Language of the Old Testament: Biblical Hebrew "The Holy Tongue"

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Abstract

Some kind of familiarity with the structure and thought pattern of biblical Hebrew language enhances translation and improved ways of working with the language needed by students of Old Testament. That what the authors of the Scripture say also has meaning for us today is not in doubt but they did not express themselves primarily for us or in our language, and so it requires training on our part to understand them in their own language. The features of biblical Hebrew as combined in the language's use of imagery and picturesque description of things are of huge assistance in this training exercise for a better operational knowledge of the language and meaning of Hebrew Scripture.

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1. Introduction

Hebrew language is the language of the culture, religion and civilization of the Jewish people since ancient times. It belongs to the northwest ancient Semitic family of languages. The word Semitic, according to Kitchen (1992) is formed from the name Shem, Noah's eldest son (Genesis 5:32). It is an adjective derived from 'Shem' meaning a member of any of the group of people speaking Akkadian, Phoenician, Punic, Aramaic, and especially Hebrew, Modern Hebrew and Arabic language. Hebrew is the only one of the ancient tongues spoken in the Near Eastern cradle of civilization that has survived to the present day. In the Old Testament Bible, Hebrew is called שְׂפַת כְּנַעַן (language or lip of Canaan). Elsewhere, it is also called אֲרָמִת (language of Aram (Syria); אַשְׁדּוֹדִת (language of Ashdod) (Isaiah 19:18; Neh 13:24; Isaiah 36:11). There are references to the language in the New Testament (John 5:2; 19:13; Acts 21:40). From the New Testament Greek term "εβρίως" came the Latin *Hebraeus*, the source of our English word "Hebrew".

Hebrew is used in the later rabbinic literature, which even then often prefers to use the phrase "sacred or holy tongue" to distinguish itself from the "Vulgar tongue". As the language of the scriptures, the term 'holy tongue' is used because even when Aramaic language displaced Hebrew as the spoken language, it remained the language used for sacred purposes such as the liturgy in the Temple and later in the synagogue. During the first one thousand years of Jewish history, Hebrew was spoken as a language. During the next two thousand years it was mainly used for library purposes and as the language of worship. In modern times, Hebrew has once again become a living language, and the official language of the state of Isreal. But the Modern Hebrew spoken in Israel today "is a modern construction which differs widely from biblical Hebrew". (Mckenzie, 1992: p. 347).

The language may be classified according to the following- Biblical Hebrew, Haskala Hebrew, Medieval Hebrew, Mishnaic Hebrew and Modern Hebrew. Biblical Hebrew, which is our interest here, adopts the Tiberian system of vocalization. There are many different vowel systems that developed over time but only three such systems are not extant. They are the Babylonian, the Palestinaian and the Tiberian systems. The system ordinarily used in printed texts of the Old Testament is the Tiberian system worked out by the Masoretes (transmitters, traditionalists) of the school of Tiberias.

The early writers of Hebrew would have been as little conscious of grammar as were the pre-Islamic Arab poets. The various attempts at etymologizing in the Old Testament writings are merely folk etymologies and are no evidence of linguistic interest. As any language, however, comes more and more into use as a literary medium, it tends to become fixed. This is a gradual process, and in the case of Hebrew, may be considered to have gained impetus when the Jerusalem dialect, perhaps as early as the united kingdom under David and Solomon, came to be regarded as the standard form of the language. "The body of inscriptional material in Hebrew is so small and fragmentary that any study of the grammatical forms must of necessity be based on the text of the Old Testament" (Jeffrey, 1962: p.555).

That text, which however has suffered so much at the hands of copyists, is written in 'about ninety eight percent

Hebrew' (McCain, 2002). It is the aim of this paper to examine some of the dominant features of this language with a view to highlighting the richness of the language in imagery and picturesqueness. These features furnish the Old Testament student with the nature of the language which immediately accentuates his interest in studying it. This is significant because many who go straight into learning the language without this preliminary practice lose interest easily, especially when difficult parts of the language, which differ remarkably from our familiar English language, are being taught or studied. Articulating the observations garnered from learning and teaching Hebrew constitutes the method of presentation and discussion of this work.

