

Before and After Babel: Linguistic Exceptionalism and Pluralism in Early Rabbinic Literature and Jewish Antiquity*

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1. Introduction

Language is sometimes regarded as if it were transparent. That is, we focus on what texts have to say, or what we construe them to mean, without giving enough consideration to how the language, or languages, by which they communicate are themselves strategic rhetorical choices that are critical to the text's social and cultural work, as to the identity-formation of its authors and audience. Hence, it is common in English-speaking countries (resistant as they are to multilingualism), for teachers or scholars to teach or analyze ancient Hebrew or Aramaic or Greek Jewish texts in English as if nothing were "lost in translation." The ancients knew better, and reflected considerably on the question of language choices and their consequences within a multicultural environment.¹ This is particularly true, I would argue, for early rabbinic literature, which is itself largely bilingual (Hebrew and Aramaic, not to mention Greek/Latin loan words), and which is particularly attentive, as we

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1 See, for example, *Bilingualism in Ancient Society: Language Contact and Written Text*, ed. J. N. Adams, M. Janse, and S. Swain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); J. N. Adams, *Bilingualism and the Latin Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

shall see, to both the language(s) of law and the laws of language. Law is both constituted by language and seeks to regulate language use.²

Rabbinic attentiveness to questions of language use can be attributed to two complementary, even if in tension, sorts of propellants: internal and external. Internally, for example, within the biblical tradition received by the Rabbis, the Hebrew Bible itself is bilingual (Hebrew and Aramaic),³ placing great emphasis on both the positive power of divine speech, as in the Creation account (with rabbinic literature denoting God as “He who spoke and the world came into being”) and the negative consequences of misdirected human speech (e.g., the story of the Tower of Babel and its consequent “confusion of tongues”). Externally, beginning at least as early as the Babylonian Exile in 586 B.C.E, Jewish communities, interspersed among those of other cultures and languages, were forced to adopt and adapt aspects of those cultures and languages in order to survive, while simultaneously needing to maintain a distinct identity (including a linguistic identity) so as not to be absorbed, a balancing act of no small feat and of great historical and cultural consequences. See, for example, Neh 13:23-24:

גַּם בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם רָאִיתִי אֶת־הַיְהוּדִים הַשִּׁיבּוּ נָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר־יָדוּת עַמֻּנִיּוֹת
 מוֹאָבִיּוֹת:
 וּבְנֵיהֶם תִּצְי מְדַבֵּר אֲשֶׁר־דְּבַר יְהוּדִית וְאֵינָם מְכִירִים לְדַבֵּר יְהוּדִית וְכִלְשׁוֹן עַם
 יָעָם:

Also at that time, I saw that Jews (הַיְהוּדִים) had married Ashdodite, Ammonite, and Moabite women; a good number of their children spoke the language of Ashdod and the language of those various peoples, and did not know how to speak Judean (יְהוּדִית) (NJPS).

- 2 For the bilingual nature of rabbinic literature (and law), see my forthcoming article, “Language Mix and Multilingualism in Ancient Palestine: Literary and Inscriptional Evidence,” *Jewish Studies* 48 (2011), esp. at n. 48 (with Hebrew translation to appear in *Leš* 73 [2011]).
- 3 Although the Aramaic sections of the Hebrew Bible are in some of its later books (especially the Book of Daniel), there are Aramaisms throughout. Rabbinic literature itself stresses that Aramaic (*targum*) can be found in all three divisions of the TaNaKh (Torah, Prophets, Writings). See *Gen. Rab.* 74:14 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, 871), which gives as examples Gen 31:47; Jer 10:11; Dan 2:4. Cf. *y. Soṭah* 7:2 (21c) (ed. Academy of Hebrew Language, 933); *Sanh.* 10:1 (27d) (ed. Academy of Hebrew Language, 1315).

Navigating the challenges of “languages in contact,” as much as “cultures in contact,” was critical to the success of such survival strategies. With each succeeding wave of foreign conquest, domination, and dispersion, these strategies were tested and refined anew.

I wish to suggest that it is against this broad canvas of multicultural and multilingual intersection and interaction, especially in the context of hellenization, Romanization, and Christianization, that the early rabbinic preoccupation with matters of language, especially multiple languages, needs to be, at least in significant part, understood. In other words, multilingualism was not just of philosophical or theological interest for the rabbis, but of direct practical consequence. In Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine times, the Jews of Palestine, including the rabbinic sages and their followers, however few or many they may have been, lived mainly in villages and cities of mixed populations, religious cultures, and languages, the three main languages having been Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek (with each having had sub-dialects), with lesser exposure to others as well. In those villages and cities they would have heard and seen a variety of languages. The relative proportions of *frequency* of use of those languages to one another, their *functional mix* (which language was used for which task), and the degree of *fluency* (oral, aural, reading, and writing) among mixed populations and diverse social strata varied from place to place, even within a relatively narrow geographic range, as over time. In short, the multilingual context was extremely complex, but unavoidable. Here I define “multilingualism” as “the knowledge of more than one language by a person or a social group and the ability to switch from one language to another in speech, in writing, or in speaking.”⁴

2. Teaching/Speaking Hebrew to One’s Children

As for all societies and cultures, especially those either in transit or living as a cultural minority, language, in our case “Jewish language,” is an important marker of identity, especially when (as always) there are multiple choices available, both internally (more than one Jewish language as options) and

4 Benjamin Harshav, *The Polyphony of Jewish Culture* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007), 23-40 (“Multilingualism”), citing from 25. Harshav further clarifies that multilingualism can be “personal, social, or inter-subjective,” that is, not all members of a society need to be equally multilingual to characterize that society as being multilingual.

externally (Jewish versus non-Jewish languages). In particular, the question of which language to speak with one's children highlights the tension between social advancement within the larger society and cultural transmission of one's own. Five passages, all from the Land of Israel, four from tannaitic sources and one from a Palestinian talmudic *barayta*, emphasize the obligation of a father to teach or speak to his son in Hebrew at an early age, together with teaching him Torah and how to recite the *Shema*.⁵ Here are two such passages:

“ולמדתם אותם את בניכם” (דברים יא:ט), בניכם ולא בנותיכם דברי רבי יוסי בן עקיבה. מיכן אמרו כשהתינוק מתחיל לדבר אביו מדבר עמו בלשון הקודש ומלמדו תורה ואם אין מדבר עמו בלשון קודש ואינו מלמדו תורה ראוי לו כאילו קוברו שנאמר “ולמדתם אותם את בניכם לדבר בם” (שם), אם למדתם אותם את בניכם “למען ירבו ימיכם וימי בניכם” (דברים יא:כא), ואם לאו למען יקצרו ימיכם שכך דברי תורה נדרשים מכלל הן לאו ומכלל לאו הן.⁶

“And teach them to your children (masculine plural)” (Deut 11:19): Your sons and not your daughters. These are the words of R. Yose b. Akiba. From here they said: When a young child begins to speak, his father speaks with him in the holy language and teaches him Torah. And if he does not speak with him in the holy language and does not teach him Torah, it would have been fitting for him as if he had buried him, as it says, “And teach them to your children, speaking of them.” If you taught them to your children, “to the end that your days and the days of your children shall increase” (Deut 11:21). And if not, to the end that your days shall be shortened. For thus are the words of Torah to be interpreted: from the positive, (we derive) the negative, and from the negative, the positive.

תנא בשם רבי מאיר כל מי שקבוע בארץ ישראל ומדבר לשון הקודש ואוכל פירותיו בטהרה וקורא ק”ש בבקר ובערב יהא מבושר שכן העולם הבא הוא.⁷

5 In general, I will concentrate my attention, although not entirely, on sources and authorities of tannaitic and amoraic Palestinian provenance.

6 *Sifre Deut. ‘Eiqev* 46 (ed. Finkelstein, 104).

7 *Y. Šeqal.* 3:3 (47c) (ed. Academy of the Hebrew Language, 613). For other such statements, some similarly in R. Meir’s name, some similarly stressing dwelling in

It has been taught in the name of R. Meir (ca. 150 C.E.):
Whoever is settled in the Land of Israel and speaks the holy
language and eats the fruits of the land in purity and recites the
Shema' in the morning and evening, may it be proclaimed that he
has a place in the world to come.

Note well the emphasis not just on teaching Hebrew, for example, as a vehicle for the study of Torah or the recitation of the *Shema'*, but as a language of father-to-son *speech*. As the first passage interprets the otherwise redundant phrase “speaking of them” (Deut 11:19), as soon as a child is able to speak, the father speaks with him in לשון הקודש, the “language of holiness,” this being an obligation separate from (but supportive of) teaching him Torah.⁸ The hyperbolic nature of the consequences, if not performed,⁹ suggest that such texts are less evidence of the widespread use of spoken Hebrew between parents and children in mid-second-century Galilee than of countervailing pressures that mitigated this practice. Even so, these passages strongly emphasize the role of spoken Hebrew as *pape-loshn*, an inter-generational Jewish cultural reproduction, much as one might expect from any linguistic-ethnos, but here with a particularly patriarchal emphasis.¹⁰

3. Hebrew in Exile

Although the challenges to maintaining Hebrew as a living language (whether spoken or literary) were greater in the diaspora than in the Land of Israel, even in the latter, especially under the rule of foreign empires and living among mixed populations, many of the same challenges could be encountered. The following two versions of a widely attested tradition, the first tannaitic and the

the Land of Israel, and some similarly stressing the recitation of the *Shema'* (to which I shall return below), see *Sifre Zutf.* 15:38 (ed. Horovitz, 288); *t. Hag.* 1:2 (ed. Lieberman, 374-75); *Sifre Deut.* 333 (ed. Finkelstein, 383).

- 8 Exegetically, this derives from the phrase “speaking of them” being separate from “teach them.” If “speaking of them” were no different from “teaching them,” it would be redundant, which, midrashically speaking, cannot occur in divine revelation.
- 9 Note the consequences of not doing so in *Sifre Zutf.* 15:38 and *t. Hag.* 1:2: “And if not, it would have been fitting for him (presumably, the son) not to have come into the world.”
- 10 Elizabeth Shanks Alexander has enlightened me on this aspect of these texts.

second amoraic, marvel at ancient Israel's ability to maintain its moral and cultural distinctiveness during the long enslavement in Egypt:

רבי אליעזר הקפר ברבי אומר וכי לא היה בידם של ישראל ארבע מצות שאין כל העולם כדאי בהם? שלא נחשדו על העריות. ולא על לשון הרע ולא שנו את שמם. ולא שנו את לשונם... ומנין שלא שנו את לשונם? שנו' "כי פי המדבר אליכם" (בראשית מה:יב) ואו' "ויאמרו אלהי העברים נקרה עלינו" וגו' (שמ' ה:ג) ואומר "ויבא הפליט ויגד לאברם העברי" (בראשית יד:יג).¹¹

R. Eliezer Ha-Qappar said in the name of Rabbi [Judah the Patriarch] (ca. 220 C.E.): Did not Israel [while in Egypt] possess four commandments than which nothing in the world is more worthwhile? For they were not suspect with regard to chastity, nor with regard to tale-bearing, nor did they change their [Hebrew] names, nor their language... From whence do we learn that they did not change their language? As it is said, "That it is indeed my mouth [=native language] that is speaking with you" (Gen 45:12).¹² And it says, "And they said, "The God of the Hebrews has manifested Himself to us" (Exod 5:3). And it says, "A fugitive brought the news to Abram the Hebrew" (Gen 14:13).

