

II. THE DEVELOPMENT OF HEBREW

It is commonly thought that Hebrew "died" after the destruction of the Second Temple (70 C.E.), and thereafter served mainly as a language of prayer; though some books were written in it, the language had nothing added to it, but remained stagnant. This view is wrong in several respects. Firstly, while it is true that Hebrew was not spoken, yet the literary activity in the period of the diaspora was immense. The number of books written in that period (70-1948 C.E.) reaches tens of thousands, including some weighty tomes, and each book contributed something to the development of Hebrew by dealing with different subjects and problems. Secondly, it is quite erroneous to assume that only spoken languages develop and grow. On the contrary, even in living languages the enrichment of the vocabulary takes place mainly in the written language. As for Hebrew, the diaspora period accounts for a growth of tens of thousands of words, to name the ideas, institutions, and inventions which emerged all the time; moreover, many new words were added for no external reason, since in all languages words go out of use and are replaced by others. The vocabulary which was created in the diaspora period has not yet been fully listed, being scattered over so many books (many of which exist only in manuscripts); only the Historical Dictionary now being prepared by the Hebrew Language Academy will include all those riches.

A dictionary of contemporary Hebrew contains material made up of many successive layers. In its pages, words over three-thousands years old rub shoulders with entered created a mere thousand years ago, and others which entered the language only a few years ago. All appear mixed up with each other, and

together make up one whole, the vocabulary in use in our generation. Today's Hebrew speaker is not conscious of the fact that these words are of different periods. For him they are all the same, that is all Hebrew words. On the whole it is not possible to recognize by the outward appearance of words whether they are new or old. Only the study of books written at different periods will reveal to us when a certain word began its career. There are some dictionaries which indicate, to some extent, the time when a word came into use. These are the big Thesaurus of Ben-Yehuda, the dictionaries of Y. Goor, of Y. Kenaani, and the second edition of A. Even-Shoshan.

From the Tell-Amarna letters, written in the Babylonian language before the Israelite conquest of Palestine, which contain a number of words in the local language, we learn that as early as the 14th century B.C.E. such words as those meaning today: ship, summer, dust, lovely, wall (of a city), bird-cage, brick, shortage, gate, field, commercial agent, horse, tax,¹ and ca. 15 more, were current in the speech of Palestine. These, then, are the first Hebrew words attested in any written document. It goes without saying that at that time there were current also thousands of other words from among those we find in the Bible, except that there was no occasion for mentioning them in the Tell-Amarna letters.

The same applies to the Bible itself. The Bible employs about 8,000 different Hebrew words (of which 2,000 appear only once), but of course this was not the whole vocabulary at the disposal of the Hebrew speaker in Biblical times. His vocabulary no doubt amounted to 30,000 or over, but the authors of the various books of the Bible had no reason to use most of those words. The Bible deals with a restricted number of themes, and is not an encyclopaedia. The number of different words in the Hebrew parts of the Mishnah, the Tosephta, the Talmuds, and the Midrashim, which we call as a whole "Mishnaic Hebrew," is much larger, because the variety of subjects is

1 אני(ה), קיץ, עפר, חמוד, חומה, כלוב, לבנה, מחסור, שער, שדה, סוכן, סוס, מס.

larger. It is likely that of those words which exist in Mishnaic Hebrew, but are not found in the Bible, many were actually in use in the Biblical period. With respect to one word, *mash-chezet* "a grinding-stone," we can prove this, for the word occurs in the Tell-Amarna letters!

In spite of its small size, the vocabulary contained in the Biblical literature is of special importance for present-day Hebrew. As is well known, not all the words in our language are used with equal frequency. Some words are employed constantly, e.g. man, thing, house, to do, to speak; others are used only on extremely rare occasions, although the average native speaker of Hebrew is familiar with their meaning. Scientific research has shown that in any given language 1,000 words account for ca. 85% of all the matter in an average text. Amongst those 1,000 most frequent words in Hebrew, there are 800 Biblical ones. The thousand-word list of the most urgently needed vocabulary, as taught in *Ulpanim*, also includes ca. 800 Biblical Hebrew words. Thus the importance of the Biblical vocabulary is out of all proportion to its numerical share of the 60,000 or more words which make up present-day Hebrew.

Analysis of newspaper texts has shown that 60-70 per cent of the words used in an ordinary news report are words found in the Bible, while about 20% are found only in Mishnaic Literature, and the small remaining percentage is made up from medieval and modern innovations. A recent investigation on a sample of 200,000 running words selected at random from newspapers and periodicals shows that among the words occurring more than four times (which make up almost half of the entire vocabulary found in those extracts) the Biblical words form 61% of the occurrences.² The difference is due to the inclusion of leading articles, feuilletons, etc., where newly-created words occur in larger numbers.

About 14,000 words in the Hebrew dictionary come from Mish-

² Rifka Berezin, "As origens históricas do vocabulário do Hebraico moderno," Doctoral thesis of the University of Sao Paulo, Brazil, 1972. The frequency-list on which this is based is by Dr. Raphael Balgur.

naic Hebrew. This does not constitute the full number of words used at that time, as Mishnaic Hebrew has an additional 6,000 words in common with Biblical Hebrew. Thus the Mishnaic Hebrew sources (Mishnah, Tosephta, Hebrew parts of the Talmuds, and Midrashim) use a total vocabulary of about 20,000 words.

The latest dictionary by A. Even-Shoshan, according to the estimate of its author, lists about 6,500 words from medieval sources. These mainly derive from the Piyyut, from the writings of the medieval Jews of Germany and France (principally from Rashi's commentaries), and from the translations made in the South of France in the 12th-14th centuries. These are by far not all the words which were created during the long period between the Talmud and the revival of the Hebrew language. That material is still only partly recorded.

A few thousand words in common use today are borrowed from Talmudic Aramaic. Aramaic is a language quite different from Hebrew in sound, grammar, and vocabulary, but the constant occupation of Jews with the Babylonian Talmud, and later also with the Aramaic mystical work, the *Zohar*, led to the absorption of many words from Aramaic already in the middle ages, with small changes in form so as to give them the appearance of Hebrew words. The scholars responsible for enlarging the technical vocabulary of Hebrew in modern times continued this process, and words from this source are constantly passing into Hebrew.

The same Even-Shoshan lists nearly 15,000 words created since the revival of the Hebrew language. Since that dictionary does not contain pure technical terms of the natural sciences and of technology, the number of words added in those 90 years is probably much larger, although we have to deduct a certain percentage of words which did not succeed in gaining acceptance.

Hebrew, like other languages, thus grew in layers, each corresponding to a period of the language, and we can find ample traces of all of these in our spoken and written language today. Not only words were added, but each period also contributed its

share of grammatical forms and of syntactical constructions. Some of the innovations of the various periods afterwards disappeared from use, but some of the words and grammatical features that disappeared were subsequently revived, and some are being revived today. In the Hebrew of today, all these elements are combined into a new organic unity. The speaker of Hebrew in Israel is not at all aware of the different age of the words he uses, just as little as the speaker of English is aware of the historical origin of the words in his language and the time in which they entered English. The interest in laying bare these origins is historical and intellectual, and has no bearing on the way we should use these words and constructions. In Israel, there are some writers on linguistic matters who do believe that the origin of a word should matter for the sake of style, and owing to the intensive study of the Bible, and in some circles of Rabbinic literature, the consciousness of the origin of words is more alive in Israel than in most other countries.

In the following chapters, a brief description will be given of the more important periods and developments of the Hebrew language, and an attempt made to assess the contribution of each to the formation of Hebrew.