2. Features of Biblical Hebrew

A peculiar feature of Hebrew language is that it is written from right to left. This is common with Semitic languages of which Hebrew is a part. To read the Hebrew Bible text one would have to start from what we know as the end of the book and what we know as the beginning becomes the end for a book written in Hebrew. A similar thing happens in reading sentences, instead of reading from what we call the beginning of the sentence; Hebrew is read from what we designate as the end of the sentence. For example in the Hebrew Bible, Genesis 1:1 reads:בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָה אֱלֹהִים אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְהָאָרֶץ **

To read this sentence, one who can read Hebrew starts from the place marked asterisk to end where what appears to be colon is placed. This passage means "in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth".

The Hebrew alphabet is limited to twenty two consonants. There are no capital and small letters as in English. In the absence of letters for the vowels, the consonants *he* (ה), *waw* (ו), *yodh* (י) were adopted early to indicate respectively the pure long vowels â, û, and ô Î and ê. These vocalic consonants or vowel letters are known as *Matres lectionis* (Ryder, 1982). The ancient Hebrew texts of the Bible were transmitted in a consonantal form of writing. There were very scanty and inadequate signs to indicate vowel signs. From the middle of the second century B.C, Hebrew was no longer generally spoken and its cessation as a living language led in time to a difficulty over pronunciation of the biblical texts, since the vocalic consonants failed to represent all the variations of sound. In order to safeguard the pronunciation of the consonantal text which was authoritatively fixed about the end of the first century A.D., a vowel system was devised and elaborated by the *Masoretes* (transmitters, traditionalists). This vowel system known as pointing consists of a series of strokes and dots below or above the appropriate consonants. For greater precision, accents were added, which are of importance, especially as marks of punctuation and of the tone. Due to the rigid uniformity thus achieved by the Masoretes, variations of dialect and changes in pronunciation, which assuredly took place in Hebrew language throughout one thousand or so years of its use in biblical times, have been almost entirely effaced.

In Hebrew, words which are combined in meaningful arrangements to form sentences belong to three categories: nouns, verbs and particles. Nouns are names of realities, concrete or abstract; Verbs indicate activities and Particles indicate varying types of relationship among nouns and verbs. Particles may suffer modification but not inflection. Nouns and verbs may be inflected by internal modification, or by the affixing of preformatives or afformatives or both.

The noun includes the pronouns, adjectives, and the numerals. Personal pronouns have two forms, an independent form and an affixed form which may be used with nouns, verbs or particles. The interrogative and relative pronouns are particles. The personal pronouns of the third person serve also as demonstratives, but the other demonstratives are particles, though as demonstratives they may take the article. The possessive is indicated mostly by the construct state that is a shortened form of the noun, where shortening is possible before the pronominal suffixes or before the associated words. The object may be expressed by the pronominal suffix attached to the verb or by the noun as object standing after the verb or by the noun as object preceded by the particle '*eth*' (אֵת).

Adjectives behave as nouns do. They may be either predicative or attributive agreeing with their nouns in number and gender. There are no comparative and superlative terms as in English. The comparative is expressed by using '*min*' (מִן) which means 'from', in the sense of "than". The superlative is expressed by combining the definite article and the adjective e.g 'his best prophet' in Hebrew is expressed thus 'his prophet, the good one' (נְבִיאוֹ הַטּוֹב). The smooth rendering of it should be his best prophet.

There are cardinal, ordinal, and multiplicative numerals in Hebrew. The units - one to nine are represented by *'Aleph* (א) to *Teth* (ט) respectively; the tens to ninety are represented by *yodh* (י) to *sadhe* (צ) respectively; and the hundreds - one hundred to four hundred are represented by *qoph* (ק) to Thaw (ת) respectively (Ebo, 1993).