ר' חונה בש' בר קפרא בשביל ארבעה דברים ניגאלו ישר' ממצרים, על ידי שלא שינו את שמן ולא שינו את לשונם ועל ידי שלא אמרו לשון הרע ועל ידי שלא היה בהן פרוץ ערוה... על ידי שלא שינו את שמן, ראובן ושמעון מי נחתין ראובן ושמעון מי סלקין. לא היו קורין לראובן רופס, ליהודה לוליאנא, ליוסף ליסטס, לבנימן אלכסנדרא. על ידי שלא שינו את לשונם, להלן כת' "ויבא הפליט ויגד לאברם העברי" (בראשית יד:יג) וכאן כתיב "ויאמרו אלהי העברים נקרה עלינו" (שמות ה:ג). וכת' "כי פי המדבר אליכם" (בראשית מה:יב), בלשון הקודש...¹³

11 *Mek. of R. Ishmael, Pisha* 5 (ed. Horovitz-Rabin, 14-15; but cf. ed. Lauterbach, 34-36, following MS Oxford).

12 See also the *targumim*.

13 *Lev. Rab.* 32:5 (ed. Margulies, 747-48). For later parallels, see Margulies's notes ad loc.; *Pesiq. Rab Kah. Vayhi Beshallah* 6 (ed. Mandelbaum, 182-83), with notes ad loc.; Saul Lieberman, "חונות יניי," *Sinai* 4 (1939): 227-28.

R. Ḥuna in the name of Bar Qappara (ca. 230 C.E.): For four things were Israel redeemed from Egypt: for not having changed their names, for not having changed their language, for not having engaged in tale-bearing, and for not one of them having acted licentiously.... For not having changed their names: They went down [to Egypt] as Reuben and Simeon, and came up as Reuben and Simeon. They did not call Reuben “Rufus,” nor Judah “Leon,” nor Joseph “Lestes,” nor Benjamin “Alexander.” For not having changed their language: Above it is written, “A fugitive brought the news to Abram the Hebrew” (Gen 14:13), while here it is written, “And they said, ‘The God of the Hebrews has manifested Himself to us’” (Exod 5:3). And it is written, “That it is indeed my mouth [=native language] that is speaking with you” (Gen 45:12).

Two of the four behavioral traits that remained unchanged in Egypt are ethnic markers (the other two being moral): names and language. Both passages employ biblical prooftexts to show not only that Joseph was still able to communicate with his brothers in their native tongue (presumably, Hebrew), but that by the time of Moses and Aaron the Israelites continued to be recognized by the Egyptians as Hebrews, a linguistic marker first applied to Abraham, their founding father (Gen 14:13).¹⁴ In other words, despite challenging circumstances over a long duration, the Hebrews retained that ethnic designation by virtue of their having maintained their “native” Hebrew language.

The second passage introduces an interesting twist in that it provides the local names which the Hebrews did not adopt in place of their native Hebrew names while enslaved in Egypt. However, the alternative names are not Egyptian but Latin,¹⁵ suggesting that in speaking about cultural maintenance during the enslavement in Egypt of the distant past, the midrash is actually

14 The designation of Abraham and his descendants as Hebrews (*‘ibrim*) has several popular derivations (see *Gen. Rab.* 41 [42]:8 [ed. Theodor-Albeck, 414]), the most common being: 1. From Eber (*‘eber*), son of Shem (Gen 10:21, 24-25; 11:14-17), of whom Abraham is a descendent (Gen 11:26). 2. Abraham came from “across (*me‘eber*) the Euphrates” (Josh 24:2-3; cf. LXX Gen 14:13).

15 On the relation of the Hebrew to Latin names, see the commentary of R. David Luria (RaDaL) to *Midrash Rabbah*; Saul Lieberman, “פתרון מלים וענינים,” in ספר־היוכל לפרופסור שמואל קרויס: למלאת לו שבעים שנה, מנחה היא שלוהה מאת חבריו, ידידיו ותלמידיו (Jerusalem: R. Mass, 1936/7), 306.

talking about cultural maintenance in the Greco-Roman present. In both contexts, the continued use of the Hebrew language (and names) is presumed to be an important factor in cultural perseverance.

The following passage, commenting on the first word of the Decalogue (Exod 20:2), presumes the very opposite, that the Israelites upon leaving Egypt understood (and presumably spoke) Egyptian, not Hebrew:

א"ר נחמיה מהו אנכי, לשון מצרי הוא. למה הדבר דומה למלך בשר ודם שנישבה בנו ועשה ימים הרבה אצל השכויין, לבש נקמה אביו והלך אצלו והביאו ובא להשיח עמו בלשונן של שכויין. כך הב"ה, עשו ישראל במצרים כל אותן השנים ולמדו שיחתן של מצרים, כשגאלן הב"ה ובא ליתן להם את התורה ולא היו יודעים לשמוע, אמ' הקב"ה הרי אני משיח להם בלשון מצרי, אמ' הקב"ה אנכי, אנוך, כך פתח להם הקב"ה בלשונם, אנכי י"י אלהיך (שמות כ:ב).¹⁶

R. Nehemiah said: What is *'anokhi*? It is an Egyptian word. Why did God find it necessary to use an Egyptian word? For answer, consider the story of a mortal king whose son had been captured. The son spent many years among his captors, until the king, cloaked in vengeance, went to free his son, brought him back, and then found he had to talk with him in the captors' speech.¹⁷ So it was with the Holy One, blessed be He. Israel had spent all the years of their servitude in Egypt where they learned the Egyptian speech. Finally, when the Holy One redeemed them and came to give them the Torah, they could not understand it. So the Holy One said: I will speak to them in their captors' speech. Thereupon the Holy One used the word *'anokhi*, which is a form of the Egyptian (Coptic) *'nwk*, so that the Holy One began His inauguration of the giving of Torah with Israel's acquired way of speaking: "I (*'anokhi*) am the Lord thy God" (Exod 20:2).

16 *Pesiq. Rab Kah. Bahodesh Ha-shelishi* 12:24 (ed. Mandelbaum, 223; trans. Braude, 248). My thanks to Yonatan Moss for bringing this passage to my attention. For later parallels, see Mandelbaum's note ad loc. For further discussion, see Rivka Ulmer, *Egyptian Cultural Icons in Midrash* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 252-53.

17 Cf. *Pisqa* 11.6; and Acts 2:5-12.

Although the Torah's narrative of the Exodus from Egypt and the revelation at Mt. Sinai is recounted in Hebrew, the actual language spoken by the Israelites at that time, considering the circumstances of their long residence in Egypt, may well have been Egyptian, as the Midrash discerns from the telltale *'nky*.

Thus, we find two very different views of Israelite language maintenance in Egypt: (1) the Israelites resisted the pressure to acculturate linguistically to Egyptian society; (2) such linguistic accommodation, to which God himself accommodated in his own revelatory speech (and self-identification) at Sinai, was unavoidable.

4. Hebrew as Primordial Language

The previous passages make no special claims for Hebrew that would not be made by any other ethnos on behalf of the importance of preserving and transmitting its particular linguistic code, especially when threatened by political or cultural domination and exile. Was Hebrew simply one of the “seventy languages” of the seventy nations of the world,¹⁸ or did it have a uniquely-privileged ontological status among the languages (e.g., as לשון הקודש, the “language of holiness”)?

Consider the following:

“לזאת יקרא אשה כי מאיש לקחה” וגו' (בראשית ב:כג). מיכן אתה למד שניתנה התורה בלשון הקודש, ר' פינחס ור' חלקיה בשם ר' סימון כשם שניתנה בלשון הקודש כך נברא העולם בלשון הקודש, שמעת מימך אומר גיני גיניה, איתא איתתא, אנתרופי אנתרופייא, גברא גברתא, אלא איש ואשה, למה שהלשון הזה נופל על הלשון הזה.¹⁹

“She shall be called, woman (*'ishah*), because she was taken out of man (*'ish*)” (Gen 2:23). From this you learn that the Torah was given in the holy language. R. Phinehas and R. Helkiah in R. Shim'on's (ca. 300 C.E.) name said: Just as it was given in the holy language, so was the world created with the holy language.

18 The idea that there were seventy nations in the world – here each presumed to have its own distinct language – derives from the “table of nations” in Gen 10.

19 *Gen. Rab.* 18:4; 31:8 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, 164-65, 281). On the Torah having pre-existed and been consulted by God in Creation, see Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, trans. Henrietta Szold, 7 vols. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1913-1938), 1:3-4, with notes. For a similar claim for “wisdom,” see Sir 1:4; 24:9.

Have you ever heard one say [in other languages], *gini, ginia; itta, itteta; antropi, antropia; gavra, gevarta* [that the word for “woman” is the feminized form of the word for “man”]? But *’ish* and *’ishah* [are used in Hebrew]. Why? Because the two expressions correspond to one another.

At issue here, of course, is not whether the Torah, as we have it, is written in Hebrew, but whether it was originally delivered in Hebrew and whether as such it pre-existed its formal revelation at Mt. Sinai all the way back to (even preceding) Creation. The key to this understanding is here located in Gen 2:23, according to which the designation by God of man (*’ish*) and woman (*’ishah*) by terms that are linguistically related to one another, that is, that woman derives from man both physically and linguistically in Hebrew, is not the case in other languages (nor for the proper names of Adam and Eve). Thus, the Hebrew biblical text as we know it cannot be a translation from an ur-text in another language. Since Hebrew is instrumental in the designation of the first humans as *’ish* and *’ishah* at the time of creation, it must also have been the language of the divine speech by which the world was created (Gen 1).

Thus, Hebrew is shown to have been the language of both revelation and creation, and, implicitly, the language by which God addressed the first humans and in which they communicated with one another (the words from Gen 2:23 having been spoken by the first man). Hebrew was the language of divine and human communication before there were seventy nations speaking seventy languages, of which Hebrew would have been one among many. Thus, to begin with at least, Hebrew *alone* was the language of holiness as well as of primordial humanity, but also of cosmogony.

However, the language with which the world was created need not necessarily have been the language(s) spoken by the first humans, either in or after Eden (although the previous passage suggests as much). One might think that the Hebrew language was only given to humans to use at a later, more appropriate time, e.g., with Abraham, the first “Hebrew,”²⁰ or with the revelation of the Torah through Moses at Mt. Sinai. The question of the language spoken by the first humans receives specific attention in the following passage from the Babylonian Talmud:

אמר רב יהודה אמר רב: אדם הראשון בלשון ארמי ספר שנאמר “ולִי מֵהַ
יְקָרוּ רַעֲיָךְ אֵל” (תהלים קלט:ז). והיינו דאמר ריש לקיש: מאי דכתיב

20 See below, at n. 33.

”זה ספר תולדת אדם” (בראשית ה:א) — מלמד שהראהו הקדוש ברוך הוא דור דור ודורשיו, דור דור וחכמיו. כיון שהגיע לדורו של רבי עקיבא שמח בתורתו ונתעצב במיתתו, אמר ”ולי מה יקרו רעיך אל.”²¹

Rab Judah said in Rab’s (ca. 230 C.E.) name: The first man spoke Aramaic, for it is written, “How *weighty* are your *thoughts* unto me, God” (Ps 139:17). And that is related to what Resh Laqish (ca. 250 C.E.) said: What is the meaning of the verse, “This is the book of the generations of Adam” (Gen 5:1)? It is to intimate that the Holy One, blessed be He, showed him [=Adam] every generation and its expositors, every generation and its sages. When he came to the generation of Rabbi Akiba, he [=Adam] rejoiced at his [=Akiba’s] learning but was grieved at his [martyr’s] death, and said: “How *dear* are your *friends* to me, O God.”

