

PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

HEBREW AS A TREASURE OF HUMAN HERITAGE

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of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda
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Aharon Maman and Alan Schneider



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THE ACADEMY OF THE HEBREW LANGUAGE



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The Importance of the Bible for the Rebirth of Hebrew as a Native *Lingua Franca*

IDA ZATELLI

ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on the use of biblicisms in the literary language of the Revival period (second Revival), on their stylistic value, and on their relationship to the underlying ideology. The term biblicism as used here denotes a linguistic phenomenon specific to Biblical Hebrew whereby a word is used in a non-biblical context, while retaining its obvious archaic features, in order to produce unique stylistic results. A few examples from Shmuel Yosef Agnon's, Ḥayyim Nahman Bialik's and Ya'akov Kahan's works are analyzed.

At the time of the Mishnah the language variety that had become prevalent in spoken usage started to have a considerable influence on classical Hebrew, assuming a prominent role in shaping the literary language. In a similar fashion the prose of the authors who were active during the second Revival shows important transitional linguistic features as evidenced by the significant proportion of freely adapted biblical forms and structures.

The long, fascinating, and complex history of Hebrew has a surprising ending, uncharacteristic of other languages. Hebrew is revived,

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reactivated at the end of the 19th century, closing a process that shifted its domain of application from the profane to the sacred and then back to the profane, to daily life. I will only mention here that the *teḥiyya* was heralded by the splendors of the Jewish Italian Renaissance in the works of Azaria de' Rossi (1513–1574) and Yehuda de' Sommi Portaleone (1525/27–1590/92). In 1573–1575 *Mə'or 'enayim*, “Enlightenment to the Eyes” (or “The Light of the Eyes”) by de' Rossi was published in Mantua, a work that was mainly historical in character, the first Hebrew book to use extra-biblical sources in a modern way. The first Hebrew play, by Yehuda de' Sommi, came out in Mantua as well. De' Rossi and de' Sommi wrote mainly in Biblical Hebrew.¹ According to them, Biblical Hebrew alone in its most elegant forms could give voice to a new literature. This stance was based on ideology, not religion. An idealized conception of biblical times—seen as a golden age of national splendor—motivated the preference for the “sacred language,” the language of the Bible. Through this ancient tongue Jews in the Diaspora set out to compete with other Western cultures. However, it is worth noting that the nature of the language to be used in literature was a matter of lively and widespread debate in Renaissance Italy, and elsewhere as well. As an example, the Italian scholar Pietro Bembo defined the literary style of his time by setting the literary language of the great 14th century authors as the standard, and Petrarch as the model for poetry. These authors lived almost 150 years before Bembo. Unfortunately, Biblical Hebrew, with its limited vocabulary and rigid grammatical structures, left much to be desired in terms of creative expression and variety. The initial purist attitude toward writing in Hebrew was gradually abandoned and the post-biblical variety of the language, closer to speech, began to be used to expand vocabulary and to give greater flexibility to the grammar. Lastly, I would like to mention Anania Coen (Graziadio Vita Coen, 1751–1834), an often-forgotten scholar from Reggio Emilia. This small town in Northern Italy, where an important and cultured Jewish community (whose numbers are now

1. See Ida Zatelli, “Una lingua per un popolo. Il caso della riattivazione dell'ebraico” (1997); Ead., “L'ebraico: valore identitario e concezione sacrale” (2019).

greatly reduced) once flourished, was responsible for the production of many Hebrew printed editions. In 1819 Anania Coen published in Italian a pamphlet called *Discussion of the Language of the Mishnaic Text, or Project Aimed at Expanding Hebrew Vocabulary with Words Drawn from the Mishna* (*Ragionamento sulla lingua del testo Misnico, ossia Progetto d'aumentare la Lingua Ebraica colle voci del Testo Misnico onde arricchire una tale lingua*).² In it he argued that Mishnaic words not found in the Bible were actually in use in biblical times, but that their absence in the text was purely coincidental (a Berlin-based German scholar, Ḥayyim Keslin, expressed a similar view in 1786).³ Coen also wrote several works in Rabbinic Hebrew, among which it is worth mentioning *Safa 'aḥat* (*One Language*, Reggio 1822).⁴

