; 8:30; Neh 7:6; 12:27; 13:7; 1 Chr 21:15; 2 Chr 11:14; 19:1; 30:3, 11; 32:23; 34:7. For a full list see Ernst Jenni, *Die hebräischen Präpositionen. Band 3: Die Präposition Lamed* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2000), 270–271.

⁵¹ Jenni, *Lamed*, 270–271.

⁵² Also, twice in the Genizah manuscript of the Damascus Document (CD 5:6; 13:3).

⁵³ Note that in the Kaufmann manuscript, אֵינוּ “he is not” is always pointed אֵינּוּ, a contraction of אֵין הוּא, see Moshe Azar, *The Syntax of Mishnaic Hebrew* (Jerusalem: Academy of Hebrew Language, 1995), 167, note 3 (Hebrew).

⁵⁴ Some items, such as שֶׁ and הֵן, both attested already in classical BH, have been left aside. They would require extensive discussion that cannot be offered in the present paper for reasons of space. In an unpublished paper on “The Peculiar Semantics of Late Biblical Hebrew: Qohelet’s Language as a Test Case,” Nili Samet has identified several additional examples, such as נָפֶה “neatly” and לְעוֹלָם “absolutely.” The occurrence of אֵילֵי “these” in Sira 51:24 has not been included because the passage in which it occurs is suspected to be a retroversion from Syriac.

there is little doubt that these elements go back to the period when the latest books of the Hebrew Bible were composed.

• Discussion

The examples are distributed over a variety of biblical books, reflecting different periods and cultural backgrounds, yet they display an evident family relationship. Typologically, they are all grammatical innovations—none of them is attested in classical BH—that cannot be explained by the usual processes of analogy or phonetic change. A majority of the items clearly reflect Aramaic influence, although this influence takes various forms:

- Some appear in their Aramaic form, notably אִי “woe,” אִלּוּ “if,” כְּבָר “already,” מְקֻצָּת “some,” the *piel* of hollow verbs.
- Others are a mixture of Aramaic and Hebrew: e.g. הָיָה “being” or כְּמוֹת “like.”
- Still others are calques or loan translations, representing an Aramaic item in Hebrew form: e.g. בְּשַׁל “because of,” כְּאַחַד “together,” חוּץ מִן “apart from,” עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא “before,” שְׁלֵמָה “lest,” and relative מִה שֶׁ.
- In some cases the Aramaic interferes with the meaning of forms that are purely Hebrew: אֵיזָה “which,” אֶצֶל with verbs of motion, יוֹתֵר “more.”

Some of the items cannot be traced to Aramaic: notably אֲנִי “we,” short forms of the imperfect of הָיָה “to be,” non-accusative אֶת־אֲשֶׁר, and אֲנִי + separate pronoun.⁵⁵

Any item in our list could be interpreted in various ways. The typological similarity however, and the attestation in works by different authors, militate against *ad hoc* explanations. It is preferable to look for an explanation that works for all of them. As in the case of MH, the elements listed suggest that a far-reaching process deeply affected the Hebrew language. Because the items listed here all recur in MH, the process underlying them would seem to be the same one that produced MH. Our items represent an idiom that can be regarded as the ancestor of MH. If so, the historical side of Cook’s hypothesis cannot be accepted. What we call Mishnaic Hebrew did not receive its characteristic cast in the Hasmonaean period. An early form of MH was around well before the end of the Persian period.

⁵⁵ Although the genesis of these features is hard to trace, they do exhibit properties typical of languages acquired by adults: אֲנִי and אֵיזָה are morphologically simpler than their BH equivalents, אֲנִי + separate pronoun substitutes an analytic construction for a synthetic one.

It would be a mistake to regard LBH as an early form of MH. While in MH the items are common and regular, in LBH they remain sporadic. Nor do any of them become dominant in post-biblical writings of the Hellenistic period, such as Ben Sira and the Qumran documents. Where Hebrew equivalents exist, they often compete with the new forms in all literary texts of the Persian and Hellenistic periods. What this leads up to is that our elements are occasional crossovers from a different “dialect.”⁵⁶ They represent a Hebrew idiom, different from LBH, but closely akin to MH.

3. The Relation between Mishnaic and late Biblical Hebrew I: Diglossia

In principle, one might argue that MH-like features in LBH are simply innovations within the Hebrew language of the time: harbingers of a development that would come to full fruition as BH evolved into MH. This scenario is not, overall, a probable one. Several considerations indicate that Hebrew in the Second Temple period bifurcated into two idioms. Moreover, general linguistics provides a good model—that of diglossia—for the conjoint existence of two forms of the same language.

- LBH and proto-MH as coeval varieties of Hebrew

The conjoint existence of two Hebrew idioms, one akin to LBH and one akin to MH, is widely admitted for the late Second Temple period.⁵⁷ The non-Biblical scrolls from Qumran show much continuity with LBH: most of the words they use are known from the Hebrew Bible.⁵⁸ Yet several considerations make it nearly certain that a form of MH was in use at the same time.⁵⁹ Although the Mishna was created much later, it contains sayings of sages who lived in the first century BCE, in a time frame overlapping that of the scrolls.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ The notion of dialect is not precise in this context as will be clarified in the section on diglossia below.

⁵⁷ See e.g. Bernard Spolsky, “Diglossia in Hebrew in the Late Second Temple Period,” *Southwest Journal of Linguistics* 10 (1991), 85–104; Scobie P. Smith, “The Question of Diglossia in Ancient Hebrew,” in *Diglossia and Other Topics in New Testament Linguistics*, ed. by Stanley E. Porter (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 37–52; Michael O. Wise, *Language and Literacy in Roman Judaea. A Study of the Bar Kokhba Documents* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 288–317.

⁵⁸ See e.g. Ian Young, “Late Biblical Hebrew and the Qumran Peshier Habakkuk,” *JHS* 8, 2008, Article 25 (<http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/jhs/article/view/6223>).

⁵⁹ Rabin, “Historical Background,” 145–148.

⁶⁰ Wise has cogently argued that the main sectarian scrolls from Qumran were composed in the first century BCE. See Michael O. Wise, “Dating the Teacher of Righteousness and the Floruit of His Movement,” *JBL* 122 (2003): 53–87. Their precise date is of no great importance

The use of different idioms by different groups is confirmed, as it seems, by a few statements in the sectarian scrolls. In the Hymns scroll we read: “they come to seek you through the *words* of lying prophets *corrupted by error*. With *mocking lips* and a *strange tongue* they speak to your people” (1QHa 12:16–17; see also 1QHa 12:20–21; CD 5:12). The adversaries referred to here may be the group that produced and transmitted early sayings collected in the Mishna. Their teaching diverged from the traditions of the Qumran sectarians and was couched in language they found repulsive.⁶¹

As was noted above, the Qumran writings attest some of the same grammatical features typical of MH as the late biblical books.⁶² They also attest a few additional ones, notably הַמֵּן “from” (4Q386 f1 ii:4) and עַכְשָׁיו “now” (4Q225 f2 ii:7).⁶³ All these features are exceptional in Qumran Hebrew and must be viewed as occasional crossovers from a different idiom.⁶⁴

The evidence gathered in the preceding section tends to show that the language situation in the time of the Scrolls was not new but continued an earlier format.

- The relation between LBH and MH

If LBH and proto-MH were in use concurrently, the question arises how they relate to one another. The two idioms are commonly referred to as dialects: language varieties peculiar to a specific region. The geographical origin of LBH is diverse: some books may have been written in Jerusalem while others may come from various other locations. As to proto-MH, its place of origin is hard to determine. Gary Rendsburg argued that it emerged in the Galilee and David Talshir argued that it was the Hebrew dialect of the Judean

to the question at hand, and a date in the second century BCE would not change the argument of the present study.