From its biblical context, Ps 139:17 is presumed to have been spoken by Adam. Rab Judah notices that the verse contains an Aramaism in the word for “your thoughts” (רְעִיךָ), indicating thereby that Adam spoke Aramaic. By contrast, another interpretation of the same verse, by Resh Laqish, understands the word in question to be proper Hebrew for “your friends.” At issue, therefore, appears to be which of two related Semitic (and Jewish) languages was spoken by Adam, Hebrew or Aramaic.²²

21 *B. Sanh.* 38b.

22 The meaning of the passage is less certain than I have presented it. Commentators have recognized a second Aramaism in the word for “weighty” (יָקָרָה). Does the same verse as cited by Resh Laqish denote the same Aramaism (“weighty”) or a proper Hebrew meaning, “dear”? Thus, it is unclear whether Resh Laqish’s use of Ps 139:17 is intended to support that of Rab Judah’s (Adam spoke Aramaic), or to refute it (Adam spoke Hebrew), or is neutral, simply adducing another interpretation of the same verse for other purposes. Some Syriac writers claim that Syriac was spoken by the first humans. See Yonatan Moss, “The Language of Paradise: Hebrew or Syriac? Linguistic Speculations and Linguistic Realities in Late Antiquity,” in *Paradise in Antiquity: Jewish and Christian Views*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl and Guy G. Stroumsa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 120-37. On the question of the original language of humankind, see Umberto Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language*, trans. James Fentress (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), esp. 95-103; Milka Rubin, “The Language of Creation or the Primordial Language: A Case of Cultural Polemics in Antiquity,” *JJS* 49 (1998): 306-33; Arno Borst, *Der Turmbau von Babel: Geschichte der Meinungen über Ursprung und Vielfalt der Sprachen und Völker*, 6 vols. (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1957-1963), esp. 1:227-92.

The question of which language or languages were spoken by humankind prior to the physical and linguistic dispersion of the generation of the Tower of Babel is discussed in several Palestinian sources, both rabbinic and pre-rabbinic:

כתיב "ויהי כל הארץ שפה אחת ודברים אחדים" (בראשית יא:א) רבי לעזר ורבי יוחנן חד אמר שהיו מדברים בשבעי' לשון וחורנה אמר שהיו מדברין בלשון יחידו של עולם בלשון הקודש תני בר קפרא "יפת אלהים ליפת וישכן באהלי שם" (בראשית ט:כו) שיהו מדברין בלשונו של יפת באוהלו של שם.²³

It is written, "Everyone on earth had the same language and the same (or, multiple) words" (Gen 11:1): R. Eleazar (ca. 300 C.E.) and R. Yoḥanan (ca. 280 C.E.): One said that they spoke seventy languages, and the other said that they spoke the language of the Single One of the World [=God], the holy language. Bar Qappara (ca. 350 C.E.) taught: "May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem" (Gen 9:27): That they may speak the language of Japheth [=Greek] in the tents of Shem [=the Hebrews].

Contrary to the customary view that multiple languages began with the destruction of the Tower of Babel, R. Eleazar interprets Gen 11:1 to mean that the seventy nations (Gen 10:1-32, immediately *preceding* the story of the Tower of Babel) already spoke seventy languages (assuming a correlation of each nation to a language) *prior* to the "confusion of tongues" that accompanied the scattering of the peoples (Gen 11:7-9). He does this by taking Gen 11:1 to mean that the multiple (אֲחָדִים) "speeches" (דְּבָרִים=*paroles*) constituted a single (אֶחָד) language (שִׁפְהָ=*langue*).²⁴ By this interpretation, the difference between pre- and post-Babel is that humankind previously spoke many languages and *understood one another*, whereas subsequently they still spoke multiple languages but no longer understood one another. Thus, the divine punishment of that generation was not so much the multiplication of languages as their cognitive confusion.²⁵

23 Y. Meg. 1:11 (71b) (ed. Academy of the Hebrew Language, 748).

24 The distinction between a single *langue* and multiple *paroles* originates with Ferdinand de Saussure, as developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss.

25 See Gen 11:7, 9. For this distinction see Philo, *On the Confusion of Tongues* 191. For further discussion, see Steven D. Fraade, "Rabbinic Views on the Practice of Targum and Multilingualism in the Jewish Galilee of the Third-Sixth Centuries,"

By contrast, R. Yoḥanan takes both שְׂפָה אֶחָת and דְּבָרִים אֶחָדִים to refer, by a word-play, to the language of the “Single One (יחיד) of the World” (=God), that is, to Hebrew as the language of holiness (of God). According to him, all of humankind spoke Hebrew prior to the Tower of Babel, but that thereafter the single language of the Single One was divided into many (presumably seventy) languages.²⁶

The same talmudic passage cites, in the name of Bar Qappara, an interpretation of Gen 9:27 as “they would speak the language of Japheth (=Greek) in the tents of Shem (=the Hebrews),” and be understood.²⁷ This would appear to be a middle position between those of R. Eleazar and R. Yoḥanan, conferring a privileged status to Greek in particular, thereby allowing for the possibility of Hebrew-Greek translation and presuming Hebrew-Greek bilingualism prior to Babel.²⁸

Note how, according to the following late midrash, Hebrew as the single language of Creation will be restored in messianic times:

in *The Galilee in Late Antiquity*, ed. Lee I. Levine (New York and Jerusalem: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), 267 n. 37; Willem Smelik, “Language Selection and the Holy Tongue in Early Rabbinic Literature,” in *Interpretation, Religion and Culture in Midrash and Beyond: Proceedings of the 2006 and 2007 SBL Midrash Sessions*, ed. L. Teugels and R. Ulmer (Piscataway, NJ.: Gorgias Press, 2008), 95-99; idem, “Code-switching: The Public Reading of the Bible in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek,” in *Was ist ein Text? Alttestamentliche, ägyptologische und altorientalistische Perspektiven*, ed. Ludwig Morenz and Stefan Schorch, BZAW 362 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007), 140; Esther Eshel and Michael E. Stone, “The Holy Language at the End of Days in the Light of a Qumran Fragment,” *Tarbiz* 62 (1993): 169-77 (Hebrew); idem, in *DJD* XIX (1995), 219-21; Avigdor Shinan, “The Language of the Sanctuary’ in the Aramaic Translations of the Pentateuch,” *Beth Mikra* 66 (1976): 472-74 (Hebrew).

- 26 For Hebrew as the single language of Gen 11:1, the language of Creation, see also *Tg. Ps.-J.*, *Tg. Neof.*, and *Frg. Tg.* (MS Vatican) to Gen 11:1. On the difficulty of rendering Gen 11:1, and for its broader ancient Near Eastern implications for multilingualism and translation, see William W. Hallo, “Bilingualism and the Beginnings of Translation,” in *Origins: The Ancient Near Eastern Background of Some Modern Western Institutions*, Studies in the History and Culture of the Ancient Near East 6 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 154-68.
- 27 One of the sons of Japheth is Javan (Greece), according to Gen 10:2, next cited in our text. Similarly, Abraham is a descendent of Shem (Gen 10:10-26).
- 28 For such a privileging of Greek, compare the view of Rabban Shim’on ben Gamliel in *m. Meg.* 1:8; *y. Meg.* 1:11 (71c) (ed. Academy of Hebrew Language, 749); *b. Meg.* 8b-9b; 18a.

“הבה נרדה [ונבלה שם שפתם]” (בראשית יא:ז), שעירכב הקב”ה את לשונם ולא היה אחד מהם יודע לשון חבירו, מה היה אותו הלשון שהיו מדברים בו, לשון הקודש היה, שבו נברא העולם. בעולם הזה היו האומות והבריות חולקין על הקב”ה, אבל לעולם הבא כולן שוין כתף אחד לעברו, שנאמר “כי אז אהפוך אל עמים שפה ברורה [לקרוא כולם בשם ה' לעברו שכם אחד]” (צפניה ג:ט)...²⁹

“Let us, then, descend [and confound their speech there]” (Gen 11:7): When the Holy One, blessed be He, mixed up their language, not one of them knew his companion’s language. What was that language which they had been speaking? It was the holy language through which the world had been created. In this world nations and peoples take issue with the Holy One, blessed be He, but in the world to come all of them will be like a single shoulder for serving Him, as it is said, “For then I will make the peoples pure of speech [so that they all invoke the Lord by name and serve Him with one shoulder]” (Zeph 3:9)...

The messianic ideal of all of humanity serving God in unity will require the replacement of the cacophony of languages with a single “pure language” (שפה ברורה).³⁰

It should be stressed that the early rabbis were not the first to speculate upon the history of multilingualism through scriptural interpretation. The following two passages from the book of *Jubilees* (mid-second century B.C.E.) present somewhat differing accounts as to when the languages were “confused” and when Hebrew was introduced:

3:28 On that day [=expulsion from Eden] the mouths of all animals, the cattle, the birds, everything that walks and everything that moves about were made incapable of speaking because all of them used to converse with one another in one language and one tongue.³¹

29 *Tanḥ. Noah* 28 (ed. Buber, 28b).

30 For a single language being connected to a single counsel (עיצה), see *Frg. Tg.* (MS Vatican) to Gen 11:1: “And all the inhabitants of the earth had one language and one word and one counsel, because they spoke in the holy language by which the world was created in the beginning.”

31 For the “myth” that the animals originally shared a common language, see Philo, *Confusion of Tongues* 6.

12:25 Then the Lord God said to me: “Open his [=Abraham’s] mouth and his ears to hear and speak with his tongue in the revealed language.” For from the day of the collapse [of the Tower of Babel] it had disappeared from the mouth(s) of all mankind. 26 I opened his mouth, ears, and lips and began to speak Hebrew with him – in the language of the creation. 27 He took his fathers’ books (they were written in Hebrew) and copied them. From that time he began to study them, while I was telling him everything that he was unable (to understand). He studied them throughout the six rainy months.³²

In 3:28 the “confusion of tongues” (at least among the animals) is retrojected from the Tower of Babel incident (Gen 11) to the expulsion from Eden (Gen 3), in a sense, to a more originary point of rupture, without explanation, but with a paraphrase of what appears to be Gen 11:1. However, in 12:25, the Tower of Babel incident is identified with the cessation of human use of Hebrew, only to be *restored* with Abraham, the first “Hebrew.”³³ Note how the “revelation” (or restoration) of Hebrew, the language of creation, to Abraham coincides with his copying and studying of (presumably) sacred texts, for which he relies on divine inspiration for understanding.

5. The Language(s) of Revelation

Although the Hebrew Bible, and especially the Pentateuch, as we have it is almost entirely in Hebrew, several midrashim emphasize that Hebrew is also the language in which it was divinely revealed to Moses at Mt. Sinai, that being *לשון הקודש*, the “language of holiness”:

“כה תאמר” (שמות יט:ג). כה בלשון הקודש, כה כסדר הזה, כה כענין הזה, כה שלא תפחות ולא תוסיף.

“Thus shall you say” (Exod 19:3): “Thus,” in the holy language. “Thus,” in this order. “Thus,” in this manner. “Thus,” without removing or adding.³⁴

32 *Jub.* 3:28; 12:25-27 (trans. VanderKam).

33 See above, n. 14.

34 *Mek. of R. Ishmael, Bahodesh* 2 (ed. Horovitz-Rabin, 207). For the last phrase, see Deut 4:2; 13:1.

