

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present a comprehensive description of the Hebrew language of the two main communities that lived in South Yemen—Shar'ab and Aden.

Hebrew ceased to be a spoken and living language in the third century CE and since that time was preserved principally within a liturgical framework—reading from the Bible, praying, and studying Rabbinic literature. The reading of books written in Hebrew and Aramaic was passed continuously from generation to generation through to the last. In each community a unique tradition of reading the Hebrew texts formed. A reading tradition can be defined in the following way: pronunciation of the Hebrew letters as they were passed on and received from generation to generation in a particular community or ethnic group.

The reading tradition held by the Jews of Yemen has received much attention. Several researchers such as Abraham Zvi Idelsohn and Hubart Grimme in the early 20th century, and Shlomo Dov Goitein after them, researched Yemenite Hebrew and described in detail the vowels and consonants of its system of pronunciation. However, the most comprehensive and accurate research of Yemenite Hebrew was done by Shlomo Morag. In 1956, Morag founded *The Jewish Oral Traditions Research Center* in which the various language traditions of the Jewish communities are documented in the form of recordings. The first product of the research center was his significant book, *The Hebrew Language Tradition of the Yemenite Jews*, printed in 1963. The book is based on an intensive study of Yemenite Hebrew, and is more detailed and organized than all previous research on the topic. On the basis of many hours of recordings of Yemenites who came from all over Yemen, Morag differentiated between five groups of Yemenite Hebrew divided according to geographical regions in Yemen—each group has its own system of pronunciation.

The tradition of the Jews of central Yemen receives the most attention in Morag's book ("group A"), and principally investigated was the tradition of the people of the city Sanaa. The court of law of Yemen was situated in Sanaa, and many sages and scholars lived there who were spiritual authorities for all the communities in Yemen. Morag identified in the people of Sanaa a great

ability for conservation. Their language tradition is characterized by ancient and original linguistic characteristics—they differentiate between all twenty-two Hebrew consonants and between the six allophonic בגדכפ"ת pairs. In terms of vowels, they differentiate between all six, as in the vowel system of the ancient Babylonian Tradition, and the mobile *shva* (*shva na*) is pronounced exactly according to the rules of the Tiberian Tradition of the Bible. The sounds themselves are stable and fixed in their pronunciation and hardly ever vary. Moreover, the scholars of Sanaa have a very good command of the books of the Bible and the Talmud, and have a stable tradition of pronouncing each and every word contained therein. These features also characterize scholars from other areas of Yemen but not to the same extent typical of the scholars of Sanaa.

Since Morag's book, almost all of the research on Yemenite Hebrew has been done on the basis of informants from Sanaa. The collection of recordings of informants from Sanaa at the *Research Center* is bigger than the amount of recordings from all the other cities—in Yemen or otherwise. In this work, I focus on the language tradition of the Jews from Southern Yemen. Upon considering the differences Morag described between the various regions in Yemen, the principal differences are based on the pronunciation of three sounds: the ק, the dagesh-marked ל, and the vowel *holam*. It is possible to say, generally, that the sounds are pronounced one way in Southern Yemen, and another way in Central and Northern Yemen. Since several studies have been done on the language tradition of Central Yemen, there remains a need to examine the Hebrew tradition Southern Yemen in a more focused and in-depth way.

In this paper, I improve upon Morag's findings on the phonetic system of the Jews of Southern Yemen, and examine anew phonological issues in the reading of the Bible. However, most of this paper deals with the tradition of reading the Mishnah: I deal with phonological issues from the reading of the Mishnah, and more specifically in the Mishnaic system of nouns according to the reading tradition of the Jews of Southern Yemen.

Before summarizing the principal findings of the paper, I would like to begin with a few things on the community of Southern Yemen.

The Shar'ab region shares a northern border with Ibb County and a southern border with Ta'izz. At the beginning of the 20th century, approximately 10,000 Jews lived in this region and inhabited many settlements (over 130). Some of the Jews were scattered in small villages, and it sometimes happened that the Jews living in a certain village did not number enough to make up a *minyan* of ten. In Shar'ab there were many scholars well versed in the Bible, the Halacha and the Kabbalah. In general, the people of Shar'ab have a tradition of reading in Aramaic: Onkelos' tradition of the Torah and Jonathan's tradition for *haftarot*, selected chapters of the Mishnah and the Aramaic sections of *En Ya'akov* and *Hok LeYisra'el*. Study of the Babylonian Talmud in its entirety was the province of few.