⁶¹ Chaim Rabin, *Qumran Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), 68–69; Steven Weitzman, “Why did the Qumran Community Write in Hebrew?” *JAOS* 119 (1999): 35–45, in particular 43–44.

⁶² See the list in section 2 under יוֹתֵר, אֵי, כִּבֵּר, מְקַצֵּת, שְׁלֵמָה, אֶשֶׁר, מָה.

⁶³ A fuller list, including also content words, may be found in Elisha Qimron, *The Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1986), 98–104. See also Menahem Kister, “Some Observations on Vocabulary and Style in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” in *Diggers at the Well. Proceedings of a Third International Symposium on the Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls & Ben Sira*, ed. Takamitsu Muraoka, J. F. Elwolde (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 137–165, in particular 137–146; Moshe Bar Asher, *Studies in Classical Hebrew* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 165–180, 207–225.

⁶⁴ In 4QMMT, the language stands closer to MH, perhaps because the document is addressed to those outside the closed group to whom the authors belong. See Qimron’s detailed analysis in Elisha Qimron and John Strugnell, *Qumran Cave 4. V. Miqsat Ma’asey ha-Torah*, DJD 10 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 65–108.

lowlands, stretching out from Modi'in westward.⁶⁵ Neither theory has been widely accepted.⁶⁶

The search for the geographical origin of MH is not devoid of interest, but it risks missing an important point. The contamination of LBH literature with proto-MH features, documented above, cannot be explained on the view that the latter was simply a regional dialect. The repeated (though infrequent) slips of LBH authors suggest that they knew the other idiom. There was some kind of symbiosis. Whatever their geographic origin, the two idioms interacted with one another in the same society.

LBH is a literary idiom. It continues patterns of usage that were defined in classical biblical literature, and has come down to us in writing. Proto-MH, for its part, is not based on a literary corpus. It has no written attestation before the first century CE.⁶⁷ For the duration of the Second Temple period, it was to all appearances a spoken language only. General linguistics offers a theoretical framework in which this constellation, with a written language following earlier literary models and a spoken variety that essentially differs from it, can be made sense of: that of diglossia. On the basis of Greek, Swiss German, Arabic and Haitian Creole, Ferguson defines diglossia as follows:

DIGLOSSIA is a relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include a standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature, either of an earlier period or in another speech community, which is learned

⁶⁵ Gary Rendsburg, "The Galilean Background of Mishnaic Hebrew," in *The Galilee in Late Antiquity*, ed. Lee I. Levine (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1992), 225-240; David Talshir, "The Habitat and History of Hebrew During the Second Temple Period," in *Biblical Hebrew – Studies in Chronology and Typology*, ed. Ian Young (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 251-275.

⁶⁶ But see Aaron Koller, "The Social and Geographic Origins of Mishnaic Hebrew," in *Studies in Mishnaic Hebrew and Related Fields: Proceedings of the Yale Symposium on Mishnaic Hebrew, May 2014*, ed. Elitzur A. Bar-Asher Siegal and Aaron J. Koller (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2017), 149-173.

⁶⁷ The earliest writings attesting a form of MH are the Copper Scroll and the documentary texts from the time of the first and second Roman wars. See, for the former, Jesper Høgenhaven, "The Language of the Copper Scroll," *RevQ* 27/106 (2015): 271-301; for the latter, see Mor, *Judean Hebrew*.

largely by formal education and is used for most written and formal spoken purposes but is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation.⁶⁸

Although our information on ancient Hebrew is much more fragmentary than for the living languages to which Ferguson refers, several considerations show the potential fruitfulness of his model. In the comparison between the “high” language (H) and the “low” language (L), Ferguson observed a number of constants that appear to be relevant to LBH and MH:

Function: *H is used for official communications such as sermons and newspaper articles, L in conversation.*

This tallies with the attestation of LBH in literary texts, and the absence of attestation of proto-MH.

Prestige: *Speakers regard H as superior to L, often to the point of denying that they ever speak L, or that L is even a real language. In some cases, the superiority of H is connected with religion.*

If passages like 1QHa 12:16–17 quoted above do refer to the Pharisees’ use of MH in their teaching, this nicely illustrates the relative prestige of the two idioms.

Literary heritage: *A sizable body of written literature in H is held in high esteem by the speech community.*

LBH is without contest the language of Israel’s national and religious literary heritage.

Acquisition: *L is acquired by children from a very early age, in what may be regarded as the normal way of learning one’s mother tongue. The learning of H is chiefly accomplished by the means of formal education and sets in later.*

Little is known about the way MH was learnt, but LBH clearly reflects intense study of earlier texts.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Charles Ferguson, “Diglossia,” *Word* 15 (1959): 325–340, in particular 336. The impact of Ferguson’s paper has been enormous. For a review of problems and discussions, see Hudson 2002.

⁶⁹ See Hendel and Joosten, *How Old*, 91–93.

Grammar: *H has grammatical categories not present in L and notably has an inflectional system of nouns and verbs which is much reduced or totally absent in L.*

The relative simplicity of MH in comparison with LBH, particularly in the realm of nominal and verbal inflection, was illustrated in section 1.

Lexicon: *The bulk of the vocabulary of H and L is shared, though with variations in form and with differences of use and meaning. A striking feature of diglossia is the existence of paired items, one H one L, referring to fairly common concepts frequently used in both H and L.*

MH and LBH share a very large part of their vocabulary. As to paired items, note examples like the following:

LBH	MH	gloss
שֶׁמֶשׁ	חֶמֶה	“sun”
יָרֵחַ	לְבָנָה	“moon”
קֵץ	סוֹף	“end”
בֹּא	נִכְנֵס	“to enter”
עֲנֵה	הִשִּׁיב	“to answer”
הָרָה	מְעַבְּרָת	“pregnant”

Phonology: *The sound systems of H and L constitute a single phonological structure of which the L phonology is the basic system.*

Much of the phonology of ancient Hebrew is uncertain, but one detail shows the relevance of Ferguson’s observation. The old Hebrew *sin*, originally a lateralized sibilant, was in all likelihood pronounced as *samek* in LBH, as it was in MH.⁷⁰ The shift is usually attributed

⁷⁰ For BH, see Geoffrey Khan, *The Tiberian Pronunciation Tradition of Biblical Hebrew. Volume I: Description of the Tiberian Pronunciation Tradition* (Cambridge: Open Book, 2020), 62–63. Khan points to סָכְרִים “they were hiring” in Ezra 4:5, of the root שָׁכַר “to hire.” Another instance is the place name מִכְמֶשׁ, which is written מִכְמֶס in Ezra 2:27; Neh 7:31; note also the proper name הֶסְנוּזָה in Neh 11:9. For MH, see E. Y. Kutscher, *The Language and Linguistic Background of the Isaiah Scroll (1QIsa^a)* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 185.

to the influence of Aramaic. Like other grammatical features from Aramaic that penetrated into Hebrew, it most probably reflects second-language acquisition. Speakers of an Aramaic dialect in which *sin* did not exist learnt Hebrew as adults and assimilated the *sin* to the closest sibilant in their language. They transmitted their Hebrew to the next generation, at which point the new pronunciation became a native feature. From the spoken language (L) the shift then affected the high language as well. For all their classicizing zeal, the LBH authors were unable to preserve the original pronunciation of this consonant.

The analogies are striking. They strongly suggest that the language situation in Judaea during the Second Temple period was diglossic in nature. Everyone spoke a form of MH, and all educated people knew a form of LBH. The Qumran authors who qualified the spoken language as “*words corrupted by error*” would nevertheless speak MH to their friends in informal conversation and to vendors in the marketplace. Hillel and Shammai would have been equally as able as the Teacher of Righteousness to write new religious texts in LBH, but in their understanding only the low language should be used in discussions about *halakha*.

Diglossia comes into being, according to Ferguson, when literacy is limited to a small elite in a speech community that also has a sizeable body of ancient literature embodying the fundamental values of the community. Both these conditions apply to Hebrew in the period of interest to us.