“ויאמר ה' אל משה כה תאמר” (שמות כ:ט). בלשון שאני אומר “כה תאמר אל בני ישראל” (שם), [בלשון שאני אומר לך בו תדבר אל בניין בלשון הקדש. כל מקום שנאמר, “כה” “ככה” “ענייה ואמירה”, הרי זה בלשון קדש.

“The Lord said to Moses: Thus you shall say...” (Exod 20:19): In the language that I speak. “Thus you shall say to the Israelites”: [In the very same language that I speak to you, you shall speak to My children.] In the holy language. Wherever it says “thus,” “so,” or “answer and say,” this refers to the holy language.³⁵

With Moses acting as the intermediary of God’s revelation to Israel, how can we be certain that what he recorded is what was revealed to him?³⁶ These midrashim take their cues from the emphatic (and otherwise redundant) language of Scripture when it says, “thus” (כֹּה), meaning that Moses was specifically admonished, among other things, not to change the language of revelation in recording it.³⁷ It can be presumed, therefore, that the language in which the Torah is recorded is the language in which it was revealed, thereby ensuring that the text shares in the holiness of its language and vice versa.

Notwithstanding the preceding texts’ emphasis on the seemingly *mono-lingual* Hebrew revelation, several early rabbinic texts emphasize its *multi-lingual* nature:

35 Ibid., 9 (ed. Horovitz-Rabin, 238; cf. ed. Lauterbach, 274-75, following MS Oxford).

36 On the broader topic of Moses’s intermediary role, and suspicions that he might have tampered with the revelation that he received and transmitted, see Steven D. Fraade, “Moses and the Commandments: Can Hermeneutics, History, and Rhetoric Be Disentangled?” in *The Idea of Biblical Interpretation: Essays in Honor of James L. Kugel*, ed. Hindy Najman and Judith H. Newman, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 83 (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 399-422.

37 Whereas elsewhere such formulations relate to specific ritual recitations, here they relate to the language of Sinaitic revelation as a whole. We might compare this tradition with another which states that with Ezra’s re-establishment of the Torah, there existed the possibility of changing the Torah’s language from Hebrew to Aramaic. Instead, its language remained unchanged but its script was changed from “Hebrew” to “Assyrian” (or Aramaic). This is linked to an understanding of מִשְׁנֵה הַתּוֹרָה in Deut 17:18 as the Torah “destined to be changed.” See *Sifre Deut.* 160 (ed. Finkelstein, 211); *t. Sanh.* 4:7-8; *y. Meg.* 1:11 (71b-c) (ed. Academy of Hebrew Language, 748-49); *b. Sanh.* 21b-22a; 4 *Ezra* 14:42; Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 4:355-56; 6:443-44 nn. 41-44; Shlomo Naeh, “The Script of the Torah in Rabbinic Thought (A): The Traditions Concerning Ezra’s Changing of the Script,”

(ב) "ויאמר ה' מסיני בא וזרח משעיר" (דברים לג:ב), ...דבר אחר כשנגלה הקדוש ברוך הוא ליתן תורה לישראל לא בלשון אחד אמר להם אלא בארבעה לשונות שנאמר "ויאמר ה' מסיני בא" זה לשון עברי "וזרח משעיר למו" זה לשון רומי "הופיע מהר פארן" זה לשון ערבי "ואתה מרבבות קדש" זה לשון ארמי.³⁸

"He said: The Lord came from Sinai; He shone upon them from Seir" (Deut 33:2)... Another interpretation: When the Holy One, blessed be He, was revealed to give Torah to Israel, he did not speak to them in one language but in four languages, as it is said, "He said: The Lord came from Sinai": This is the Hebrew language. "He shone upon him from Seir": This is the Roman language. "He appeared from Mount Paran": This is the Arabic language. "And approached from Ribboth-qodesh": This is the Aramaic language.

Prior to this interpretation, the four place names in Deut 33:2 are interpreted to refer to the four directions from which God *simultaneously* approached the Israelites at the moment of revelation.³⁹ Similarly here, the Torah is revealed to

Leš 70 (2008): 125-43 (Hebrew). According to one version of this tradition (*b. Sanh.* 21b), it was the Israelites of Ezra's time who chose, as a sort of compromise, to retain the Hebrew language of the Torah but to change its script to Assyrian/Aramaic, which is how it is preserved.

- 38 *Sifre Deut.* 343 (ed. Finkelstein, 395). See Fraade, "Rabbinic Views," 267 n. 36. The specific languages are determined by the exegetical exigencies. The word וְאָתָהּ of Deut 33:2 is understood to be Aramaic and hence to represent the Aramaic language, even though the *Sifre's* subsequent interpretations of this word are based on word plays that presume it to be Hebrew. On multilingual puns as the basis for rabbinic interpretation, see Daniel Boyarin, "Bilingualism and Meaning in Rabbinic Literature: An Example," in *Fucus: A Semitic/Afrasian Gathering in Remembrance of Albert Ehrman*, ed. Yoël L. Arbeitman (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1988), 141-52; Galit Hasan-Rokem, "The Almost Invisible Presence of the Other: Multi-Lingual Puns in Rabbinic Literature," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 222-39. For a Hebrew version of the same, see eadem, "משחק במילים יווניות בחידות עבריות-ארמיות," in *Studies in Talmudic and Midrashic Literature: In Memory of Tizrah Lifshitz*, ed. Moshe Bar-Asher et al. (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2005), 159-71. See also Saul Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine in the II-IV Centuries C.E.*, 2nd ed. (New York: Feldheim, 1965), 29-67.

- 39 In the better manuscripts, however, the order is reversed: four languages followed

Israel *simultaneously* in four languages, the number four denoting, like the four directions, completeness: the multilingual plenitude of revelation which cannot be limited to a single language. It is important to emphasize that according to this midrash all four languages were addressed to Israel (“to them”/להם) and not to different peoples, each in its own language. Does this imply a presumption that Israel (ideally perhaps) would have understood these four languages? Given the anachronistic nature of the list, we must assume that the midrash is more about the idea of multilingual revelation than about its practicalities.

For revelation dividing into “seventy languages,”⁴⁰ again representing typologically the totality of linguistic expression,⁴¹ note the following talmudic passage:

אמר רבי יוחנן: מאי דכתיב “ה’ יתן אמר המבשרות צבא רב” (תהלים סח:יב) – כל דיבור ודיבור שיצא מפי הגבורה נחלק לשבעים לשונות. תני דבי רבי ישמעאל: “וכפטיש יפצץ סלע” (ירמיהו כג:כט) מה פטיש זה נחלק לכמה ניצוצות – אף כל דיבור ודיבור שיצא מפי הקדוש ברוך הוא נחלק לשבעים לשונות.⁴²

by four directions. For the four hemistichs of Deut 33:2 interpreted as representing the four directions that Moses summoned to witness against Israel, see *Sifre Deut.* 306 (ed. Finkelstein, 340).

40 See above, n. 18.

41 Seventy is the product of two “complete” numbers, seven and ten. As such it is typological for totality, and not realistic of a particular number. See Moshe Idel, “Infinities of Torah in Kabbalah,” in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 155 n. 31 (with reference to earlier treatments): “The figure 70 stands for the totality of the aspects of a certain limited phenomenon, as we discover by comparing phrases closely related to the phrase ‘seventy facets’: ‘seventy languages,’ ‘seventy nations,’ ‘seventy angels,’ etc.” Similarly, other texts speak of forty-nine (seven times seven) faces of the Torah. See *The Mishnah of Rabbi Eliezer or the Midrash of Thirty-Two Hermeneutical Rules*, ed. H. G. Enelow (New York: Bloch, 1933), 45, with Enelow’s notes for other sources, esp. *Pesiq. Rab.* 21 (ed. Friedmann, 101a) and *Midrash Haggadol* at Exod 34:29 (ed. Margoliot, 717). See also *Soferim* 16:5 (ed. Higger, 288-89).

42 *B. Shabb.* 88b. For parallels, see Fraade, “Rabbinic Views,” 267 n. 37; idem, “Rabbinic Polysemy and Pluralism Revisited: Between Praxis and Thematization,” *AJSR* 31 (2007): 28-29, including references to previous treatments by Daniel Boyarin and Azzan Yadin; Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 6:39 n. 214. Note especially *b. Sanh.* 34a, where the parallel to the interpretation of Jer 23:29 concludes: “One scriptural verse goes out as several meanings (טעמים).” For the Torah having “seventy faces/facets,” see *Num. Rab.* 13:15. Note *The Alphabet of*

R. Yoḥanan (ca. 280 C.E.) said: What is the meaning of the verse, “The Lord gives a word; those who announce it are a great host”? Each and every utterance that issued from the mouth of the Almighty divided into seventy languages. The school of R. Ishmael taught: “[Behold, My word is like fire, declares the Lord,] and like a hammer that shatters rock!” (Jer 23:29): Just as a hammer splits into several sparks, so too each and every utterance that issued from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be He, divided into seventy languages.

Once again, the sense of the passage is that each and every seemingly monolingual divine utterance contains within it the complete potentiality of linguistic expression, here signified by the totality of human languages.⁴³ Like light emerging from a prism, the linguistic plenitude of divine speech is revealed upon its being issued for human reception. There is no sense here or in the preceding passage that each language was intended monolingually for its respective nation, as later parallels aver.⁴⁴

6. Torah Inscribed

The following brief passage from the Mishnah sheds further light on the multilingual nature of the Torah’s revelation (and interpretation). Its context is a retelling of Deuteronomy 27’s account of the covenantal ceremony in which the people, after crossing the Jordan, are instructed to build an altar: וְכָתַבְתָּ עַל-; וְהָאֲבָנִים אֶת-כָּל-דִּבְרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת בְּאֵר הַיֵּטֵב “And on those stones you shall inscribe every word of this Teaching (Torah) most distinctly” (Deut 27:8; NJPS). According to the Mishnah (*Soṭah* 7:5):

Rabbi Akiba (in *Batei Midrashot*, ed. S. A. Wertheimer, 2 vols. [1950-53; Jerusalem, 1968], 2:354), where it is said that Moses taught the seventy “faces” of the seventy languages of Torah. See above, n. 41.

43 For this idea in later Jewish mystical thought and writing (including that of Walter Benjamin), see Moshe Idel, *Old Worlds, New Mirrors: On Jewish Mysticism and Twentieth-Century Thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 168-75.

44 See *Exod. Rab.* 5:9; and the comments of R. Samuel Edels (the MaHaRSha) to our talmudic passage.

ואחר כך הביאו את האבנים ובנו את המזבחה וסדוהו בסיד וכתבו עליהן
את כל דברי התורה הזאת בשבעים לשון שנאמר "באר היטב" (דברים
כז:ח).⁴⁵

And afterward they brought the stones and built the altar and
plastered it with plaster. And they wrote on them all the words
of this Torah in seventy languages, as it is written, "very
clearly" (Deut 27:8).