The city of Aden is on the Red Sea, and its port served as a center of commerce between Yemen and countries of the Red Sea. The city was conquered by the British in 1838, and following that time developed economically and in terms of urban infrastructure. In the 20th century, the city's population was made up of the local population and immigrants who came from various places in Yemen because of its economic prosperity. Knowledge of the Bible was part of the culture of any Adenite boy, as in the rest of Yemen, which he obtained from the Talmud "mori" (teacher) or in the synagogue. The people of Aden gained proficiency in the Mishnah within a liturgical framework—in prayer or mourning—and also from Moed tractates that were taught during the *chaggim* (holidays). Students of the local yeshiva learned, in addition, others of the six tractates of the Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud.

Because the whole of Southern Yemen is close to the port, Aden was open to influences outside of Yemen. Printed books that came from Livorno and from other places greatly influenced Halachic Minhagim (customary laws), the wording of prayers, and the versions of Rabbinic literature. Some of the printed books were punctuated (to indicate the Hebrew vowel system), especially Siddurim (Jewish prayer books) and the books of the Mishnah. These all had a significant influence on the language tradition of the people of Southern Yemen.

Summary of the study's findings:

On the subject of consonants, it is necessary to specify the range of pronunciations of the letter **ק** in the tradition of Aden. Morag described two pronunciations, and this study expands that number to three main pronunciations. On a basic level, the letter is pronounced as in Shar'ab—q. The other two pronunciations (**⊗**, **®**) are more fricative, and in general are dependent on the phonetic environment. In certain conditions, the pronunciation of **ק** became identical to the pronunciation of the lax **ק** (**⊗**). This overlap created a stop or pharyngealized pronunciation also in the use of the lax **ק**: q > **®** > **⊗** // **⊗** > **®** > q.

The lax **ק** is pronounced in southern Yemen as a bilabial consonant. Because of the affinity between the lax and the dagesh pronunciations, there ceased in many instances to be a distinction between the allophones.

The most important topic in terms of vowels is the pronunciation of the *holam*. Morag hypothesized that in southern Yemen the *holam* was pronounced like the *tsere* — e. A reexamination of the pronunciation of the *holam* in Yemen changes the mapping of its pronunciation. Outside of Sanaa and its environs, the *holam* has a variety of pronunciations. Some of them are close or even identical to the *tsere* and some are close to the *holam* as pronounced in Sanaa. This diversity in the pronunciation of the *holam* is documented also in the people of southern Yemen, and is dependent on the degree of lip-rounding and in the vowel's placement (height and backness) in the mouth. Indeed, it is correct that in southern Yemen the pronunciation of the *holam* as a *tsere* can be heard in the majority of the people of the area and in the majority of instances, such that the pronunciation caused morphological changes (that is to say paradigm shifts in verb forms). Essentially, unlike the consonants **ק** and **ק**, there is no clear and continuous variation in the pronunciation of the *holam* across geographical boundaries—its diversity of pronunciations was characteristic of all the areas of Yemen.

In terms of the rules of the mobile *shva* (*shva na*), the southern tradition is similar to the tradition of the center. The *shva na* is pronounced in three manners: the default is *š*, before a guttural it is pronounced with the vowel of the guttural being furtive (*hatuph*), and in front of the consonant **שׁ** it is pronounced *š*. The people of southern Yemen also distinguish between a *shva na* and a resting *shva nah* in the same way as those of central Yemen. In a few known, fixed words the

people of southern Yemen deviate from the rules: מִיֶּחָד, מִיֶּסָדִים. Instead of pronouncing the *shva na* regularly ĭ, they pronounce it ă. These are not coincidental abnormalities. This special pronunciation is uniform among the informants and is documented in the Habban region, and should therefore be viewed as an authentic phenomenon

On the subject of stresses, we found that in southern Yemen there is less meticulousness in the lengthening of the stressed syllable in a segolate word (a word in which the penultimate vowel is stressed). The same thing is true with the pronunciation of secondary stresses, marked in the Bible with a *ga'ya*: these are not pronounced meticulously in southern Yemen. There are types of secondary stresses (in a closed syllable or *shva*) that are systematically pronounced in central Yemen and in southern Yemen are very limited.

On the tradition of reading the Mishnah: as a basis for this work, I recorded over the course of a few years informants from the communities that were proficient in the tradition of their forefathers. The recordings comprehend the corpus that was possible to learn abroad—*Brachot*, *Mo'ed*, *Pirkei Avot*, and chapters from the Mishnah that are learned in mourning. I describe the Mishnaic reading tradition from several perspectives: the “*Ketiv and Qeri*” custom, different phonological characteristics, and noun morphology. I compare the findings with the first major informants of the tradition in central Yemen: from the Nahum manuscript (16th century) to the vocalized Talmud of Rav 'Amr. Issues of phonology and nouns, I compare to the tradition of manuscripts of the Mishnah and to descriptions of the oral tradition that have been published in various studies.