Once it is installed, again according to Ferguson, diglossia can remain stable for centuries. This leads us back to the question when proto-MH emerged. The diglossic bond between LBH and MH can be observed most clearly in the late Second Temple period, but it may go back much further in time.

- Nothing new under the sun

Both the conjoint existence of LBH and proto-MH and the diglossic nature of their interaction have been amply discussed in Hebrew studies. In a way, the views defended in this section do not go much beyond those of M. H. Segal as expressed in his *Grammar of Mishnaic Hebrew* of 1927. Although writing long before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and even longer before Ferguson’s definition of diglossia, Segal clearly perceived that LBH and MH coexisted over a long period, and exerted different functions:

BH was to [the authors of the late biblical books] only a literary and artificial medium of expression which they had acquired in the schools from the study of the old sacred literature. (...) What language did the authors of those late BH books speak in their daily life? Or, in other words, what was the language of ordinary life of educated native Jews in Jerusalem and Judea in the period from 400 B.C.E. to 150 C.E.? The evidence presented by MH and its literature leaves no doubt that that language was MH.⁷¹

More recently, several other Hebraists, taking into account both the new evidence from the Qumran texts and Ferguson's seminal study, have come down to similar views.⁷² In the compass of the present paper, it has nevertheless seemed worthwhile to retrace some of the main arguments favoring those views.

4. Hidden reflexes of the low language in the high language

The notion that LBH was a high language in the Fergusonian sense is not new, but its implications have not been appreciated fully. Several well-known characteristics of LBH fall into place when we realize it is not a natural language, nor even the literary form of a natural language, but the prestige language, modeled on a corpus of traditional literature, of people who in daily life spoke a different form of Hebrew.

It has often been claimed that much of the LBH corpus is stilted and unnatural. Samuel Driver, whose BH *Sprachgefühl* is justly celebrated, states: "The characteristic of the Hebrew in which these latest parts of the OT are written is that while many of the old classical words and expressions still continue in use, and, in fact, still preponderate, the syntax is deteriorated, the structure of sentences is cumbrous and inelegant."⁷³ Judgments

⁷¹ Segal, *Grammar*, 13.

⁷² See e.g. Rabin, "Historical Background," 152: "The Jewish community in the Persian period was thus, it appears, trilingual, using Aramaic for purposes of outside communication and for limited literary composition; Biblical Hebrew for normal literary composition; and in all probability an older form of Mishnaic Hebrew as a purely spoken vernacular." For a review of similar scholarly opinions, see Steiner "Colloquialism," 21-26; Ian Young, Robert Rezetko, with the assistance of Martin Ehrensverd, *Linguistic Dating of Biblical Texts. Volume 1: An Introduction to Approaches and Problems*. (London: Equinox, 2009), 173-179.

⁷³ Driver, *Introduction*, 473-474. On Driver's stature as an Hebraist, see, e.g., Avi Hurvitz, "The 'Linguistic Dating of Biblical Texts': Comments on Methodological Guidelines and Philological Procedures," in *Diachrony in Biblical Hebrew*, ed. Cynthia L. Miller-Naudé and Ziony Zevit (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 274.

like this, which could surely be formulated in a more neutral way, capture an essential trait of LBH: it is the product of authors whose mother tongue was a different idiom. The LBH authors know their classics well, many expressions and phrases can be traced back to passages in early writings. They do not lack in talent and have something new to say. But they do not always find the right way to express their thoughts in the high language they have studied as youngsters.

Another characteristic of LBH is its diversity. Although all LBH books share certain features, such as the use of Aramaic and Persian loanwords, each book also has its own set of linguistic peculiarities. Nili Samet writes: “It seems that it would not be accurate to define LBH as a dialect, sociolect, gelect, or a reflection of a specific register. LBH is not a uniform linguistic entity, and even the inclusive label ‘linguistic variety’ does not necessarily capture its essence.”⁷⁴ LBH authors select words and expressions from the classical texts they have studied, and supplement them with elements from other languages with which they are more familiar, notably their spoken Hebrew and Aramaic. This mixture could only be unstable, as transpires from the great differences in style among the various books.⁷⁵

Another way of putting this is to say that LBH lacks system. In natural languages, word meanings and grammatical functions are part of a subtle “system in which everything holds together,” as famously stated by Ferdinand de Saussure.⁷⁶ In LBH, some systematizing tendencies can indeed be identified, but many usages seem arbitrary. Elements from classical BH, Aramaic, and spoken Hebrew are thrown together in what looks like chaos.

Paradoxically, this chaos turns out to be revealing in certain respects. Ferguson pointed out that the phonology of the high language in a diglossic bond is based on the phonology of the low language. This observation reflects the way diglossia functions: the low language is acquired during childhood, when the physical apparatus for pronouncing sounds is highly flexible; the high language is learnt at a later stage, when the possibility

⁷⁴ Samet, “Peculiar Semantics.” See also Hurvitz, *Concise Lexicon*, 14.

⁷⁵ Note also Mireille Hadas-Lebel, *Manuel d'histoire de la langue hébraïque des origines à l'époque de la Mishna*, (Paris: Publications Orientalistes de France, 1976), 96–97: “Alors que la prose hébraïque préexilique depuis la Genèse jusqu’au livre des Rois manifeste une remarquable unité, les écrits postexiliques ont chacun une individualité stylistique propre suivant les proportions dans lesquelles interviennent les différents ingrédients qui composent leur langue : imitation de l’hébreu classique, influence de l’hébreu parlé, influence étrangère et notamment araméenne.”

⁷⁶ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (Paris: Payot, 1995; first edition 1916).

to learn new sounds is more limited. What is true for phonology is true too for other areas of language: structures and mechanisms acquired during childhood are more deeply internalized than what is learnt later.

- The LBH verbal system

In a fascinating paper, Geoffrey Horrocks has shown that Byzantine authors writing in classicizing style tend to use a range of linguistic options known from classical Greek without, however, drawing all the distinctions the forms in question originally implied.⁷⁷ Notably, he shows that while authors aiming for a lower register, closer to the colloquial, practically never use the optative, classicizing authors do use the optative but without observing the subtle conditions governing the selection of this form in classical Greek. This reflects the way diglossia functions: distinctions of tense, mood and aspect are acquired without difficulty by children, but they are fiendishly hard for adults to learn from scratch.

In ancient Hebrew the same dynamics can be observed. In section 1, we saw that one of the characteristics of MH is the simplification of the verbal system.⁷⁸ While BH distinguishes between a narrative preterit (*wayyiqtol*) and a retrospective tense used in discursive texts (*qatal*), MH has a single past-tense form used both in narrative and discourse (*qatal*). In addition, the BH distinction between volitive modality and general modality is levelled through the disappearance of jussive, cohortative and *weqatal*: *yiqtol* alone now expresses both volition and other types of modality.⁷⁹ In LBH the entire spectrum of forms is still in use, but the distinctions made in classical Hebrew are fading. This remarkable state of affairs finds a ready explanation in light of the hypothesis formulated in the preceding section. The LBH authors' "native" language was something approaching MH, with three basic forms: a preterit (*qatal*), a present tense (the predicative participle), and a modal form (*yiqtol*). This verbal system was a poor guide when they set out to compose new texts in the high language with five basic forms.

⁷⁷ Geoffrey Horrocks, "High-register Medieval Greek: 'Diglossia' and What Lay Behind It," in *Storia e storie della lingua greca*, ed. Caterina Carpinato and Olga Tribulato (Venice: Ca' Foscari, 2014), 49–72.

⁷⁸ Jan Joosten, *The Verbal System of Biblical Hebrew: A New Synthesis Elaborated on the Basis of Classical Prose* (Jerusalem: Simor, 2012), 377–410.

⁷⁹ The imperative continues in use for the second person.