The biblical expression ("very clearly") is understood by the Mishnah not in its more common biblical physical sense of clearly inscribed in the plaster, but in the more common post-biblical intellectual sense of "well expounded."⁴⁶ Once again, to completely reveal the meaning of the Torah⁴⁷ requires the plenitude of linguistic expression. To fully comprehend the written record of revelation, in a sense to penetrate its seemingly monolingual writing, requires retroverting it to the fullness of the seventy languages in which it was originally heard by Israel, that is, to the totality of human language.⁴⁸ The physical impracticality of this view need not detain us, as it has others.⁴⁹

For a similar association of interpretation with multilingualism, again in terms of seventy languages, note the following passage, also from the Mishnah (*Ṣeqalim* 5:1):

- 45 Following MS Kaufmann. For the continuation of the Mishnah, see below, n. 57. This interpretation of Deut 27:8 is repeated in *b. Soṭah* 36a. The same idea is applied to Moses's teaching of the people in *Tanḥ. Devarim* 2 and *Midrash Peṭirat Moshe* (A. Jellinek, *Bet Ha-Midrash*, 1:122). See also Rashi at Deut 1:5 and 27:8.
- 46 Compare the ambiguous use of *פָּאַר* in Deut 1:5 for "expound." The biblical verb *פָּאַר* is mishnaically construed not in its root meaning "to incise or articulate" (see Z. Ben-Hayyim, "The Contribution of the Samaritan Inheritance," in *Proceedings of the Israeli Academy of Sciences and Humanities* 3 [1969]: 166-68), but in its extended post-biblical meaning "to interpret" (here, multilingually).
- 47 The Deuteronomic passage most likely understands "Torah" to refer to something like the book of Deuteronomy, whereas the Mishnah most likely understands it to refer to the Pentateuch.
- 48 See above, n. 43.
- 49 For further discussion and parallels, see Fraade, "Rabbinic Views," 268 with n. 38; Saul Lieberman, *Tosefta Ki-Fschutah*, vol. 8 (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1973), 699-701; Marc Hirshman, *Torah for the Entire World* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1999), 108-13 (Hebrew); Azzan Yadin, *Scripture as Logos: Rabbi Ishmael and the Origins of Midrash* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 76-79; Smelik, "Code-switching," 138-41.

אלו הן הממונין שהיו במקדש... פתחיה על הקינין (פתחיה זה מרדכי)
למה נקרא שמו פתחיה שהיה פותח בדברים ודורשן ויודע שבעים
לשון.⁵⁰

These are the officers which served in the Temple:... Petahiah was over the bird-offerings. (This same Petahiah was Mordechai.) Why was his name Petahiah? Because he would open (פתח) matters, and interpret (דורש) them, and he knew seventy languages.

The source of the explanation of the name Petahiah-Mordechai is Neh 7:7 and Ezra 2:2, where Mordechai, one of those who returned from the Babylonian Exile, is immediately followed by Bilshan. If the two are taken as one name, then by a word play it could mean that Mordechai was a master of languages (*ba'al lāšôn*), or even a mixer of languages (*bālal lāšôn*).⁵¹ These two mishnaic passages clearly associate exemplary interpretation with a knowledge of seventy languages, as do other rabbinic passages, which cannot be considered here.⁵²

Another set of texts, roughly contemporaneous with that of *m. Soṭah* 7:5, represent the multilingual inscription of the Torah of Deut 27:8 quite differently. According to them, the purpose of rendering the Torah in seventy languages was *not* to reveal its plenitude of meaning through the plenitude of language, but rather to render it physically and cognitively accessible to the seventy nations, each in its own monolingual tongue.⁵³ This is how the parallel Tosefta (*Soṭah* 8:6-7) presents it, but *not* in interpretation of *בְּאֵר הַיָּטֵב* of Deut 27:8:⁵⁴

ר' יהודה אומ' על אבני מזבח כתבוה אמרו לו היאך למדו אותן אומות
העולם את התורה? אמ' להן מלמד שנתן המקום בלב כל אומה ומלכות

50 The words within parentheses appear to be a scribal gloss, as they do not appear in MSS Kaufmann and Parma.

51 In modern Hebrew, linguistics is *בְּלִשָּׁנוּת*.

52 On Petahiah/Mordechai and seventy languages, see *y. Šeqal.* 5:1 (48d) (ed. Academy of Hebrew Language, 619); *b. Menaḥ.* 65a (with Rashi ad loc.); *b. Meg.* 13b; *Pirqe R. El.* 50. For other passages that valorize knowledge of “seventy languages,” see *b. Sanh.* 17a; *b. Soṭah* 36b.

53 See above, n. 18.

54 But cf. below, n. 58.

ושלחו נטורים שלהם והשיאו את הכתב מגבי אבנים בשבעים לשון
 באותה שעה נתחתם גזר דינם של אומות העולם לכאר שחת.
 ר' שמעון או' על הסיד כתבו. כיצד? כירוהו וסדוהו בסיד וכתבו עליו
 את כל דברי התורה בשבעים לשון וכתבו מלמטה "למען אשר לא
 ילמדו אתכם" וגו' (דברים כ:יח): "אם אתם חוזרין בכם, אנו מקבלין
 אתכם."⁵⁵

R. Judah (ca. 150 C.E.) says: They inscribed it [=the Torah] on the stones of the altar. They said to him: How did the nations of the world learn the Torah? He said to them: This teaches that the Omnipresent moved every nation and kingdom to send their scribes (*notarii*) and they transcribed the writing from the stones in seventy languages. At that moment the verdict against the nations of the world was sealed for destruction.

R. Shim'on (ca. 150 C.E.) says: They wrote it on plaster. How so? They laid it out and plastered it with plaster, and they wrote on it all the words of the Torah in seventy languages, and they wrote below, "That they teach you not [to do after all their abominations]" (Deut 20:18): "If you [non-Jews] repent, we shall receive you."

According to R. Judah,⁵⁶ the purpose of inscribing the Torah on the plastered stones was to make the Torah accessible to the seventy nations, if only briefly,⁵⁷ so they could copy it into their own languages, and thus have no

55 *T. Soṭah* 8:6-7 (ed. Lieberman, 205). For other versions, see *Mek. Deut.* Geniza fragment (ed. Kahana, 345, after Lieberman and Schechter); *y. Soṭah* 7:5 (21d) (ed. Academy of the Hebrew Language, 935-36). For discussion, see Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine: Studies in the Literary Transmission of Beliefs and Manners of Palestine in the I Century B.C.E. – IV Century C.E.* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1962), 201-202; idem, *Tosefta Ki-Fshuṭah*, vol. 8, 699-702.

56 Compare his attribution in *Mek. Deut.* Geniza fragment (ed. Kahana, 345); *y. Soṭah* 7:5 (21d) (ed. Academy of the Hebrew Language, 935-36).

57 Depending on whether the words were inscribed on the altar stones or on a separate monument, they might not have been left standing for very long. The Mishnah continues, "And they then took the stones and spent the night in their place" (cf. Josh 4:3, 8, 20), implying that the stones inscribed with the Torah in seventy languages did not remain in their place for very long, but were disassembled and taken to Gilgal. See *y. Soṭah* 7:5 (21d) (ed. Academy of Hebrew

excuse for *not* having observed it, on the grounds of linguistic incomprehensibility, and would be punished accordingly for their non-observance.⁵⁸ R. Shim'on leaves open the possibility that the nations were given the opportunity to read the Torah in their own languages, and thereby the possibility of repentance and conversion, at least in theory.⁵⁹ Whereas R. Shim'on understands that the Torah was written on plaster on the stelai in seventy languages, R. Judah avers that the Torah was written on the altar stones in Hebrew alone, so that the non-Israelite nations were divinely encouraged to send their scribes to transcribe (that is, translate) it from the stones into their own respective languages (but to no avail). A similar understanding is reflected in the Palestinian *targumim*, as the following *Fragmentary Targum* indicates through its own "double translation" of Deut 27:8:

ותכתבון על אבניא ית כל מילי שבח אוריתא הדא כתב חקק ומפרש
טבא מתקרי בחד לישן ומתורגם בשבעין לישן.⁶⁰

And you shall inscribe upon the stones all of the words of praise
of this Torah, in engraved writing and very distinct, to be read
in one language and translated into seventy languages.

According to this translation (perhaps seeking to promote the work of fellow translators) the Torah was inscribed in Hebrew alone, requiring, presumably,

Language, 935-36); *b. Soṭah* 36a. If the inscription would have been written in ink on plaster, without cover, it would have been washed away by rain. See Jeffrey H. Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 248.

- 58 I simply mention here the possibility that באר שחת is a play on באר היטב and thank Tzvi Novick for this suggestion.
- 59 The biblical context of Deut 20:18 is rules regarding the treatment of defeated populations of Canaan, who are to be completely destroyed, in order to prevent their influencing the Israelites to follow their abhorrent practices. However, early rabbinic exegetes interpreted this passage more leniently. As Tigay (*Deuteronomy*, 472) notes, "[S]ince the express purpose of the law is to prevent the Canaanites from influencing the Israelites with their abhorrent religious practices (v. 8), if they abandoned their paganism and accepted the moral standards of the Noachide laws they were to be spared." See *Sifre Deut.* 202 (ed. Finkelstein, 238), commenting on Deut 20:18: "teaching that if they repent, they are not to be killed."
- 60 *Frg. Tg.* (MS Paris) to Deut 27:8. Compare *Tg. Ps.-J.* to Deut 27:8; *Tg. Cairo Geniza* fragment (MS T.-S. B 8.8 f. 1v); as well as *Frg. Tg.* (MSS Vienna, Nürnberg, Leipzig) and *Tg. Neof.* ad loc., all of which suggest an *oral* translation into seventy languages rather than inscribed translations.

the nations to send their multilingual scribes to render it into their own particular languages.

We have, then, two very different understandings of the recording of the Torah in seventy languages upon crossing the Jordan. One, represented by the Mishnah (and consistent with its only other use of “seventy languages,” in *Šeqalim* 5:1) and built upon an intellectual understanding of בְּאֵר הַיָּטֵב (Deut 27:8), is that to understand the Torah to the fullest extent possible would require its being rendered into the full range of linguistic expression (seventy languages), which has nothing to do with the nations as recipients of revelation.⁶¹ The other, represented by the Tosefta and its parallels, understands the recording of the Torah in seventy languages in a more “practical” (or, according to some, cynical) manner. Its purpose was to make the Torah accessible, if only briefly, to the seventy nations, each in its own language, if only so as to exclude them from the rewards of the covenant for their non-obedience of its terms.⁶² It would be a grave methodological mistake, it seems to me, to collapse the fundamental ideational difference between the Mishnah and the Tosefta by reading the fuller latter into the briefer former, the generative relation of the Mishnah to the Tosefta, at least in this case, being difficult to determine.

While much has been written of late on the overall relation of the Tosefta to the Mishnah,⁶³ general paradigms cannot supplant the task of evaluating

61 See above, nn. 43, 48.

62 This is in line with other tannaitic traditions of the nations having been offered the Torah, so that upon rejecting it, they could not protest the unfairness of their not having been offered it. See, for example, *Sifre Deut.* 343 (ed. Finkelstein, 395-97), with parallels, treated by me in *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 32-37, 197-98 nn. 35-42. Similarly, in early rabbinic sources, the giving of “seven Noahide laws” to the non- (pre-) Israelite nations, was less to enable them to inhabit their own nomistic order than to deny them covenantal status (or fuller revelation) for their having failed to uphold even these minimal seven laws. See my article, “Navigating the Anomalous: Non-Jews at the Intersection of Early Rabbinic Law and Narrative,” in *The Other in Jewish Thought and History: Constructions of Jewish Culture and Identity*, ed. Laurence J. Silberstein and Robert L. Cohn (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 145-65.