The salient characteristic feature of the Hebrew verb is its system of derived stems used to represent aspects of the verbal action. Hebrew normally uses seven verbal forms, all of them fully inflected for number, gender and person. The forms are called the *Qal, Niphal, Piel, Pu'al, Hithpa'el, Hiph'il and Hoph'al*. There are no true tenses, but there are

three states known as the perfect, imperfect and imperative.   A distinction is marked between transitive and two types of intransitives; one originally indicating a transient state and the other a permanent state.

Hebrew as a Semitic language has the tri-consonantal root acting as a kind of frame for a series of vowel patterns. The insertion of the vowel-Pattern into the frame gives it its specific meaning. The triradical stem is the essential element for both form and meaning. In the word *qohen* (כֹּהֵן), for instance, "k h n (כהן)' would be the consonantal frame and 'o, e (ֱ)' roughly represent that of the present participle in English, thus *qohen* means ministering one or one who ministers (Priest). To look up a word in the Hebrew lexicon, one needs to be mindful of the three root letters for easy consultation. Of course words in the Hebrew lexicon are compiled essentially using the three root letters of each word.

Two genders are recognized in Hebrew. They are the masculine and the feminine, though there are still some fragments of the dual gender remaining. There is no neuter gender in Hebrew (Weingreen, 1959). Even inanimate objects and abstract ideas, which in English would normally be regarded as neuter, must in Hebrew be grouped as either masculine or feminine. The inanimate object (stone אֶבֶן) is feminine just as the abstract idea (truth אֱמֶת) is also feminine. Similarly, the inanimate object (star כּוֹכָב) is masculine, just as the abstract idea (peace שָׁלוֹם) is also masculine.

One of the most distinctive features of Hebrew is its syndetic or co-ordinative character, that is, the prevalence of the simple conjunction "and". The conjunction 'and' is a prefixed *waw* (ו), i.e. it is inseparable from the word it governs. A casual reader of the Hebrew Bible and even the English Bible cannot help noticing the frequency with which "and" occurs in the passages. In a similar way some prepositions in Hebrew are also inseparable from the words that define them. These Hebrew prepositions are "to or for" (ל); "in, with, or by" (ב); and "as or like" (כ). They have no existence as separate words but they attach themselves, as prefixes, to the words they govern. They are therefore called inseparable prepositions just as the "and" is called inseparable conjunction.

Hebrew has no equivalent of the English indefinite article 'a' or 'an'. For this reason, the indefinite article in Hebrew can only be inferred from the context. Thus, a horse (סוס) is translated as either 'horse', or 'a horse'. On the contrary, Hebrew has the definite article "the (ה)" just like the *waw* conjunction and the inseparable prepositions; it is attached to the word it defines. The *waw* conjunction, the inseparable prepositions and the definite article are all inseparably prefixed to the word they govern.
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Biblical Hebrew makes wide use of anthropomorphic expressions. According to Mckeenzie (1977), anthropomorphism which means the attribution of human features and behaviour to nonhuman beings along with anthropopathism (the attribution of human feelings to non human beings) is common in both religious and profane literature of all cultures. These expressions have their origin in metaphor and could be described as extension of meaning, a device essential apparently to mechanism of languages in general. They occur as frequently in other Semitic languages as in Hebrew. When such expressions are applied to the activities or attributes of God it would be indefensible on linguistic grounds to interpret them in a literal sense, or to base theories of beliefs on whatare intrinsic modes of expression dictated by the very nature of linguistic communication. In Prayer biblical Hebrew language attains through anthromorphism an intimacy and anurgency that is scarcely paralled elsewhere and cannot be achieved in any other way. The risk of humanizing God is accepted in order that the danger of thinking of him as anabstraction or an impersonal force may be avoided.

An important aspect of Biblical Hebrew is poetry. Hebrew poetry, like the Hebrew prose, is expressed in Hebrew language and an important feature of Hebrew poetry is the phenomenon of parallelism. It is the juxtaposition of semantics and frequent grammatically similar word groups. Generally speaking, these word groups are the hemistichs of a distich or a tristich. Parallelism is also found between two or more distinct verses. Bishop Lowth distinguished three types of parallelism: synonymous, antithetic, and synthetic (Fitzgerald, 1977). These classifications have been universally accepted, although it has often been pointed out that the third category is not actually parallelism but is rather a catch all to include everything that does not fit into the other two categories. In Biblical Hebrew poetry there is a rhythmic structure dependent on the accent. There is occasional strophic arrangement and even some poetical pieces arranged in stanzas with a refrain, but all attempts to find generally applicable strophic schemes in biblical Hebrew have failed.