A full analysis of the way the LBH verbal system diverges from classical Hebrew would be beyond the scope of the present study.⁸⁰ It will suffice to point out a few diagnostic phenomena:

- In the narration of successive events, *wayyiqtol* is still dominant in the LBH books, but many instances of *w + qatal* can be found as well:

Ezra 8:36 They delivered (*wayyiqtol*) the king's commissions to the king's satraps and to the governors of the province Beyond the River, and they supported (אָנָּח, *w + qatal*) the people and the house of God.⁸¹

Such instances of narrative *w + qatal* occur in classical Hebrew only on very specific conditions. In LBH, *w + qatal* is used as a free variant of *wayyiqtol*, in effect showing that the authors had no real need of the latter form, and used it only because it was frequent in the classical texts on which they modelled their writing.

- The modal forms are used promiscuously:
 - Predictive *yiqtol* and jussive:

Dan 11:4 And when he shall stand up, his kingdom shall be broken (*yiqtol*), and shall be divided (אֶחָדָה, jussive) toward the four winds of heaven.
 - Predictive *weqatal* and *w + yiqtol*:

Dan 11:7 a branch from her roots shall rise up (*weqatal*) in his place. He shall come (*w + yiqtol*) against the army and enter (*w + yiqtol*) the fortress of the king of the north.
 - Volitive *yiqtol*:

Neh 2:3 May the king live (יִחְיֶה) forever!

While classical Hebrew distinguishes volitive and non-volitive modality, LBH uses all the classical forms in both volitive and non-volitive statements.

- Similarly, the long imperative is used in LBH as a simple by-form of the normal imperative. In classical BH, the long form expresses movement toward the speaker and other speaker-oriented nuances. In LBH, the form is attested but the process is not always oriented toward the speaker:

⁸⁰ See Joosten, *Verbal System*, 377–410; Ohad Cohen, *The Verbal Tense System in Late Biblical Hebrew Prose* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2013).

⁸¹ See also Ezr 3:10; Neh 13:1; Dan 8:4; Eccl 1:13; 2:5 and many more in Ecclesiastes.

2 Chron 25:19 Now stay at home (שָׁכֶה בְּבֵיתְךָ); why should you provoke trouble so that you fall, you and Judah with you?⁸²

The LBH authors knew the long form from their study of earlier Hebrew texts but did not fully master its usage. This indicates that, in their native Hebrew, there was only one form of the imperative.

Other instances of simplification have not been thoroughly investigated in diachronic perspective. However, a count of occurrences suggests that here too, the absence of certain forms from the spoken language led to diminished use in the high language as well.⁸³

- The infinitive absolute is used 354 times from Genesis to 2 Kings, but only 39 times in LBH.
- Imperfect feminine plural forms conforming to the masculine paradigm are rare in CBH but in LBH they are about as frequent as the old feminine forms.⁸⁴
- For the paragogic *nun*, the statistics are more straightforward: there are 124 instances in CBH, 4 in LBH.⁸⁵
- The passive *qal* is found some 47 times in CBH, but only 3 times in LBH.

All these forms were known to the LBH authors from their study of earlier texts. They were not, however, part of their native language, which led to the relative sparsity of the forms in their own compositions.

- The nominal system

The data for the instances of simplification of nominal morphology are similar to those for verbal morphology:

- Directional *he* occurs 81 times in LBH as against 671 times in CBH. In addition, it does not always express direction in LBH: e.g. שָׁמָּה is used for simple location in Eccl 3:16 and 1 Chr 4:41.

⁸² Note that the parallel in 2 Kgs 14:10 has the normal imperative. Other LBH examples of long imperatives that are not speaker-oriented are Neh 6:14; 13:29.

⁸³ The LBH corpus is only around a third the length of the CBH corpus, but the numerical differences are significant nevertheless.

⁸⁴ For the 3fpl, CBH has 104 “feminine” forms and 7 “masculine” forms referring to feminine subjects; LBH has 10 “feminine” forms and 9 “masculine” with feminine subjects. See Dobbs-Allsopp, “Late Linguistic Features,” 32–33.

⁸⁵ In LBH: 2 Chr 6:26; 7:19; 19:9, 10 (the first two were copied from the parallel passages in Kings).

- The adverbial ending *-am* is attested in LBH only in the word יוֹמָם “by day” (six times).

LBH authors knew the old forms from earlier texts, but they were not part of their own vernacular. This explains why they both misused and underused them.

- Function words

Finally, some of the function words that went missing in MH are rare or unattested in LBH, too. Of the particles that are not attested in MH, some do occur in LBH, notably כִּי and גַם, but others, such as אֵת “with” and אֲנֹכִי, are much reduced, and some are lacking entirely: אֶפֶס, הֵוֵי, בִּי, אֶכֶן, הֵוֵי, אֶכֶן, פֶּן, קָרֵב, בָּזָה “here,” כֹּה “here.” The only exceptive expression that is well attested in LBH is כִּי אִם. These data again suggest that underlying the high, classicizing, language is another idiom that stands close to MH.

In section 2, we listed grammatical features characteristic of MH that occur sporadically in late Biblical texts. These elements, it was argued, overtly attest to the influence of the spoken language on the biblical authors. The data recorded in the present section also show that the LBH authors submit to the influence of spoken language, but they do so covertly. The lack of certain nuances and distinctions shows that the continuity between the LBH corpus and earlier texts is partly artificial. The words are the same, but the global functioning of the language is not. Under the veneer of classical BH lurks the first language of the LBH authors, a form of proto-MH.

5. LBH as the high language in a diglossic society

Beyond the overt and covert influence of the low language that we have tried to identify, LBH also exhibits other characteristics that lend it the defining characteristics of the high language as described by Ferguson. It is a language of prestige, modelled on earlier writings that were venerated by the community, and taught in a school setting. The present section presents data confirming this picture.

- LBH as a language of prestige

Diglossia implies a division of labor: the high language is used for literature and official communication, the low language in informal speech.

LBH is a prestige language that serves exclusively to recount national history and formulate religious teaching. In all the LBH books—Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, Esther, Ecclesiastes and Daniel—kings and high officials take center stage. Theological concerns are primary. In this respect, the LBH corpus does not differ much from the earlier biblical books. We do know, however, that classical BH was also used in more humdrum communication. For the monarchic period a collection of inscriptions, some of them addressing such topics as delivering wine or recovering a cloak, has been retrieved from archaeological sites. Many of them reflect day-to-day exchanges that were not meant to be archived or preserved. Nonetheless, the language of these inscriptions stands very close to the classical BH of the earlier books of the Bible.⁸⁶ The few linguistic differences reflect the subject matter more than the prestige of the writing.

Very little ephemeral writing has been preserved for the Persian and early Hellenistic periods. A small number of inscriptions in paleo-Hebrew script have surfaced: inscribed seals, bullae, coins, an ostrakon, and a whorl.⁸⁷ All of these are extremely short, and many contain only proper names. Because of the script, they are considered to reflect the use of Hebrew, and a few instances of *bn* “son of” or the article *ha-* confirm this view. They do not reveal much as to the stylistic register the writers were aiming for. Some of the proper names are given in late forms, e.g. יֵשׁוּעַ “Jesus” for classical יְהוֹשֻׁעַ “Joshua,” and some of the vocabulary, notably the term פַּחַח “governor” is likewise late. The same forms are common in the LBH books, however. They simply reflect the realities of the Persian period.

The scarcity of epigraphic material might be due to accident. For Judah (Yehud), Aramaic documents are not more numerous than Hebrew ones for this period. A single document has nevertheless been preserved that suggests a colloquial form of Hebrew was used in day-to-day communication. On a sherd retrieved from controlled excavations in Jerusalem, a short message is written in Aramaic script, but Hebrew language:

⁸⁶ Hendel, Joosten, *How Old*, 60–72.