Keri uchetiv: in many cases, the informants deviated from the style of the print they were reading and pronounced another version. The main types of alterations were in linguistic form (such as: רשות אַחת > רשות אחת; שלשה דפנות > שְלוש דפנות), exchanges with versions that were more familiar to them (שבת ויום חול > שבת ויום טוב; כמה היה גובהה > כמה היה גבוה), morphological alternations (מְשַׁבְּעִין > מְשַׁבְּעִין; כְּתִיקוֹן > כְּתִיקוֹן), and distancing themselves from insults and swearing (מְשַׁבְּעִין > מְשַׁבְּעִין; נְטִמָּאת > נְטִמָּאת).

Phonological issues: in the matter of the בגדכפ"ת letters, other rules arise than in the Tiberian Tradition of the Bible. After a word ending in a vowel, a *dagesh kal* (dagesh lene) is preserved (עוֹשֶׂה כֵּן, שְׁתֵּי פִּיאוֹת) except for in words that come after 'לא' (לֹא תֵאָכֵל). After the letters וּכּוֹס, בְּגוּפוֹ and גּ, a *dagesh kal* is common in the letters כּ and נּ (such as בְּדִינָר, וְתִשָּׁע). In another position the phenomenon is rarer (such as בְּיִית, יְגִמּוֹר, לְתִלוּיָהּ). In between vowels the *dagesh kal* is common in proximity to another letter with a dagesh (זִגְגִין, תּוֹתִים). A fricative pronunciation that doesn't follow the rules is common in the letter פּ (יִסְפּוֹד, פְּטוֹר), in certain fixed stems (יִבְדּוֹק, נִפְגָּם), in the letter כּ dissimilated from פּ (כִּלְכּוֹל, כִּלְכָּלָה), and after ר (קִצְרֹן, הִרְכִּינֵס).

Dagesh hazak (gemination, dagesh forte) in ר: in the Tiberian Tradition of the Bible it is rare. In the tradition of southern Yemen, the ר takes a dagesh primarily after the relative pronoun ש (שְׂרָאָה, שְׂרָוִחַ), in ל"י stem in the pi'el (מְקַרְהַ, עָרָה), in the *qattāl* pattern (סִרְגִּין, גָּרַע) and in verbs and some proper names (מְקַרְדִּין, חֲרִיב).

Guttural letters that takes a dagesh: Two forms occurred in the corpus: מִיחִי, מִיחוּ. In the tradition of central Yemen exist additional forms in ל"י stem.

Duplication in *shva* letters: in the Bible the *dagesh hazak* cancels itself in י in the *shva* after the definite article ה or the preposition מ. In the tradition of southern Yemen of Talmudic language there is a *dagesh hazak* after the definite article ה (בְּיָשׁוּב, הַיְסוּד) but not after the preposition מ (מִימִיָּהם—in the tradition of central Yemen מִימִיָּהם, but not always).

Preformative מ of the participle Pi'el and Pu'al after indefinite article ה: always takes a dagesh in central Yemen (הַמְחַתְּכוֹ, הַמְעַמֵּר); in southern Yemen it doesn't take a dagesh and the vowel ה is lengthened by secondary stress (וְהַמְרַקֵּד, וְהַמְרַקֵּד, וְהַמְעַמֵּר), but there is a dagesh in other forms: (הַמְגִילָה). The southern tradition is the same as in this as the better manuscripts.

After מָה: throughout Yemen the letter does not take a dagesh (מָה שְׂאֶמְרוּ, מָה נִשְׁתַּנָּה), except for several known instances (מָה יֵאָכֵל, מָה נִאָּה).

Gutturals: in the tradition of southern Yemen, the guttural consonant acts in many instances as a regular consonant. Sometimes it is only marked with a *shva nah* (נִחְשְׁדוּ, נִעְקְרָה, מַעֲרַב), and sometimes also the preceding vowel doesn't change (נִעֲשָׂה, הִעֲבִיר).

Punctuation of definite article ה before ע: in instances in the Bible where there is a *qamats*, there are many instances of *patah* (לְעוֹקָה, הִעִיקָר).

Other linguistic issues in the reading of the Mishna:

Pā'el verbal stem: in several forms a Pā'el stem replaces the Pi'el, without a dagesh and with *qamats* in the preceding vowel (מְסַכֵּךְ, מְתַלְשִׁים).

Masculine participle Pu'al in the verb stem ל"י: is read with a final *qamats* (מְצוּפָה זֶהב, מְמוּנָה).

Hif'il conjugation of ע"י stem: there is a tendency to pronounce the *tsere* (מְבִיאִין, מְבִיָּאִין).

Punctuating the relative pronoun ש: before third person pronouns, 'אֵין' and its declensions, אֵם and similar—the relative pronoun ש: is read with a shva (שְׁהוּא, שְׁאֵינוּ, שְׁאֵם, שְׁאֵלְמֵלָא).