The present paper, which is part of a larger project carried out a few years ago at the University of Florence,⁵ will now focus on the role of the Bible and on the use of *biblicisms* in the literature of the so-called second Revival period, on their stylistic value, and on their relationship to the dominant linguistic ideology. The term *biblicism* as used here denotes a linguistic phenomenon specific to Biblical Hebrew whereby a word is used in a non-biblical context to produce unique stylistic results, while retaining its obvious archaic features. At the time of the second Revival, the reactivation of a spoken variety of Hebrew in Eretz Israel—*ivrit ḥadaša*, עברית חדשה—was almost complete. On the other hand, literature old and new coexisted in a balanced relationship shaped by the authors' varying degrees of innovation. We might say that the language of this specific period—from ca. the second Aliyah in 1904 until 1935, when the first Modern Hebrew grammar by Yoseph Klausner was published⁶—shows features

2. Reggio Emilia: Stamperia della Società, 1819. Cf. Giulio Busi, *Anania Coen: editore e letterato ebreo tra sette e ottocento. Con gli annali della tipografia ebraica di Reggio Emilia* (1992).
3. In the Haskalah-inspired quarterly *HaMe'asef*.
4. See Genesis 11:1 *safa 'eḥat udavarim 'aḥadim*.
5. Cf. Carlo Guandalini, "Biblicismi morfologici e sintattici nell'ebraico letterario della Rinascita" (1996–1997).
6. Joseph G. Klausner, דקדוק קצר של העברית החדשה (1935).

that are common to another historical variety of Hebrew, i.e. late Biblical Hebrew.

According to Edward Yechezkel Kutscher's definition, "late Biblical Hebrew represents the transitional stage between standard Biblical Hebrew and Mishnaic Hebrew."⁷ In those times the variety that had become prevalent in spoken usage started to have a considerable influence on classical Hebrew, assuming a prominent role in shaping the literary language. In a similar fashion, the prose of the authors who were active during the second Revival shows important transitional linguistic features as evidenced by the significant proportion of freely adapted biblical forms and structures. Some of these authors write in a transitional language which shows an infrequent use of biblicisms, while others purposely emulate a biblical style.

I will limit the scope of this paper to style emulation in the works of Shemuel Yoseph Agnon, Ḥayyim Nahman Bialik, and Ya'akov Kahan. The attitude of these writers toward Biblical Hebrew is far removed from the strict purism of an author like David Frischmann,⁸ who in the Bible alone saw the nobility and purity required to develop a new literary aesthetics. He distances himself from Eliezer Ben-Yehuda's efforts to reactivate Hebrew. The notion that Hebrew could be revived as a spoken language had always seemed futile to him; in fact, it would have damaged the integrity and the purity of the language, an act which he saw as a form of desecration. The use of Biblical Hebrew in Frischmann's works is therefore to be regarded as ideological. In this respect, I vividly remember how Prof. Chaim Rabin z.l. once mentioned Dante Alighieri and compared the introduction of Mishnaic Hebrew in writing to Dante's transformation of the Italian vernacular into elevated poetry in the Divine Comedy.⁹

7. Edward Y. Kutscher, *A History of the Hebrew Language* (1982), 84. Cf. also Moshe Bar-Asher, ed. *מחקרים בלשון* (1985); Id., *L'hébreu mishnique: études linguistiques* (1999).

8. David Frischmann, *כל כתבי דוד פרישמן* (1929–1935).

9. Chaim Rabin, "Hebrew" (1970); Id., "The National Idea and the Revival of Hebrew" (1983); Id., "La vita ininterrotta della lingua ebraica" (1987), 599.

Returning to the authors in question, the fact that Bialik and Kahan were first and foremost poets who showed a secondary interest in prose (two short stories will be considered here) cannot be ignored. Their Hebrew is intensely lyrical, and their style favors archaizing features and the use of biblicisms. On the other hand, Agnon shows a clear preference for Mishnaic Hebrew. Far from resorting to *‘ivrit ḥadaša* עברית חדשה, the language he uses is based on a kind of Mishnaic purism that produces the highest artistic results. Therefore, his “biblical” short stories assume a special artistic non-ideological significance. In the hands of these writers biblicisms become a remarkably powerful literary device. Rather than archaic, we could view them as high register forms with specific expressive aims. So, in these short stories biblicisms fulfil an eminently stylistic and artistic function that is independent of the historical evolution of the language. Nevertheless, resorting to Biblical Hebrew does not preclude drawing upon different historical phases of the language. I will give just a few examples.

Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1888–1970)¹⁰

A number of Agnon’s short stories depart from his mainly Mishnaic style to adopt forms and structures that are closer to those found in Biblical Hebrew prose. *Məḥolat hammawet* is part of the collection *Polin: Sippure ‘aggadot* (Polish Tales).¹¹ In this collection, the writer pays homage to the Polish Jewish communities by recounting their origin and the most salient events in their history. The use of biblicisms fits the genre perfectly, while pointing to the antiquity of the communities and inducing in the reader a sense of nostalgia, where fantasy and reality merge together. Language contributes to the creation of an effective style that matches the narrative.