⁸⁷ Gordon J. Hamilton, “Paleo-Hebrew Texts and Scripts of the Persian Period,” in *“An Eye for Form”: Epigraphic Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, ed. Jo Ann Hackett and Walter E. Aufrecht (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 283–286.

כברן / לף לחנניה]

בצק

“Loaves, 1 thousand, for Hananya, dough.”⁸⁸

On the basis of the script, this ostrakon has been dated to the end of the 4th or the very beginning of the 3rd century BCE. Several observations can be made on the language of this short text:

- The use of the word בצק (*bāṣēq*) “dough,” which is not attested in Aramaic at all, shows that the language is Hebrew.
- The word כברן (*kikkārīn*) “loaves” also points to Hebrew.⁸⁹ In Aramaic, the word is attested only with the meaning “talent,” a weight of metal or a sum of money. In biblical Hebrew, including LBH, the word refers to bread in the expression כֶּכֶר לֶחֶם “round of bread, loaf.”⁹⁰ The addition of “bread” is necessary here, for כֶּכֶר is also used in other meanings: “talent” and “district.”⁹¹ In MH, כֶּכֶר, singular or plural (e.g. Yad 2:5 (כִּיכָרִין)), is used without further specification in reference to loaves of bread, and has no other meaning.
- The masculine plural ending in *nun* is the normal one in Aramaic, but it is marginally attested in Hebrew too. It occurs a few times in the Hebrew Bible, perhaps reflecting local dialects.⁹² In the LBH corpus it occurs only once, in Dan 12:13 הַיָּמִין “the days.” It is found very frequently in MH, alongside *-im*.⁹³ It is worth noting that, in the postexilic period, word-final *mem* and *nun*, in any function, are often confused, not only in Hebrew but also in Aramaic. Perhaps they were pronounced similarly.⁹⁴

⁸⁸ Joseph Naveh, “Hebrew and Aramaic Inscriptions,” in *Excavations at the City of David: Inscriptions*, ed. Yigal Shiloh and Donald T. Ariel (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Institute of Archaeology, 2000), 1–10, in particular 9–10; Koller, “Social and Geographic Origins,” 160.

⁸⁹ Pace Ingo Kottsieper, “‘And They Did Not Care to Speak Yehudit’: On Linguistic Change in Judah,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Fourth Century B.C.E.*, ed. Oded Lipschits, Gary N. Knoppers, and Rainer Albertz (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 95–123.

⁹⁰ See e.g. 1 Chron 16:3 (where the parallel in 2 Sam 6:19 has חֲלֵת לֶחֶם).

⁹¹ For LBH, see e.g. Esth 3:9; Ezra 8:26; 1 Chron 20:2 (“talent”), Neh 3:22; 12:28; 2 Chron 4:17 (district).

⁹² Note that *-in* is the normal masculine plural ending in Moabite.

⁹³ GKC § 87e; Segal, *Grammar*, 126.

⁹⁴ Qimron, *Grammar*, 113 (with literature).

- The abbreviation 𐤀𐤋 for 1000 is known from Official Aramaic documents, and no doubt reflects Aramaic influence. It is not attested in MH, but does occur in Hebrew documents from Masada.⁹⁵

Although the data may not be as conclusive as we might have wished, the document clearly shows that Hebrew was used in day-to-day communication. Moreover, the noun *kikkārīn* “loaves” indicates that the variety of Hebrew so used was not LBH: both its semantics and its morphology set it apart from LBH and assimilate it to MH.

It would be unwise to build a theory on a single inscription of four words. The least that can be said, however, is that the little evidence we have is consistent with the diglossic scenario: LBH is used in literature, as attested in the Bible, and a different Hebrew idiom, akin to MH, is used in day-to-day communication.

- LBH and the literary heritage of Israel

LBH is based on writings preserved from before the fall of Jerusalem. There is no way to know in what form the LBH authors knew the ancestral literature, nor how exactly pre-exilic writings came down to them. The fact, however, that LBH writings refer to, and build on, earlier texts is indisputable. Chronicles rewrites and embellishes parts of Samuel-Kings, Ezra-Nehemiah relates to laws formulated in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, Daniel 8-12 predicts the future on the basis of prophecies contained in the book of Isaiah, Esther artfully interacts with the Joseph story recounted in Genesis, and Ecclesiastes is at least in part directed against earlier wisdom texts as represented in parts of the book of Proverbs.⁹⁶

The constant reference to earlier models affects the linguistic make-up of LBH. Where earlier texts are quoted or alluded to, their language is usually preserved at least in part.

Particularly suggestive evidence of the intertextual reference of LBH writings to earlier texts is found in the case of pseudoclassicisms, where the LBH authors appear to get the meaning or the syntactic structure of the classical expression wrong. One example will illustrate:

⁹⁵ Mor, *Judean Hebrew*, 251.

⁹⁶ Hendel, Joosten, *How Old*, 85.

2 Chron 13:9

כָּל־הַבָּא לְמִלֵּא יָדוֹ בַּפֶּר בֶּן־בָּקָר וְאַיִלִם שִׁבְעָה וְהָיָה כֹהֵן לֵאלֹהִים

Whoever came, *filling his hand* with a young bull or seven rams became a priest of what are no gods.

1 Kgs 13:33

הַחֲפִיץ יִמְלֵא אֶת־יָדוֹ וְיִהְיֶה כֹהֵן בְּמֹת

Any who wanted, *he filled his hand* to be priests of the high places.

In Kings, the idiomatic expression “to fill the hand” is used in the meaning it has in the Pentateuch and Judges: Jeroboam *ordains* the willing to be priests.⁹⁷ In the Chronicles passage, the “filling of the hand” refers to Israelites’ *bringing gifts* in order to acquire a priestly position.

The LBH meaning, which is attested also in 1 Chron 29:5 and 2 Chron 29:31, cannot have evolved from the classical meaning. The LBH usage shows that the original meaning of the expression was forgotten and reinterpreted on the basis of its occurrences in the earlier texts.

Pseudoclassicisms epitomize the language use we find in the latest books of the Bible. In narrating the events of their time and expressing their own ideas, the LBH authors use the language of the earlier books as they understand it.

If this judgment is accurate, LBH would not be learnt from early childhood but studied in a school setting. Writing in close dependence on the language of traditional literature would have been possible only at the cost of long and intensive training. Positive evidence that the LBH authors studied the language in a school is hard to come by.⁹⁸ However, the phenomenon of pseudoclassicism provides a clue.

Pseudoclassical expressions such as the one mentioned above rarely stand alone. The interpretation of “to fill the hand” as “to bring gifts” is found three times in Chronicles,

⁹⁷ See e.g. Exod 28:41; 29:9, 29, 33, 35; Lev 8:33; 16:32; 21:10; Num 3:3; Jud 17:5, 12. In Ezek 43:26 the expression refers to the consecration of an altar.

⁹⁸ See William Schniedewind, *A Social History of Hebrew. Its Origins Through the Rabbinic Period* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2013), 147, 149.

but it also surfaces in the Jewish Targums and the Peshitta. These Aramaic versions render all instances of Hebrew “to fill the hand” as “to bring gifts,” including in passages, in the Pentateuch, Judges and Kings, where the intended meaning is “to ordain.” The Targums are much later, of course, but it is unlikely that the Targumists based their interpretation on Chronicles. Instead, it appears Chronicles and the Aramaic versions attest a tradition. The translation shows that the pseudoclassical meaning was not just a guess on the part of the Chronicler, but a piece of linguistic information circulating among learned Jews.