Borrowing is a feature of biblical Hebrew for there are many words which are not originally Hebrew but were borrowed from surrounding peoples, adopted into Hebrew, and used with as little sense of their foreign origin as there is when speakers of English use such words as "piano" or "solo", which were borrowed from Italian (Jeffery, 1962). Some of these borrowed words such as 'oven', 'olive', 'pomegranate', 'purple' 'harp' etc, for which no satisfactory etymology has yet been suggested, may be words which came from the pre-Semitic inhabitants of the land, or words borrowed from one or another of the non Semitic peoples with whom the Hebrews were in contact but of whose languages we have no adequate record.

Circumlocution is also a feature of biblical Hebrew. Hebrew resorts to circumlocution in order to express some otherwise straightforward English expressions. For example, the English expression "the prophet spoke" is expressed in Hebrew as "he spoke (namely) the prophet". "The strong man" is expressed in Hebrew as "the man, the strong (one)". There are still many other occasions which in Hebrew call for this periphrastic expression of otherwise simple and straightforward expressions. Hebrew lacks exact equivalents of the English expressions for possession, comparison and relation, therefore resort to circumlocution is inevitable.

Biblical Hebrew shares very close affinity and many common features with other languages of the Semitic family and they are by their features rightly understood in relation to each other. Excavation in Syria and Palestine since the First World War has helped a lot in aiding textual, epigraphical and comparative philological study of Hebrew and other Semitic languages and that is why we can today clearly discuss the features as above.

3. Hebrew Imagery and Picturesqueness

The classical biblical Hebrew language has a unique stylistic and grammatical pattern (Koppman, 1986). It is succinct, but rich in imagery and picturesqueness. This is largely due to its features as discussed above. Our intention here is to discuss some few biblical passages to buttress the authenticity of the above.

In the book of Habakkuk for instance it is stated characteristically in Hebrew fashion that when a house is built by evil and sin "the stone will cry out from the wall and the beam from the woodwork respond" (2:11). This is a beautiful expression used to pronounce a curse against unscrupulous gain. The man, who has become rich through injustice and then seeks to escape retribution by building his nest or house away from the common herd, shall not escape misfortune. In fact, shame and death await him for the very stones and the beams in the ceiling, ill-gotten as they are, cry out in reproach against the master of the house. The spiritual import of the expression is that no one escapes the consequences of his evil deeds.

The imagery of biblical Hebrew is largely drawn from the things and activities of everyday life. It has therefore a universal quality and lends itself without difficulty to translation. The lord's "brightness was like the light; rays flashed from his hand and there veiled his power" (Habbakuk 3:4). This catchy expression depicts the lord's splendour or radiance as that of the day; rays of light short forth from his hands. The lord's power is hidden in brilliance. Related to this passage is the expression in Exodus 34: 29-30, 35 where it is stated that the skin of Moses' face shone because he had been talking with God. To convey the brilliant rays of light emanating from the countenance of Moses, Hebrew uses this expression. The radiance of Moses' face marks a reflection of the divine glory he has in some way confronted on the mountain.

The book of Psalms is replete with succinct description of things in Hebrew. Psalm 18:8 states that "smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth; glowing coals flamed forth from him". This is a graphic description of God's angry mood. The expression borrows the usual literary dress of biblical Hebrew theophany. In Psalm 19:5 it is said that when the sun rises, it is "like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and like a strong man runs its course with joy". This speaks about the awesome sight of the sun, which is merely God's handiwork, it is compared to a groom coming forth from the chamber where the sun rests for the night and to a soldier giant, in its course. This is a hymn of praise depicting God's glory in the heavens. In verse one and two of the same Psalm it is said that "the heavens are telling the glory of God and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. The beauty of the heavens is itself a hymn in praise of God.