מחולת המות *Danse Macabre* or *Dance of Death*, 1925, p. 24, ll. 8–12

בירכתי ארץ פולין עירה קטנה שם יש, ובקצה העירה עומד בית כנסת ישן נושן
[...] חופות לא יעמידו שם. קול מזהלות חתנים מחופותם לא ישמע שם. וכל

10. Agnon made Aliyah in 1907.

11. Shmuel Y. Agnon, ספורי אגדות, פולין: (1925).

זרע אהרון הכהנים לא ידרכו על הגל ההוא עד היום הזה. [...] בימים מקדם ישב בעיר ההיא גביר מופלג ונאמן רוח. ולגביר בת יחידה, רכה וענוגה, יפה כחמה, ברה כלבנה. ובהגיע עתה, עת דודים, וימצא לה הגביר היקר איש כלבנו.

At the furthest ends of Poland there is a small town, and on the edge of the town there is an old synagogue [...] No wedding **takes place** there. No joyful cry **can be heard** from the bridal canopy there. And to this day all of Aaron's lineage, the priests, **have yet to go near** that fountain [...] In the days of old a distinguished and righteous nobleman lived in that town. He had one daughter, delicate and gentle, **beautiful as the sun, pure as the moon**. When her time came, the time for her to be married, the kind man **found** her someone to his liking.

The phrase *yafa kaḥamma, bara kallevana* merits further consideration. It is adapted from Song of Songs 6:10: יָפָה כְּלִבְנָה בָּרָה כַּחֲמָה: “beautiful as the moon, radiant as the sun.”

Agnon inverted the order of the terms “sun” and “moon.” He apparently interpreted the adjective *bara* as “pure” according to the most frequent reading and probably considered it better suited to qualify the noun “moon,” *levana*, than “sun,” *ḥamma*. Many years ago, within a project on biblical semantics, I had the opportunity to research purity adjectives, which led me to the conclusion, among others, that *bara*, ברה, in Song 6:9–10 does not belong to the lexical field of purity. The analysis of the lexeme's distribution in Song 6 reveals a prevalence of the emotional and natural elements, where the ethical “candor” and “purity” of the Psalms and Job is overshadowed by natural “integrity” and “radiance” or “brightness.” If we look at Song 6:9, we see a parallelism between *tamma* and *bara*, the former meaning “perfect one, faultless,” more in terms of physical appearance and emotions than of ethical and religious conduct.¹²

Only one is my dove
my perfect one

12. See Ida Zatelli, “Bar: A Sample Entry for a Database of the Semantics of Classical Hebrew” (1994).

the only one of her mother
faultless/perfect for her who bore her.

Therefore, Agnon inverted the two terms according to what seemed to him to be the most logical correspondence.

Biblicisms

- durative *yiqṭol* forms: *ya'amidu* (take place), *yiššama'* (can be heard), *yidrəkhu* (have yet to go near), *wayyimša'* (found).
- *yafa kaḥamma, bara kallavana*, "beautiful as the sun, pure as the moon."

Ḥayyim Nahman Bialik (1873–1934)¹³

In his prose writing Bialik devoted special attention to the most popular aspects of Jewish culture by undertaking the collection and reworking of the aggadic tradition. In this respect, the short story *Mišpaṭ hayyeruša*¹⁴ offers a clear example. The language is reminiscent of Biblical Hebrew, which works well with the timeless folktale atmosphere of the story. Biblicisms are mainly used for stylistic effect.

משפט הירושה *The Inheritance Judgment*, 1928, p. 50, ll. 4–12

ויהי היום, ויתן הזקן ביד בנו אניה טעונה מסחורת הארץ, להביאה אל ארץ אפריקה. ויבוא העלם אל ארץ אפריקה, ויעש שם מקנה וקנין, וירא ברכה רבה, ולא אץ עוד לשוב אל בית אביו, ויוסף לסחור את־הארץ ויעש בה ימים רבים. עוד הוא מתמהמה – והזקן אב העלם הלך למות [...] ויקרא אליו את עבדו [...] ויאמר: [...] היה נא אתה אחרי מותי על ביתי ורכושי ועל כל־אשר־לי, וכלכלת אותם באמונה עד שוב בני – והשבות לו את־כל־נחלתו כצדק וכמשפט.