The same can be said for other pseudoclassicisms. The interpretations underlying them are confirmed by various ancient sources.⁹⁹

6. When did MH emerge as a distinct language variety?

MH differs from biblical Hebrew in a way that cannot be explained from natural language evolution. The wrenching changes affecting verbal and nominal syntax and the renewal of a large proportion of function words show that something momentous happened to the language. The present author has a hard time reading Shakespeare in the original. English changed a lot over the last 400 years. But Shakespeare mostly uses the same function words as modern English: “perhaps,” “then,” “where,” “here,” “always”—they didn’t change. In Hebrew they did.¹⁰⁰

Many of the changes from BH to MH could be explained from the long-term bilingualism of Hebrew speakers after the Babylonian exile. Many Jews would have spoken Hebrew and Aramaic more or less equally well, passing from the one to the other as the situation required. In such a situation, the assimilation of one of the two languages to the other may indeed go far beyond the borrowing of content words to affect even core grammar. This process has been referred to as “heavy borrowing.”¹⁰¹ Greek dialects spoken in Turkey before the exchange of populations in 1923 were larded with Turkish elements, not only in their vocabulary but even in their morphology.¹⁰²

As Ed Cook has argued, however, a different process is more likely in the case of Hebrew, namely language shift. A large group of Aramaic speakers learnt Hebrew as adults and changed the language in the process: the words were mostly Hebrew, but the

⁹⁹ See Hendel, Joosten, *How Old*, 86–89, for other examples.

¹⁰⁰ Segal, *Grammar*, 134–149.

¹⁰¹ Sarah Grey Thomason, Terrence Kaufman, *Language Contact, Creolization, and Genetic Linguistics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 41.

¹⁰² Thomason, Kaufman, *Language Contact*, 215–222.

underlying structures were Aramaic. They then transmitted this new idiom to their children, and from them it spread to other groups. Afrikaans was born when non-Dutch speakers learnt Dutch as adults and changed it in the process. In time, the new idiom spread to native Dutch speakers and displaced Dutch as a spoken idiom. This model accounts for the grammatical interference that created MH, and it also agrees with the large-scale simplification that affected the language.

An important argument in favor of the shift model is the timeline. Cook argued that MH originated in the Hasmonaean period. In the present paper, however, evidence was presented showing that the characteristic features of MH—the Aramaic interference in the grammar, and the simplification—already show up, overtly or covertly, in the language of the latest books of the Hebrew Bible. LBH and a form of MH co-existed in a diglossic situation during the Persian and Hellenistic periods. This suggests that proto-MH emerged at some time before the end of the fifth century BCE. If so, the “slow shift” model cannot be invoked: the period of intense Aramaic influence would have extended over one or two centuries only, far too little to explain the transformation of BH into MH.

If proto-MH came into being before 400 BCE or so, when, where, and how is it likely to have originated?

- Chronological pegs

Mishnaic Hebrew is attested in full in the Mishna and early midrashim, which can be dated to the beginning of the third century CE. The Mishna may have originated as an oral text, to be written down centuries later, but this does not preclude that its text was fixed at composition around 200 CE and has been transmitted to us in a version reasonably faithful the original.¹⁰³

MH did not fall from the clear sky in the time of Judah Ha-Nasi. Documentary evidence attests that a language approaching MH was used in writing non-literary texts from the second half of the first century CE onward.¹⁰⁴ The Copper Scroll from Qumran

¹⁰³ For the oral origin of the Mishna, see Jacob Sussman, “‘Oral Law’ Taken Literally: The Power of the Point of a *Yod*,” in *Mehqerei Talmud III: Talmudic Studies Dedicated to the Memory of Professor Ephraim E. Urbach*, ed. Jacob Sussman and David Rosenthal (Jerusalem: M 2005), 209–384 (Hebrew).

¹⁰⁴ Wise, *Language and Literacy; Mor, Judean Hebrew*.

confirms this, although its contents did not give occasion for many MH features to be used.¹⁰⁵

The Mishna purports to transmit sayings of figures from earlier periods. In Mishna Avot, it takes the chain of tradition all the way back to Ezra, but in most other parts the earliest Rabbis quoted belong to the first century BCE. Given the stated importance of quoting someone's opinion in the very words he or she used,¹⁰⁶ the suggestion that figures such as Hillel and Shammai expressed themselves in some form of MH seems credible. This takes us back to a time close to that of the sectarian texts from Qumran.

As was noted in section 3, the Qumran texts appear to refer to their opponents' use of MH in religious teaching. The scrolls themselves are written in a language that aligns closely with LBH. Where they attest characteristic features of MH, these appear to be due to occasional slips into the vernacular.

The evidence for the period before the Dead Sea Scrolls has been collected in section 2. The earliest evidence is found in occasional slips in the later books of the Hebrew Bible:

Ruth: *Piel* of hollow verbs (4:7)

Isaiah 56–65: בָּאֲחָד

Jeremiah: לְ for direction (3:17 MT), אָנֹכִי (42:6), non-accusative אֶת־אֲשֶׁר (27:8 MT)

Ezekiel: *Piel* of hollow verbs

Jonah: בָּאֲשֶׁר לְ, בִּשְׁלִי

Zechariah 9–14: non-accusative אֶת־אֲשֶׁר

Psalms 119: *Piel* of hollow verbs

Song of Songs: שְׁלֵמָה

Nehemiah: בָּאֲחָד, מִקְצֵת, הִנֵּה, לְ expressing direction, אֲנִי + separate pronoun

Ezra: בָּאֲחָד, אֶבֶל, לְ expressing direction

Chronicles: אֶבֶל, אֶצֶל, לְ expressing direction

Ecclesiastes: מִה־, יְהוּא, הִנֵּה, עַד אֲשֶׁר לֹא, יוֹתֵר, בָּאֲחָד, בִּשְׁלִי, כִּבְר, אֵלֹהִים, אִי־יָדָה, אִי־שָׁה

¹⁰⁵ Høgenhaven, "Language of the Copper Scroll."

¹⁰⁶ See m. Eduyyot 1:3.

Esther: יוֹתֵר, אֵלֹ, *piel* of hollow verbs

Daniel: אֲשֶׁר לְמָה, מְקַצֵּת, אֲצֵל, אֲבָל, *piel* of hollow verbs,

The last six books in this list are the ones commonly classified as belonging to the LBH corpus and may safely be regarded as postexilic. Song of Songs, too, presents many LBH features.¹⁰⁷ Psalm 119 is one of the Psalms dated to the Persian period on linguistic grounds by Avi Hurvitz.¹⁰⁸ Ezekiel and Trito-Isaiah are regarded as exilic, although both texts may have been supplemented or partly rewritten in the Persian period. Jonah and Zechariah 9–14 are of uncertain date, but both are widely regarded as postexilic writings. The MH features in Jer 3:17 and 27:8 occur in additions to the MT not reflected in the Old Greek; additions like this in Jeremiah are generally considered to be later than the rest of the book. The feature in Jer 42:6 is attested in both the MT and the Septuagint. Ruth 4:7 is an etiological statement that is liable to have been added by a later editor.¹⁰⁹

In spite of the difficulty to date biblical texts with any precision, the present list is instructive in that none of the MH features listed takes us back before the Babylonian exile. On the face of it, the earliest occurrences could be those in Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Trito-Isaiah.

Beyond this point, direct evidence is lacking. Only cautious speculation can take us further.

- Changing languages

The notion that MH originated in a process of second-language acquisition provides a starting point. A group of Aramaic speakers learnt Hebrew. Who were these adult learners? Cook argued that they were non-Jews who were incorporated into the Jewish nation and religion by force during the Hasmonaean period. This is an inspired hypothesis, but it turns out not to agree with part of the data. To mention only one point, it would require Ecclesiastes and Esther to have been written, or rewritten, after 150 BCE, a view almost no biblical scholar will accept.

If MH emerged earlier, the Aramaic speakers we are looking for can only ever have been Jews.¹¹⁰ There simply does not seem to be a plausible scenario for non-Jews *en*

¹⁰⁷ Dobbs-Allsopp, “Late Linguistic Features.”

¹⁰⁸ Avi Hurvitz, *The Transition Period in Biblical Hebrew: A Study in Post-Exilic Hebrew and its Implications for the Dating of Psalms* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1972), 130–152 (Hebrew).