Another beautiful and picturesque expression is in Psalm 98:8- "let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together". The personification of flood and hills is interesting. The Psalm is a hymn of praise commemorating Yahweh as king. It is an invitation to praise Yahweh on account of salvation; invitation to the world and nature to praise the king who is coming to rule. Specifically the passage is an extended hymnic invitation to lands and to nature to sing, rejoice, and offer praise before the king. The coming of the lord is the actualization of his reign in the cult, which represents and celebrates his rule in the world (Murphy, 1977)

The importance of recognizing God as a person comes out clearly in much of the imagery used to describe him. The message of the prophet Hosea apply the terminology of personal relationships to God and his people in particularly sensitive way. "I drew them to me with affection and love, I picked them up and held them to my check; I bent down to them and fed them" (Hosea 11:4). Moses reminded Pharaoh that Israel was God's "first born son. I told you to let my people go, so that they might worship me..." (Ex 4:22). Isaiah depicts God as a broken-hearted father whose children have rejected his guidance (Isaiah 1:2). Ezekiel portrays God as a generous step father who had rescued the city and its people from certain death (16:3-8). God is depicted as husband of his people (Hosea 2:14-23). Isaiah boldly applied the imagery of motherhood to God's love for his people (49:15; 66:13).

Hebrew makes extensive use of terms for physical attitudes to describe psychological states, organs of the body

are associated with mental attitudes to the point that it is most difficult for anyone inured to Indo- European procedure to dissociate his mind from the original meanings. This is particularly so when a work is replete with them, as, for instance, in the Song of Songs or Canticles. In highly Hebrew figurative lyrical poetry, this book illustrates the rich wonders of human love. The power of this Hebrew poetry lies in the intensity of love and devotion expressed and especially in the rich imagery which permeates the descriptions of the lovers and their love. "Your navel is a rounded bowl that never lacks mixed wine. Your belly is a heap of wheat, encircled with lilies" (7:2). Love is described as "strong as death, jealousy is cruel as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a most vehement flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it" (8:6-7). Very many other picturesque descriptions of love litter the whole book of Canticles.

Biblical Hebrew because of its nature is really rich in imagery. It makes use of all the common figures of speech, parables, similes, metaphors etc. Hebrew uses these images and pictures to describe apocalyptic things wherever they are mentioned in the Scripture. For instance 'star' or lion' is used for a hero, 'rock' for refuge, 'light' for life and divine revelation, 'darkness' for sorrow and ignorance. Generally, the use of images and picturesque description of things enhances translation and better understanding of the language.

4. Conclusion

Hebrew is one of the bequests of the Semitic people to the human race. Apart from being the vehicle whereby the Scriptures were conveyed, its influence on New Testament Greek and European literature is incalculable, even though much of it on the latter may have come indirectly from the Vulgate version. Among the Hebrew loan-words in English are Satan, sack, hallelujah, Sabbath, shekel, jubilee, myrrh etc. Some names being borne by people today originated from Hebrew language -Abraham, Jacob, Isaac, Samuel, David etc.

Only a small percentage of those who study the Bible can be experts in Hebrew, yet some familiarity with the structure and thought pattern of the language is essential for the type of biblical knowledge that a theology student should have (Brown, 1977). Such a demand is again part of the recognition that God has acted in particular place and time and his message would have taken a different form and nuance had it been expressed in another language. With English as one's only linguistic tool, it is possible to have a good knowledge of the Old Testament but scarcely a professional one. Much of the biblical Hebrew imagery cannot be modernized and if it can be interpreted, it cannot simply be dispensed with, for it is too integral a part of the biblical message. The authors of the Old Testament wrote in language and culture far removed from our own and their primary duty was to 'be intelligible for their own time. That what they say also has meaning for us today is not in doubt but they did not express themselves primarily for us or in our language, and so it requires training on our part to understand them in their own language. The features of biblical Hebrew as combined in the language's use of imagery and picturesque description of things can help in this training for a better knowledge of the Scripture.

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