Punctuating letters וּבכ"ל in pretonic position: many times the letters are punctuated with a shva (כְּזָה, כְּאֵלוּ, יֵין וְחוּמָץ).

Changes in form in a pausal position: in a syntactic pausal position is occasionally in the same forms as the Bible (נִדְדָּה, אֶחָת, שְׁלֹשִׁי).

Participle with a subject suffixes: in Aden, the pronunciations are the same as in the central tradition (מְקוּבָּלָנִי, גּוֹזְרָנִי – the shva is mobile); in Shar'ab there is another form: מְקוּבָּלָנִי, גּוֹזְרָנִי.

Feminine participle with an object suffixes: pronunciations as in several other traditions: עוֹקְרָתִי, הוֹכְכָתִי.

Absolute instead of construct state: in several constructs, the first noun preserves the absolute form: עֲקָרָב ר: Especially when the word ends in a labial consonant or in מוֹתֵר שְׁקִלִים, בֵּית הַבַּד.

Construct forms instead of absolute forms: common in מְקוֹם ש- sentences when a preposition precedes: מְמָקוֹם שְׁנֵהָגוּ; לְמָקוֹם שְׁטַעָה.

Connecting של: as in many other traditions, the word 'של' is connected frequently to a nearby word: שְׁלִי-זָהָב, שְׁלִי-אֶדָם.

Definite nouns: the default is to make definite nouns that have in front of them בכ"ל letters: לְעֵתִיד לָבָא, כְּתָרִיס, בְּיִחוּד, לְמַפְרָע.

Noun morphology: this study examined 900 nouns. I will give a sample group of nouns according to various characteristics.

Shift to a \u\ vowel within a certain consonant environment: תְּרַנְגוּל, שְׁפוּדִים, קֶסֶמִין.

Conservation of the base vowel: פְּסוּקִים, בְּרִיאִים.

Shift to *patah* before open final syllable: שְׁיִירָא, קִימָא.

Feminine plural suffix after י punctuated usually with a *hiriq* or a *qamats*: מַלְכִּיּוֹת, פּוֹרְעָנִיּוֹת, סִנְהֶדְרִיּוֹת, מְרַבִּיּוֹת.

qall pattern is frequently punctuated in singular form with a *qamats*: טַל, חָג, דָּק.

The *qal* pattern is common in the tradition of Aden as in central Yemen and more rare in the tradition of Shar'ab: סָדֶן, נָסֶר, דָּלָף in Aden instead of סֶדֶן, נֶסֶר, דֶּלֶף in Shar'ab.

Plural of the *qātol* pattern is generally an action: לְקוּחוֹת, דְּשׁוּשׁוֹת. This is considered relatively late.

Plural through the Aramaic in specific words: רַבְקוֹת, עוֹלְשִׁין, גִּזְרִין.

The suffix ס in words not of Hebrew origin are pointed usually with a *patah*: הוּגְרַס, בְּרִדְלָס, הֶרְכִּינָס.

In order to characterize the Yemenite tradition, it is necessary to map out categories in relation to other traditions:

A tradition unique to southern Yemen: אֵלוּ (demonstrative), גִּזָּל, זָבֵל, כְּבֵרָה, גִּזָּל.

The general Yemenite tradition: רַחֲב, רִינּוֹחַ, עֲלִים, עִסְקָה, עוֹבְרָה. This group contains many nouns.

Agreement with the Nahum manuscript (16th century Yemenite): in quite a few nouns there is agreement between with a more ancient Yemenite tradition (the central tradition behaves differently): מוֹלִים, הֶן but הֵם, הִכְרַת, דְּמַאי, גִּזְבְּרִין.

Agreement with the ancient tradition of many manuscripts: קָלָף, קִטְרִב, סְעוּדָה, חֲלִזוֹן and many other forms.

A difference from Biblical language: there are biblical nouns that are called otherwise in the Mishnah, which indicates the stability of the tradition of southern Yemen: מִנְהָג (מִנְהָג), מִנְעָל, מִנְהָג (מִנְהָג), פְּקָחִין (פְּקָחִים), פְּנַחֶס (פְּנַחֶס), (מִנְעָלָד).

Later forms: because of the influence of printed books or in the absence of a good tradition there exist later forms: דְּמַאי, דִּינָר, דִּייתִיקִי, אֶרֶיג.

In conclusion, it must be said that the research of traditional languages is an act of salvaging forgotten traditions. The tradition of southern Yemen is a complex tradition: it is very close to

the tradition of central Yemen, and following this study it is possible to describe a general Yemenite tradition on many issues relating to the reading of the Bible and Rabbinic literature. The tradition has many ancient characteristics of Talmudic language, and it has also a later tradition due to the influence of printed books.