¹⁰⁹ Driver, *Introduction*, 455.

¹¹⁰ Or Judeans—but religion would have been an important factor in the process.

masse learning Hebrew at any time between the fall of Jerusalem and the Maccabean revolt. We are looking, then, for a group of Jews who lost their Hebrew and became Aramaic speakers, and then relearnt Hebrew and made it their first language again.

It is easy to think of a scenario for Jews losing their native language and adopting Aramaic instead. This is almost certainly what happened in the Babylonian exile. As we know from the Hebrew Bible, and as is now confirmed by the documents from Al Yahudu and other places, a sizable group of Judeans were forcibly displaced from their homeland and settled in various locations in Babylonia.¹¹¹ As the new documents show, these Judeans had many exchanges, and various types of relationships, with other minorities and with Babylonians. The official documents from Al Yahudu are written in Babylonian, but in every-day life the Judean exiles almost certainly communicated with other ethnic groups in Aramaic.¹¹² In time this would have led to the loss of Hebrew as a native language and the adoption of Aramaic instead. The first generation born in exile of Hebrew-speaking parents would still have understood the ancestral language, but with their children they would have mostly, or exclusively, communicated in the language they knew best, i.e. Aramaic. Only groups who do not mix with others are known to preserve their spoken language after migrating. The native language of these grandchildren of the first exiles would with near certainty have been Aramaic.

- Models of language shift

The shift to Aramaic stands to reason. But why would Judean exiles go back to speaking Hebrew? This is harder to explain, but not impossible. Two types of motivation may have played a role. The first one could be described as national pride or, alternatively, religious conviction.

In France, people of Breton descent organize in groups to study dialects of the Breton language that none of them learnt as a child.¹¹³ While the words of the “Neo-Breton” they learn are all Breton, the phonology is entirely aligned on French.¹¹⁴ The phraseology, too, is thoroughly French to the point where it is often possible to re-establish the French

¹¹¹ Laurie E. Pearce and Cornelia Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer*, CUSAS 28 (Bethesda: CDL, 2014).

¹¹² On Aramaic in the Babylonian empire, see Holger Gzella, *Aramäisch. Weltsprache des Altertums* (Munich: Beck, 2023), 120–23.

¹¹³ Steve Hewitt, “The problem of neo-speakers in language revitalization: The example of Breton,” paper read at a conference on *Teaching and Learning Resources for Endangered Languages*, University College, London, 23–25/9/2020, posted on academia.edu.

¹¹⁴ Hewitt, language revitalization.

model word-for-word (whereas traditional Breton phraseology is quite independent).¹¹⁵ The motivation of the learners is that Breton is still spoken in their family (typically by a grandparent), and political commitment and activism.¹¹⁶ The example of Breton, which can no doubt be paralleled from other places with endangered languages, shows that collective learning of a language may take place for various reasons, including nostalgia and identity affirmation.

At first, the Judaeans exiles would have worried about immediate needs such as nutrition, housing and safety. As prisoners of war, the Babylonian state told them what to do, but they undoubtedly tried to make the best of a difficult situation. Their success is documented in the *Al Yahudu* documents. Once they had secured a stable situation, culture and religion may have become more of a preoccupation. As the prophecies of Isa 40–55—in all likelihood composed by an exile of the second generation—show, defeat in war had not blunted their consciousness of being the chosen people of the only God. Harking back to their religious tradition, and rediscovering aspects of their identity, they may have been moved to relearn the ancestral tongue they had nearly forgotten, and to speak it again in their families.

Indirect confirmation of a progressively more inward-looking Jewish community in exile may perhaps be found in the evolving attitude to intermarriage. While endogamous marriage was no doubt always the rule in ancient Israel, there never was a blanket condemnation of intermarriage with other nations. At the return, however, both Ezra and Nehemiah are represented as combatting intermarriage as a matter of principle. Jews were the “holy seed,” which should not be mingled with other races (Ezra 9:2). This stance appears to have originated in exile as part of an isolationist policy, which may well have had a linguistic component.

Alongside this first type of motivation, a second, more practical one, may have come into play. Although many Judeans had successfully established themselves in exile, at some point some of them remigrated to the homeland. Historians estimate that the first group of returnees, during the last decades of the sixth century BCE, was small, but a second wave, probably around the middle of the fifth century, involved a sizable number of families. The impulsion for the return was largely religious in nature: prophets predicted the return, and promised divine assistance to the ones who should undertake it; historical writings underscore the religious fervor, at times bordering on the sectarian, of the

¹¹⁵ Hewitt, language revitalization.

¹¹⁶ Hewitt, language revitalization.

returnees and their leaders. Socially and economically, there was little reason to leave Babylonia and settle in Judea.

The return will have been anticipated, and planned, over a long period of time. It is not far-fetched to think that this planning stage included a decision to reacquire the ancestral language. In fact, learning Hebrew may well have been a necessity: Judea was not an “empty land” and most of its inhabitants would presumably have been native speakers of Hebrew.

The ideological and the practical motivations are distinct, but there is no reason to think they did not operate in tandem. The relearning of Hebrew may have started in Babylonia, with national pride as prime stimulus. Or it may have happened after the exiles’ return to their homeland—soon after the edict of Cyrus, or two generations later, in the time of Nehemiah and Ezra—in which case practical reasons may have been at the forefront. In either case, the two types of motivation would have been present.

- The exilic origin of MH

What all this leads up to is that the peculiar type of Hebrew we meet in MH originated among the exiles and came to Judea with the returnees. This group became politically dominant, as is narrated in Ezra-Nehemiah, and confirmed by the fact that a large portion of the LBH literature emanates from them. Their dominance would explain how proto-MH could take a hold in Judea, spread to the local population, and continue in use until the time of the Roman wars.

An oblique reference to some linguistic implications of the return may perhaps be found in a passage in Nehemiah:

Neh 13:23

In those days also I saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab; and half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod (אַשְׁדּוּדִית), and they could not speak the language of Judah (יְהוּדִית), but spoke the language of various peoples.

David Talshir has gathered evidence showing that Ashdodite may stand here for the Canaanite/Hebrew dialect spoken in a Persian province called Ashdod and situated to the west of the province of Yehud. Its inhabitants will have included many Jews, but also Phoenicians and foreigners.¹¹⁷ The passage may echo the dismay of Babylonian Jews finding that the colloquial Hebrew of their co-religionaries who had stayed in the land was nothing like their own (which they considered to be proper Judahite). Note that Nehemiah's complaint is specifically about spoken Hebrew.

Among the MH vocabulary that is absent from Biblical Hebrew we find a relatively large number of Akkadian loanwords, e.g. גִּט "document," בוֹסְבָר "coriander," נִחְתֹּם "baker," תְּחוֹם "border."¹¹⁸ Most of the Akkadian loanwords in MH are content words, but there are a few function words too, notably אִמְתִּי "when,"¹¹⁹ אֲשַׁתְּךָ "last year," and possibly בָּאַחַד "together" and לְשֵׁם "for the sake of." There are also a few loan-translations such as טָעַן "to claim," calquing a use of Akkadian *emēdu* "to load."¹²⁰

These loans are usually understood, correctly, to have come through the intermediary of Aramaic.¹²¹ However, in Aramaic too, these words could only be acquired at a time when and in a place where Akkadian was in use. Without constituting proof, the Akkadian words that ended up in MH are compatible with the notion that this idiom originated among the exiles.

- The timespan of MH's emergence

In the view defended here, the makeover of Hebrew happened within around eighty years. If it is submitted that the first generation of exiles were Hebrew speakers (though many of them may have known Aramaic as a second language), that the second generation grew up speaking Aramaic as their first language while still understanding the Hebrew of their parents, then the third generation would be the first one that would be fully ripe for renewed acquisition of Hebrew. Calculating 25 to 40 years per generation, this scheme fits neatly in the time frame stretching out between the fall of Jerusalem in 587/6 BCE and the return

¹¹⁷ Talshir, "Habitat and History," 257.