63 For recent scholarship on the relation of the Tosefta to the Mishnah, see Shamma Friedman, “Mishnah and Tosefta Parallels (1) – Shabbat 16:1,” *Tarbiz* 62 (1993): 313-38 (Hebrew); translated and expanded as “The Primacy of Tosefta to Mishnah in Synoptic Parallels,” in *Introducing Tosefta: Textual, Intratextual and Intertextual Studies*, ed. Harry Fox and Tizah Meacham (Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav, 1999),

individual cases in their own rights. At the risk of oversimplifying, those paradigms presume that the relation of Tosefta to Mishnah can be solved in temporal linear terms. Either the Mishnah (or a proto-Mishnah) is anterior to the Tosefta, which seeks to explain and/or augment it, or the Tosefta contains the raw materials, as it were, from which the present Mishnah has been editorially crafted. In either case, the relation and progression between the two is conceived of in linear terms: one must be anterior to and generative of the other. I see no reason to operate by such a presumption in the present case, where the Mishnah and Tosefta present and represent two roughly contemporaneous but very different ways of understanding a shared tradition of the Torah having been translated into seventy languages upon the Israelites' crossing of the Jordan.

7. Knowledge of Seventy Languages as an Asset

Several rabbinic passages (besides *m. Šeqal. 5:1*, discussed above) state that the knowledge of “seventy languages” empowers interpretation and judgment. For example, the following talmudic passage rules (or imagines) that one of the qualifications for membership in the Sanhedrin is facility in seventy languages, so as to avoid having to receive testimony or question a witness via a translator. Once again, it should be assumed that “seventy languages” is typological and not realistic, especially since the passage itself recognizes that the expectation would only be met by a few:

אמר רבי יוחנן: אין מושיבין בסנהדרי אלא בעלי קומה, ובעלי חכמה,
 ובעלי מראה, ובעלי זקנה, ובעלי כשפים, ויודעים בשבעים לשון, שלא
 תהא סנהדרי שומעת מפי המתורגמן.... אמר רב יהודה אמר רב: כל עיר
 שאין בה שנים לדבר ואחד לשמוע – אין מושיבין בה סנהדרי. ובביתר
 הווי שלשה, וביבנה ארבעה: רבי אליעזר, רבי יהושע, ורבי עקיבא,

99-121; idem, “An Ancient Tosefta: On the Relationship of Parallels in Mishnah and Tosefta (2) – The Story of Rabban Gamaliel and the Elders,” *Bar Ilan Annual* 26-27 (1995): 277-88 (Hebrew); idem, *Tosefta Atiqta: Pesah Rishon: Synoptic Parallels of Mishna and Tosefta Analyzed with a Methodological Introduction* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2002) (Hebrew); Judith Hauptman, “Mishnah as a Response to ‘Tosefta,’” in *The Synoptic Problem in Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Shaye J. D. Cohen (Providence, R.I.: Brown Judaic Studies, 2000), 13-34; eadem, “The Tosefta as a Commentary on an Early Mishnah,” *JSIJ* 3 (2004): 1-24; eadem, *Rereading the Mishnah: A New Approach to Ancient Jewish Texts* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005).

ושמעון התימני דן לפנייהם בקרקע. מיתיבי: שלישית – חכמה. רביעית – אין למעלה הימנה! – הוא דאמר כי האי תנא, דתניא: שניה – חכמה, שלישית – אין למעלה הימנה.

R. Yoḥanan said: None are to be appointed members of the Sanhedrin, but men of stature, wisdom, good appearance, mature age, with a knowledge of sorcery, and who are conversant with the seventy languages, in order that the court should have no need of an interpreter.... Rab Judah said in Rab's name: A Sanhedrin must not be established in a city which does not contain [at least] two who can speak [the seventy languages] and one who understands them. In the city of Bethar there were three and in Jabneh four [who knew how to speak them]: [viz.,] R. Eliezer, R. Joshua, R. Akiba, and Simeon the Temanite, who used to discuss before them sitting on the ground. An objection is raised: A Sanhedrin that has three [able to speak the seventy languages] is wise [capable]; if four, it is of the highest standard possible. – He [Rab] holds the same view as the Tanna [of the following Baraita]: It has been taught: With two, [the Sanhedrin is] wise [capable]; with three, it reaches the highest standard possible.⁶⁴

For the same reason, the biblical Joseph is presumed to have known seventy languages in order to qualify for royal status in Egypt, but required an angelic tutor as well as a name change in order to become proficient in so many languages, in contrast to Pharaoh, who was unable to learn Hebrew:

א"ר חייא בר אבא אמר רבי יוחנן, בשעה שאמר לו פרעה ליוסף: "ובלעדיך לא ירים איש את ידו" וגו' (בראשית מא:מד), אמרו איצטגניני פרעה: עבד שלקחו רבו בעשרים כסף תמשיליהו עלינו? אמר להן: גנוני מלכות אני רואה בו: אמרו לו: א"כ, יהא יודע בשבעים לשון! בא גבריאאל ולימדו שבעים לשון, לא הוה קגמר, הוסיף לו אות אחת משמו של הקב"ה ולמד, שנאמר: "עדות ביהוסף שמו בצאתו על ארץ מצרים שפת לא ידעתי אשמע" (תהלים פא:ו). ולמחר, כל לישנא דאישתעי פרעה בהדיה אהדר ליה. אישתעי איהו בלשון הקדש, לא הוה קא ידע מאי הוה אמר, א"ל: "אגמרי!" אגמריה ולא גמר, אמר ליה: אישתבע לי דלא מגלית, אישתבע לו.

64 *B. Sanh.* 17a-b (slightly modified Soncino translation). Compare *t. Sanh.* 8:1; *y. Šeqal.* 5:1 (48d) (ed. Academy of Hebrew Language, 619); *b. Menah.* 65a; *b. Meg.* 13b.

R. Ḥiyya b. Abba said in the name of R. Yoḥanan (ca. 280 C.E.): At the moment when Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Without you no one shall lift up his hand” etc. (Gen 41:44), Pharaoh’s astrologers exclaimed: “Will you set in power over us a slave whom his master bought for twenty pieces of silver!” He replied to them, “I discern in him royal characteristics.” They said to him, “In that case he must be acquainted with the seventy languages.” Gabriel came and taught [Joseph] the seventy languages, but he could not learn them. Thereupon [Gabriel] added to his name a letter from the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, and he learnt [the languages] as it is said: “He imposed it as a decree upon Joseph when he went forth from the land of Egypt; I heard a language that I knew not” (Ps 81:6).⁶⁵ On the next day, in whatever language Pharaoh conversed with him he replied to him; but when [Joseph] spoke to him in the holy tongue he did not understand what he said. So he asked him to teach it to him; he taught it to him but he could not learn it. [Pharaoh] said to him, “Swear to me that you will not reveal this”; and he swore to him.⁶⁶

Once again, the ability to rule (and the status of royalty) presumes knowledge of multiple languages, ideally at least, all the languages spoken by humankind. Again, given the unrealistic nature of this expectation, divine (angelic) intervention is necessary to facilitate this for Joseph. Although Pharaoh shares with Joseph the ability to communicate in multiple languages, he is linguistically challenged, to his embarrassment, when it comes to learning Hebrew, rendering Joseph his multilingual superior.

Finally, we may note Philo of Alexandria’s presentation of the view of those who, critical of the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, find it surprising that the story views the multiplication of languages as a punishment, and the prelapsarian single universal language as a source of evil, whereas both the possession of a common language and knowledge of multiple languages should be advantageous:

65 Joseph’s name in this verse contains an additional letter, *heh*, shared with the tetragram name of God.

66 *B. Soṭah* 36b (slightly modified Soncino translation). Compare the requirement (CD 14:10) that the Qumran *mēbaqqēr* (“Overseer”) know *kol lēšôn mišpēḥôtām* (“all the languages of their families”), according to some reconstructions of the text.

ἄν καί εἰ μέντοι τις ἀνήρ πολὺς ἀναμανθάνω διάλεκτος, εὐδόκιμος εὐθύς παρὰ ὃ ἐπίσταμαι εἰμί ὡς ἤδη φίλιος εἰμί. οὐ βραχὺς γνῶρισμα κοινωνία ἐπιφέρω ὃ ἐν ὃ ὄνομα συνήθεια, ἀπὸ ὅς ὁ ἀδεής εἰς ὃ μῆσεῖς ἀνήκεστος πάσχω ἕοικα πορίζω. τίς οὖν ὡς κακός αἴτιος ὃ ὁμόγλωσσος ἐκ ἄνθρωπος ἀφανίζω, δέω ὡς ὠφέλιμος ἰδρύω.

Further the acquisition of languages other than his own at once gives a man a high standing with those who know and speak them. They now consider him a friendly person, who brings no small evidence of fellow-feeling in his familiarity with their vocabulary, since that familiarity seems to render them secure against the chance of meeting any disastrous injury at his hands. Why then, they ask, did God wish to deprive mankind of its universal language as though it were a source of evil, when He should rather have established it firmly as a source of the utmost benefit?⁶⁷

However scurrilous Philo finds the criticisms of these scriptural scoffers, he would appear to share their positive view of those (presumably contemporaries) who have acquired the ability to converse in multiple languages.

67 Philo of Alexandria, *Confusion of Tongues* 13 (Loeb Classical Library, 4:16-17). Compare, however, Josephus's negative view of those who acquire knowledge of multiple languages rather than knowledge of Jewish Scripture and laws (*Ant.* 20.262-65 [Loeb Classical Library, 9:526-29]): "And now I take heart from the consummation of my proposed work to assert that no one else, either Jew or gentile, would have been equal to the task, however willing to understand the Greek world. For my compatriots admit that in our Jewish learning I far excel them. I have also laboured strenuously to partake of the realm of Greek prose and poetry, after having gained a knowledge of Greek grammar, although the habitual use of my native tongue has prevented my attaining precision in the pronunciation. For our people do not favour those persons who have mastered the speech of many nations, and who adorn their style with smoothness of diction, because they consider that not only is such skill common to ordinary freemen but that even slaves who so choose may acquire it. But they give credit for wisdom to those alone who have an exact knowledge of the law and who are capable of interpreting the meaning of the Holy Scriptures. Consequently, though many have laboriously undertaken this training, scarcely two or three have succeeded."

8. Language Choice and Function

Returning to four languages, the oft-cited view of R. Jonathan of Bet Gubrin (ca. 250 C.E.) recognizes that different languages are particularly well-suited to particular functions:

אמר רבי יונתן דבית גוברין ארבעה לשונות נאים שישתמש בהן העולם
ואילו הן לעז לזמר רומי לקרב סורסי לאיליאי עברי לדיבור ויש אומרים
אף אשורי לכתב.⁶⁸

Said R. Jonathan of Bet Gubrin: Four languages are pleasing for use in the world, and these are they: Greek for song, Latin for battle, Sursi (Aramaic) for dirges, Hebrew for speech. And some say, also Assyrian for writing.

While much ink has been spilled on the specific implications of this saying (especially with respect to Hebrew),⁶⁹ its sentiment is that each language is especially well suited to a particular kind of expression. We find confirmation of the use of “Sursi (Aramaic) for dirges” in recently uncovered Aramaic *piyyuṭim* for occasions of mourning, e.g., eulogy and consolation.⁷⁰ While *we*

68 See *y. Meg.* 1:11 (71b) (ed. Academy of Hebrew Language, 619); *y. Soṭah* 7:2 (21c) (ed. Academy of Hebrew Language, 933); *Esth. Rab.* 4:12 (to 1:22). The reference to “Assyrian for writing” refers, presumably, to the adaptation of the “Assyrian” square Hebrew letters.