One day the old man **entrusted** a ship **carrying** local products in Africa to his son. The young man **travelled** there **to do** business **and made** a fortune; he did not hurry to return to his father's house but **kept** trading around the world, **staying away** for a long time.

13. Bialik made Aliyah in 1924.

14. He published *Mišpaṭ hayyeruša* in 1928; cf. Ḥayyim N. Bialik, ביאליק, כל כתבי ח.נ. (1938).

While he delayed his return, his old father was nearing the end [...] **so he summoned** his servant [...] **and said**: “After I am gone, **take care of** my house and my possessions, of all that I have, so that you will keep it safe until my son’s return—**then you will give** him **back** his inheritance according to the law.”

Biblicisms

- narrative *waw*: *wayyitten* (entrusted), *wayyar* (saw), *wayya‘aś* (“made” [a fortune]), *wayyosef* (kept), *wayyiqra* (summoned), *wayyomer* (said)
- temporal idiom: *wayhi hayyom* (one day)
- suffix pronouns: *lah’avi’ah* (to carry them) for *lahavi’ ’otah* (same meaning)
- shortened verb forms: *wayya‘aś*, *wayyar*
- participle (past durative action): *mitmahmeah* (while he delayed)
- *waw* consecutive clause: *wakhilkalta* (so that you will keep)
- *wəqatəl* form: *wahaševotha* (then you will give back)

Ya‘akov Kahan (1881–1960)¹⁵

Kahan brings themes that are typical of the ancient Greco-Roman world to the Jewish tradition. Like the poet Sha’ul Tschernichowsky, Greek literature fascinated him, especially epic poems, which he credited with a keen aesthetic sense. *Hakkokhav hammet*¹⁶ tells a story of mermaids, celestial deities, and sailors, who resemble characters from Ancient Greek mythology. The topic requires the use of a lyrical style for which biblicisms constitute a particularly apt form of expression.

המת The Dead Star, 1914, p. 9, ll. 1–24

בלילה בלילה, בהתלקח כל אשי הלילה, היתה סירונית צעירה ויפה עולה ושטה אל
אפיקי הים המכסיפים ושרה שירתה לפני הכוכבים הנוצצים [...] ויש אשר תפליג
ספינה קודרת, ועל מכסה הספינה איש בודד, עטוף אדרת שחורה וארוכה [...]

15. Kahan made Aliyah in 1934.

16. He published *Hakkokhav hammet* in 1914; see Ya‘akov Kahan, כתבי יעקב כהן (1945–1956).

וככה שרה הסירונית: – אסוף אספתי פנינים לי ואיף מהם, רדוף רדפתי אחרי גלים ואקל מהם. עתה אחשקה כוכבים לי, כוכבי השמים הנוצצים.
אני אוהבת אותם!

Every night, **when** the night fires **were lit up**, a young and fair mermaid would come up floating/gliding over the silvery waves and would sing her song before/to the twinkling stars [...]. From time to time, a desolate boat **would sail across**, and on its bridge only one man, wrapped in a long dark cloak [...].

Thus would sing the mermaid: “**Surely I have gathered** pearls for myself but **I was fairer** than them, **indeed, I have chased** waves but **I was swifter** than them. Now **I want** the stars for myself, the twinkling stars in the sky.

I love them!”

Along with the use of rather common (i.e. in the Bible) morpho-syntactic biblicisms, Kahan clearly quotes Ezek. 31:7 where the author finds a quite rare narrative form of the verb *yafa* (*wayyif*), from which he creates an unattested 1st ps. c. s. *wa'if* (see below under Biblicisms).

Ezekiel 31:7: וַיִּיף בְּגִדְלוֹ בְּאֶרֶץ דְּלִיּוֹתָיו כִּי־הָיָה שָׁרְשׁוֹ אֶל־מַיִם רַבִּים:

It was beautiful in its greatness, / in the length of its branches; / for its roots went down / to abundant water.

Biblicisms

- infinitive construct with temporal value: *bəhitlaqqah* (when they were lit up)
- prepositive infinitive absolute: *'asof'asafti* (surely I have gathered), *radof radafti* (indeed, I have chased)
- iterative *yiqṭol* form: *taflig* (would sail across)
- narrative *waw*: *wa'if* (I was fair; Kahan's calque based on the 3rd ps. m. s. *wayyif*, Ezek. 31:7), *wa'eqal* (I was swift)
- cohortative: *'eḥšəqa* (I want)

In conclusion, despite the fact that these writers were fully integrated into the society of the Yishuv and had adopted its spoken language, they experimented with a free and elegant literary style.

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