¹¹⁸ Nahum M. Waldman, "Akkadian Loanwords and Parallels in Mishnaic Hebrew" (PhD Diss, The Dropsie University, 1972).

¹¹⁹ Stephen A. Kaufman, *The Akkadian Influences on Aramaic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 58.

¹²⁰ Waldman, "Akkadian Loanwords," 22.

¹²¹ Waldman, "Akkadian Loanwords," 257–258; Yochanan Muffs, *Studies in the Aramaic Legal Papyri from Elephantine* (Leiden: Brill, 1969; reprint 2003), 192–194.

under Nehemiah around 450 BCE. It also tallies with the chronological pegs enumerated above.

Living languages are ever changing, but the kind of change that appears to have produced MH is rare. For an entire population to shift from their native language to an acquired one is exceptional. If proto-MH resulted from language shift, it will have emerged over the space of two generations: Aramaic-speaking parents learnt Hebrew as adults and transmitted their simplified language to their children for whom it was their native tongue. Repeated iterations of this complicated process are unlikely.

This does not mean that MH remained unchanged. From its inception, proto-MH will have evolved as all languages do, through the normal processes of sound change, analogy, and contact with other languages. However, these processes did not efface the marks of second-language acquisition that give MH its peculiar character.¹²²

- The first and the second resurrection of Hebrew

If we admit the hypothesis argued presently, the renewal of Hebrew that led to the creation of proto-MH had certain aspects in common with the revivification of Hebrew as a spoken language at the end of the 19th century. The analogy is not to be pressed, however. Modern Hebrew is more relevant as a parallel than Breton in that both “resurrections” of Hebrew were successful. Otherwise, the comparison is of limited value. A major difference is that the emergence of proto-MH issued in a form of diglossia, with the spoken and the written language evolving along separate paths. The renewal of Hebrew as a native language around the turn of the 19th century did not lead to diglossia, no doubt because one of the conditions formulated by Ferguson, limited literacy, did not apply. Written and spoken modern Hebrew differ in the same way written and spoken French, English, or German differ. They do not constitute different dialects.

Another crucial difference is that proto-MH emerged when various dialects of Hebrew were still widely spoken in Judea, in communities that never went through a loss of their native language. The extraordinary richness of the language of the Tannaïtes no doubt draws partly on this linguistic fund: the Aramaicized grammar of proto-MH did not hamper the borrowing of genuinely Hebrew vocabulary—in the realm of agriculture and

¹²² MH has a large number of Greek loanwords, most of which will have been borrowed during the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Greek influence did not affect the grammatical structure of MH, however: most of the loanwords are substantives, there are some verbs, but no function words.

other aspects of daily life—that by accident had not been recorded in the literary tradition. Modern Hebrew instead derives new words from modern European languages, or has recourse to neologisms.

7. Conclusions

Linguistic evidence indicates that an early form of Mishnaic Hebrew came into being over a relatively short period between the end of the sixth and the end of the fifth century BCE. Historical reasoning suggests that the most likely backdrop for the formation of this new form of Hebrew is the return of Judean exiles from Babylonian exile. The birth of proto-MH inaugurated a long period of diglossia, various effects of which can be observed in the texts from this period.

- The nature and historical depth of MH

The linguistic make-up of Mishnaic Hebrew betrays a phase of second-language acquisition in its history. A group of adults learnt to speak Hebrew and while doing so created a new, simplified, form of the language. The process also led to the importation of many grammatical features from Aramaic, thus revealing the adult learners' native language. The new idiom was transmitted to the next generation, for whom it was their native idiom, and later spread to other groups. This part of Cook's hypothesis is compelling. MH did not start out as a Hebrew dialect, spoken somewhere in Judea or Samaria from days of old.

Cook thought the process of second-language acquisition could be dated to the late second or early first century BCE, when groups of non-Jewish origin opted to learn Hebrew in order to get ahead in the Hasmonaean kingdom. However, the characteristic features of MH—the simplified grammar, and grammatical items and patterns borrowed from Aramaic—are reflected already in the latest books of the Hebrew Bible, notably Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles, Ecclesiastes, Esther and Daniel. This makes the Hasmonaean date impossible. The formative phase of MH must have happened earlier.

- Time, place and cultural-religious conditions

The most likely setting for the emergence of MH is the return from Babylonian exile. Forced migration leads to language loss. By the end of the sixth century, Jews in Babylonia

would in all likelihood have undergone a language shift, from Hebrew to Aramaic. A literate elite would continue to study traditional Hebrew literature and write new works in a continuation of Biblical Hebrew. But even the elite would, in daily life, have spoken Aramaic. This was not the end point, however. After having established themselves socially and economically in exile, the Jews conceived the desire to become again what they had been before. A sizable group relocated to their homeland and shifted languages once more, exchanging Aramaic for Hebrew in everyday communication. This is the juncture at which the ancestor of MH came into being. A generation of adult learners created a new idiom, which was then transmitted to their children as a native language.

- Hebrew diglossia

The revivification of Hebrew as a spoken language among Babylonian exiles in the Persian period created a dialect that differed essentially from all other dialects of Hebrew. Because it was produced by simplification, and because much of its grammar was based on Aramaic, the international language of the time, it was relatively easy to understand for speakers of other Hebrew dialects. Thus it spread from the returnees to other groups and may have become the vernacular throughout the Jewish settlement in and around Jerusalem. It continued as a spoken language in Judea until after the second Roman war.

For over five centuries, Hebrew was split into a spoken language close to MH, and a written language continuing Biblical Hebrew. This may seem to be an improbable state of affairs, but it is not. Several societies in which the “low” language differs substantially from the “high” language were discussed by Ferguson in his epochal essay on diglossia. The division of labor may vary from one situation to another, but the essential picture is the same. As in the Hebrew example, diglossia may imply the coexistence of a conservative and a more or less creolized variety of the same language. Until 1961, Dutch was (along with English) the official language of South Africa, while Afrikaans (along with English and indigenous African languages) served as spoken language.

The diglossic bond between proto-MH and LBH explains the sporadic presence of MH features in the late books of the Hebrew Bible. It also helps to understand some curious properties of LBH, where Biblical forms may be used to express MH meanings.

How MH became the language of the Mishna is uncertain. The association of the idiom with the Rabbis may be adventitious. A key factor would be the oral nature of early

Pharisaic-Rabbinic inquiry and teaching. Hillel and Shammai wrote no books but trained their disciples and educated the masses. They did this in the spoken language of their time.

The Hebrew language of the Mishna and early halachic midrashim is the linchpin of the approach essayed in this study. If it weren't for MH, all the data could be explained on the supposition that, after the exile, Hebrew gradually fell into disuse and Aramaic became the first language of Jews in the homeland. The evidence of simplification and interference could be ascribed to intense and long-lasting bilingualism.¹²³ The signs of diglossia could be viewed in terms of Hebrew being the high language and Aramaic the low language. The existence of MH makes all of this impossible. MH did not spring into existence around 200 C.E. Traces of earlier forms of this idiom can be followed back in time, through the Bar Kochba letters and the Copper Scroll to the Dead Sea Scrolls, Ecclesiastes, Esther and other late Biblical books. This retrospective quest reveals evidence of what otherwise could only have remained hidden: a spoken form of Hebrew. The fortune of Hebrew is that this spoken form itself one day was recorded in a written corpus and transmitted until today, thus providing present-day scholars with a clue as to what happened in bygone days.

¹²³ An approach along these lines appears to be envisaged by Holger Gzella, "The Aramaic Dialects of Early Roman Palestine: History, Variation, Use," *Orientalia* 89 (2020), 22–57, in particular 38.