69 The word *דבור* can cover a wide range of types of speech, from mundane to sublime. See Philip S. Alexander, “How Did the Rabbis Learn Hebrew?” in *Hebrew Study from Ezra to Ben-Yehuda*, ed. William Horbury (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 71-89. E. Y. Kutscher (“The Languages of the Hebrew and Aramaic Letters of Bar Cochba and His Contemporaries,” *Leš* 26 [1961-62]: 22 [Hebrew]) comments that since R. Jonathan flourished in the second half of the third century, his statement may reflect the continued use of Hebrew as a spoken language that late, at least in southern Palestine (Judea, where Bet Gubrin is located). But since R. Jonathan’s saying is transmitted, without dissent, in a Galilean Palestinian source, there is no reason to assume that its sentiment would not have been endorsed in the north.

70 See Joseph Yahalom and Michael Sokoloff, “Aramaic Piyyutim from the Byzantine Period,” *JQR* 75 (1984/85): 309-21; Joseph Yahalom, “סורסי לאיליאי: ארמית,” *מאסף ישראל תצווה* *Proceedings of the Academy of the Hebrew Language, 177th-178th meeting (1986)* (Jerusalem: The Academy of the Hebrew Language, 1989), vol. 33, 133-37; idem, “Angels Do Not Understand Aramaic: On the Literary Use of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic in Late Antiquity,” *JJS* 47 (1996): 33-44; Michael Sokoloff and Joseph Yahalom, *Jewish Palestinian Aramaic Poetry in Late Antiquity*:

might presume that each language is suitable for use by a particular nationality or ethnicity, here it is suggested (ideally at least) that all people (העולם; “the world”) would be well-served to employ all four of these languages, each for a particular kind of discourse to which it is best suited. Needless to say, these four languages would have been recognizable, at the very least, to inhabitants of ancient Palestine, some of whom would have been able to choose functionally between them. As we noted above, in conjunction with another set of four languages,⁷¹ the use of the number four, denoting completeness, could be typological (like the number seventy⁷²), standing for the totality of languages, even though here the four would be the four principal languages in use in late-antique Roman Palestine.

The following rhetorical statement, attributed to Rabbi Judah the Patriarch, appears twice in the Babylonian Talmud, once marked as a *barayta*. It is followed by a rejoinder from the Babylonian Amora Rav Joseph:

והאמר רבי: בא"י לשון סורסי למה? אלא אי לשון הקודש אי לשון
יוונית! ואמר רב יוסף: בבבל לשון ארמי למה? אלא או לשון הקודש או
לשון פרסי!

For Rabbi [Judah the Patriarch] (ca. 200 C.E.) said: In the Land of Israel, why [use] the Syrian [=Palestinian Aramaic] language? Either [use] the holy language [=Hebrew] or the Greek language. And Rav Joseph (ca. 300 C.E.) said: In Babylonia, why [use] the Aramaic language? Either [use] the holy language [=Hebrew] or the Persian language.⁷³

Rabbi Judah the Patriarch's statement has been repeatedly invoked as incontrovertible proof that Hebrew had ceased to be a spoken language in the Land of Israel by his time.⁷⁴ By the same logic, we would have to say the same

Critical Edition with Introduction and Commentary (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1999) (Hebrew); Joseph Yahalom, “Syriac for Dirges, Hebrew for Speech’: Ancient Jewish Poetry in Aramaic and Hebrew,” in *The Literature of the Sages: Second Part: Midrash and Targum, Liturgy, Poetry, Mysticism, Contracts, Inscriptions, Ancient Science and the Languages of Rabbinic Literature*, ed. S. Safrai et al. (Assen: Royal Van Gorcum, 2006), 363-74.

71 See above, at n. 39.

72 See above, n. 41.

73 *B. Soṭah* 49b (// *b. B. Qam.* 82b-83a).

74 E. Y. Kutscher (*The Language and Linguistic Background of the Isaiah Scroll* [Jerusalem: Magnes, 1959], 11 [Hebrew]; English trans. [Leiden: Brill, 1974], 13)

for Greek. Whatever the state of Hebrew usage at his time, this passage is unable to bear the weight of such far-reaching historical conclusions. All it suggests is that while a normal expectation might have been for the Jews of Palestine either to stick by their ancestral language (Hebrew) or to adopt that of the ruling elites (Greek), with Aramaic being neither, Aramaic usage is, ironically, an anomalous third possibility. In a sense, however, Aramaic, while being neither native nor foreign, is something of both: a very close cognate to Hebrew (and a biblical language), but also a language shared with the surrounding non-Jewish cultures (e.g., Samaritan, Christian, Nabataean, Palmyran) among whom Jews dwelled, and a former imperial language.

Rav Joseph's gloss avers that the question of such a seeming anomaly is not unique to the Land of Israel, but can be equally asked of Jewish use of Aramaic in Babylonia, and, one might add, of hybrid inside-outside Jewish languages throughout subsequent history. It would be akin to asking of Eastern European Jews, "Why use Yiddish? Use either Hebrew or Polish (or Russian, etc)." At the very least, our talmudic passage is evidence of Jews navigating between, and in some cases combining, three language options (inside/outside/inside-outside), and of rabbinic literature thematizing the challenges of such language choices.⁷⁵

considers this passage to be irrefutable proof that Aramaic had replaced Hebrew as the spoken language of the Galilee by the time of R. Judah the Patriarch. Willem Smelik ("Language Selection," 145) states: "Rav Yoseph's statement highlights the absurdity of Rabbi's claim [that Hebrew or Greek be spoken, but not Aramaic] and thus provides a highly ironic comment on the use of Aramaic in both areas. Rabbi's position must have been related to an ideology of Hebrew rather than a society in which the use of Hebrew was still a viable option for everyday speech." As indicated earlier, determining monolingual spoken language is not my concern here, nor is it warranted by this text, which does not indicate what *kind* of language use it has in mind.

75 In another article I provide ample evidence of such multilingual language use and selection in inscriptional realia of the second through sixth centuries C.E. from the Land of Israel; see my "Language Mix and Multilingualism in Ancient Palestine: Literary and Inscriptional Evidence," *Jewish Studies* 48 (2011). A Hebrew translation will appear in *Leš* 73 (2011).

9. Legal and Ritual Practicalities of Jewish Multilingualism

Up to now, the rabbinic passages that we have discussed have almost all been aggadic. A somewhat more restrained attitude toward multilingualism (less idealizing of multilingualism and making more limited allowance for the ritual use of other languages) is evidenced in numerous halakhic passages. They deal with the question of the acceptable language to be used in fulfilling halakhic obligations such as writing and signing legal documents,⁷⁶ reading and writing Scripture,⁷⁷ writing *mezuzot* and *tefillin*,⁷⁸ reciting blessings, curses, and oaths, reciting the *Shema*⁹ and prayers, sacrificial declarations, and performing other rituals such as those of the *soṭah*, the *yevamah*, and the anointed war priest.⁷⁹ While the overall preference is for these to be fulfilled through Hebrew, there is considerable debate as to the circumstances under which another language may be employed (especially Greek, but others as well), whether due to the lack of a competent person to perform the obligation in Hebrew or due to a desire for the audience or participant to be able to understand what is being read or recited, and in some cases being agreed to. However, in most situations, the desired default is Hebrew, even if at a sacrifice of comprehension.⁸⁰

All of these passages, both Palestinian and Babylonian, presume that not all Jews were competent to use Hebrew for legal and ritual purposes and that they had other languages more readily at their disposal. I will not discuss these

76 *M. Giṭ.* 9:6, 8; *t. Giṭ.* 7:11 (ed. Lieberman, 274); *t. B. Bat.* 11:11 (ed. Lieberman, 169). For a detailed discussion of the documentary evidence for such practices, see Fraade, "Language Mix and Multilingualism."

77 *M. Meg.* 1:8; 2:1; *t. Meg.* 2:6; 3:13 (ed. Lieberman, 349, 356).

78 *M. Meg.* 1:8.

79 *M. Soṭah* 7:1, 2; 8:1; *t. Soṭah* 2:1; 7:1, 7 (ed. Lieberman, 154, 190, 192-93); *Sifre Num. Naso* 12 (ed. Horovitz, 18); *y. Soṭah* 7:1 (21b) (ed. Academy of the Hebrew Language, 932-33); *b. Meg.* 18a; *b. Soṭah* 32b-33a.

80 See, for example, *m. Meg.* 1:8; 2:1; *m. Soṭah* 7:1-4; 8:1; *t. Meg.* 2:6; 3:13 (ed. Lieberman, 349, 356); *t. Soṭah* 2:1 (ed. Lieberman, 154); 7:1, 7 (ed. Lieberman, 190, 192); *Sifre Num.* 12 (ed. Horovitz, 18); *y. Meg.* 2:1 (73a) (ed. Academy of Hebrew Language, 758); *y. Soṭah* 7:1 (21b) (ed. Academy of Hebrew Language, 932-33); 8:1 (22b) (ed. Academy of Hebrew Language, 937-38); *b. Meg.* 18a (*barayta*). Still relevant is Saul Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine: Studies in the Life and Manners of Jewish Palestine in the II-IV Centuries C.E.*, 2nd ed. (New York: Feldheim, 1965), 29-67 ("Greek in the Synagogue").

passages in detail here since I have already done so in print in previous articles on targum,⁸¹ and since we now have an excellent treatment of them by Willem Smelik.⁸²

The important point to be made here is that the rabbinic texts presume and acknowledge Jewish individuals and communities with a variety of linguistic competencies, and are thereby confronted with a variety of language situations to be normatized. We know from extensive inscriptional and documentary evidence that such a Jewish multilingual environment was not a figment of the rabbinic imagination. While preferring Hebrew for the fulfillment of verbal ritual performances, rabbinic literature is surprisingly liberal in allowing for some of those ritual acts to be performed in other languages, especially Greek. In the case of scriptural reading and study (both public and private), the rabbinically preferred practice is bilingual: Hebrew and Aramaic performed in tandem. Interestingly, while use of a foreign language for or by a foreign language speaker is, in many cases, permitted (e.g., the recitation of the *Shema* in Greek), the allowance of Aramaic *alone* for an Aramaic speaker is *never* even considered. While the bilingual scriptural Hebrew-Aramaic reading is the rabbinic norm, the possibility of a monolingual Hebrew reading (if a suitable translator is not available) and monolingual Greek reading (for a Greek-speaking audience) is allowed, and a bilingual Hebrew-Greek reading is conceivable,⁸³ the possibility of a monolingual Aramaic scriptural reading is nowhere specifically entertained.⁸⁴ We may presume that Aramaic is too close to Hebrew in character and status to constitute an entirely separate language for such ritual purposes.

81 Fraade, "Rabbinic Views"; idem, "Scripture, Targum, and Talmud as Instruction: A Complex Textual Story from the Sifra," in *Hesed ve-Emet: Studies in Honor of Ernest S. Frerichs*, ed. Jodi Magness and Seymour Gitin, BJS 320 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 109-22; idem, "Locating Targum in the Textual Polysystem of Rabbinic Pedagogy," *BIOSCS* 39 (2006): 69-91.

82 Smelik, "Language Selection"; idem, "Code-switching."

83 See Smelik, "Code-switching," 141-47 (drawing on earlier work of Nicholas De Lange and Philip S. Alexander); idem, "Language Selection," 151.

84 As I have argued elsewhere ("Locating Targum"), there was no rabbinic "Aramaic Bible" apart from the Hebrew Bible that it accompanied. The only possible exception that I have been able to find is in *b. Meg.* 18a, where, in a barayta, the obligation to read the Scroll of Esther can be fulfilled from a written text "in Hebrew to Hebrews," where "Hebrew" is understood by some talmudic commentators (e.g., Rashi ad loc.) to be a Mesopotamian dialect of Aramaic, it not being clear whether this would have been a Jewish or non-Jewish dialect of

Space only allows us to take a closer look at selections from one of these passages, in the Palestinian Talmud:

אילו נאמרין [בכל לשון] כו'. כתיב "ואמר הכהן לאשה" (במדבר ה:ט). בכל לשון שהיא שומעת. דברי רבי יאשיה. אמר ליה רבי יונתן: ואם אינה שומעת ולמה היא עונה אחריו "אמן" (שם ה:כב). אלא שלא יאמר לה על ידי תורגמן... וקרית שמע דכתיב "ודברת במ" (דברים ו:ז). רבי אומר: אומ' אני קרית שמע אינו נאמר אלא בלשון הקודש. מה טעמא? "והיו הדברי' האלה" (שם ו:ו). ר' לוי בר חיתה אזל לקיסרין. שמע קלון קריין שמע אלוניסתינן. בעא מעכבתון. שמע רבי יוסי ואיקפד. אמר כן: אומר אני מי שאינו יודע לקרות אשורית לא יקרנה כל עיקר אלא יוצא בכל לשון שהוא יודע... ותפילה כדי שיהא יודע לתבוע צרכיו. וברכת המזון כדי שיהא יודע למי מברך. ושבעת העדות ושבעת הפקדון משביעין אותו בלשונו. השביען שלא בלשונן ואמרו אמן הרי אילו פטורין...⁸⁵

[A] These are said [in any language...].⁸⁶ It is written, "And the priest shall say to the [accused] wife" (Num 5:19): In any language that she understands. These are the words of R. Josiah (ca. 300 C.E.). R. Yoḥanan (ca. 280 C.E.) said to him: If she does not understand, then why would she respond to him, "Amen" (Num 5:22)? Rather [the verse means that] he should not speak to her through an interpreter....

[B] The recitation of the *Shema'*, as it is written, "You shall talk of them" (Deut 6:7) (ודברת במ) (Deut 6:7). Rabbi [Judah the Patriarch] (ca. 200 C.E.) says: I say, the recitation of the *Shema'* can only be recited in the holy language. What is its scriptural basis? "And these words which I command you" (והיו הדברים האלה) (Deut 6:6). R. Levi b. Ḥaitah went to Caesarea. He heard them read the *Shema'* in Greek. He wanted to stop them from doing so. R. Yose heard and was angered. He said: Should I say that one who doesn't know how to read [Hebrew written in] Assyrian [square script] should not read at all? Rather, one fulfills one's obligation in any language which he knows....

Aramaic. See, most recently, D. R. G. Beattie and Philip R. Davies, "What Does Hebrew Mean?" *JSS* 56 (2011): 71-83.

85 *Y. Soḥah* 7:1 (21b) (ed. Academy of the Hebrew Language, 932-33).

86 See *m. Soḥah* 7:1.

[C] And with regard to prayer, [he may recite it in any language] so that he will know how to beseech for his needs.

[D] And with regard to the benediction over food, [he may say it in any language] so that he knows to whom he is blessing.

[E] And with regard to the oath of testimony and the oath concerning a deposit, one administers it to him in his own language. If one administered it [to persons] not in their own languages, and they said, "Amen," behold they are exempt [from culpability for violating the oath].

Although the Mishnah (*Soṭah* 7:1) lists prayers and rituals that can be "recited in any language," including the words recited by the priest to the suspected adulteress (*soṭah*), the *Shema'*, the *tefillah* (*amidah*), the benediction over food, and the oaths of testimony and concerning a deposit, the Palestinian Talmud, developing earlier tannaitic teachings, debates the scriptural basis of such an allowance, or even the allowance itself. For example, no less than Rabbi Judah the Patriarch disagrees with the Mishnah and insists that the *Shema'* be recited only in Hebrew (as he does in *t. Soṭah* 7:7). Yet it is repeatedly stressed that for the laity to pray or recite or respond to rituals in a language that they do not understand would weaken the intention and thereby the effectiveness of their words, even to the point of absolving them of legal culpability. Even in something so basic (and, presumably, familiar) as the recitation of the *Shema'*, better to recite it in one's own language (at least in Greek in Caesarea) than not to recite it at all if unable to read it in Hebrew.⁸⁷

In a sense, we have come full circle, since we began with passages extolling the virtues and rewards of teaching one's child to speak Hebrew in conjunction with reciting the *Shema'* and studying Torah, the latter two presumably also in Hebrew, with grave consequences for not so doing, and with an implicit claim that Jewish cultural reproduction depends on it. Now we are told that even within the Land of Israel (albeit at a somewhat later date) one could find communities whose knowledge of Hebrew was so lacking as to require (according to some) the recitation of the *Shema'* in Greek rather than not at all, with no explicit suggestion of negative consequences. Rather than seeing our earlier passages as being in contradiction with these later ones, or situating them too simply along a linear chronological progression, I prefer to

87 On the exceptional status of Greek, at least according to some, see above, n. 28.

see them in dialectical and dialogical tension with one another (as they are internally within themselves).

10. Conclusions

Since I am still at the hunting and gathering stage of my work on this subject, I am reluctant to offer categorical conclusions. However, even if I were done with hunting and gathering, I would still be reluctant to reduce the rich plenitude and variety of rabbinic laws and narratives concerning language valuation and choice in a multilingual societal and cultural environment to univocal distillations. After all, the texts that we have examined are not just about language, but themselves make (when not concealed by translation) strategic language choices at every turn.

Nevertheless, let me identify a few recurring themes, not without tension with one another. I shall not now draw distinctions between the texts with respect to relative chronology and geography, since almost all of the texts and traditions are of Palestinian (Land of Israel) provenance and the themes, while rhetorically more developed in later texts, are well and widely established already in the “tannaitic” corpora. I have identified four (or five) themes around which the texts that we have examined can loosely be clustered:

1. The first theme is what I would call “ethnocentric.” This is, from a cross-cultural perspective, hardly unusual. Hebrew is the ancestral language of Israel, stemming at least as far back as Abraham, the first Hebrew, and as such must be maintained and propagated, principally from father to son, especially when it must vie with the dominant languages of foreign rule and cultural hegemony. This imperative is all the more incumbent upon those living in the Land of Israel. It is tied, ideally at least, to daily speech as well as to sacred study and practice.⁸⁸

88 For language and language choice as an expression of Jewish ethnic/national identity, see Seth Schwartz, “Language, Power and Identity in Ancient Palestine,” *Past and Present* 148 (1995): 3-47; idem, “Hebrew and Imperialism in Jewish Palestine,” in *Ancient Judaism in Its Hellenistic Context*, ed. Carol Bakhos (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 53-84; Hayim Lapin, “Palestinian Inscriptions and Jewish Ethnicity in Late Antiquity,” in *Galilee Through the Centuries: Confluence of Cultures*, ed. Eric M. Meyers (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 239-68; David Goodblatt, *Elements of Ancient Jewish Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 49-70.

2. A second theme is linguistic exceptionalism. Hebrew is not just one of many languages, each one employed by a particular nation or ethnos, but is לשון הקודש, the “language of holiness,” and the language of universal creation, thereby preceding and transcending the advent of nations, and hence, of national languages. Hebrew alone is the language of cosmogony. It is the language not just of Israel’s laws and narratives, but of divine revelation itself, Israel’s Scriptures having been recorded and transmitted in the same language as they were divinely revealed and are presently read and studied.

3. Yet, revelation was itself multilingual from its very inception. Implicit here is the idea that the fullness of revelatory meaning requires the fullness of linguistic expression (four or seventy languages). Hebrew may be the language by which the world was created, but God as the creator of all peoples must also be the ultimate creator of all human languages. The knowledge of all (seventy) languages, ideally at least, is necessary to fully comprehend the meaning of divine revelation. This leads, therefore, from linguistic exceptionalism to a seemingly contradictory linguistic pluralism.

4. Linguistic pluralism is, however, of two sorts: metaphysical and practical, which can sometimes be in tension with one another, as we saw in the differences between *m. Soṭah* 7:5 and its parallels in *t. Soṭah* 8:6-7 and other sources: was the Torah written on stones in seventy languages in order for it to be fully understood (בְּאֵיךְ הֵיטֵב), or in order for it to be briefly available to the nations, who would then have no excuse for not having observed it, thereby justifying their exclusion? The tension between linguistic exceptionalism and linguistic pluralism intersects, therefore, with the dilemma of Torah as Israel’s inheritance alone, or Torah as universally bestowed wisdom.⁸⁹ However, as we have seen, linguistic pluralism can also have the practical positive purpose of allowing Jews to recite some prayers and perform some rituals in whichever language they understand, thereby avoiding rote recitals which would be devoid of religious meaning or legal consequence for their practitioners.

As a final concluding remark, these tendencies continue, and remain in some tension with one another, throughout the length and breadth of Jewish cultural history down to the present, even as the specific “languages in contact” change. While we have several excellent treatments of Jewish bi- and

89 This tension goes back at least as far as Ben Sira (ca. 180 B.C.E.), as is well demonstrated by Seth Schwartz, *Were the Jews a Mediterranean Society? Reciprocity and Solidarity in Ancient Judaism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 45-79. See also Marc Hirshman, *Torah for the Entire World*.

multilingualism in modern times (especially regarding the relation between Yiddish and Hebrew),⁹⁰ it is often not recognized that the multilingual Jewish template (Hebrew and Aramaic) originates in antiquity, at least from the time of the Persian conquest in 538 B.C.E.⁹¹ We await both a *comprehensive* treatment of Jewish attitudes toward and practices of multilingualism in antiquity and a *comparative* study of the ubiquity of Jewish multilingualism across continents and millennia, with profound implications for the renewability of Jewish culture and identity through collective practice (*halakha*) and narrative (*aggada*), both of which are as much about language as they are performed through language.

- 90 Itamar Even-Zohar, *Polysystem Studies* (Tel Aviv: The Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics, and Durham: Duke University Press, 1990) = *Poetics Today* 11.1 (Spring 1990); Yael S. Feldman, *Modernism and Cultural Transfer: Gabriel Preil and the Tradition of Jewish Literary Bilingualism* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1985); Joshua A. Fishman, *Language in Sociocultural Change: Essays by Joshua A. Fishman*, selected and introduced by Anwar S. Dil (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972); Benjamin Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); idem, *Polyphony of Jewish Culture*, 23-40; Shmuel Niger, *Bilingualism in the History of Jewish Literature*, trans. Joshua A. Fogel (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1990); Naomi Seidman, *Faithful Renderings: Jewish-Christian Difference and the Politics of Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); eadem, *A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Max Weinreich, *History of the Yiddish Language*, trans. Shlomo Noble, Yale Language Series (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 247-314 ("Internal Jewish Bilingualism"); Uriel Weinreich, *Languages in Contact: Findings and Problems* (New York: Linguistic Circle of New York, 1953; repr. The Hague: Mouton, 1974).
- 91 For the relationship of Hebrew to Aramaic representing Jewish multilingualism across history, see E. Y. Kutscher, "השפה העברית ובנות לווייתה במשך הדורות," *Hadoar* 47 (1968): 507-10; Micah Josef Berdichevsky (Bin-Gorion), "Hebrew and Aramaic," in *Poesy and Language*, ed. Emanuel Bin-Gorion (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1987), 101-105 (Hebrew).