

#### IV. BIBLICAL HEBREW

The Israelite conquest of Canaan resulted in the settlement of tribes, as far as the western side of the Jordan was concerned, in three large areas: Galilee, the mountain chain called Mt. Ephraim, and the mountainous area south of Jerusalem called Judaea. The coastal plain, which was more densely inhabited, resisted the attempts of the Hebrew tribes to occupy their allotted territories. Nor did the Israelites, because of their inferior equipment, succeed in seizing the two chains of fortified cities which linked the coast to the Jordan valley and beyond: the valley of Jezreel and the Jerusalem corridor. These two strips of Canaanite territory separated the three Israelite areas from each other, and prevented their consolidation into one political and cultural unit. In particular we note the isolation of the tribe of Judah. We know very little of its history in the interval between Caleb, immediately after the conquest, and David. The events related in the Book of Judges, as well as the stories of Samuel and Saul, concern the history of the northern tribes only.

The stories in Judges show that the northern tribes, too, led separate lives, and only united for limited purposes at times of danger. Their other link was the sanctuary at Shiloh, where people from all tribes met for religious occasions.

According to what we find elsewhere under similar circumstances, it is to be assumed that each tribe had a separate dialect, and that perhaps there were also marked local differences of language within some tribal areas. We are told of one such difference in Judges 12:6, that Ephraimites could be recognized by saying *sibbolet* instead of *shibbolet*, the form used by the men of Gilead, and the one of standard Biblical Hebrew. This is often taken to mean that they pronounced every *sh* like *s*,

as we have it in modern times in the traditional Hebrew pronunciation of Lithuania and southern Morocco. However, as this language test took place at a river ford, the *shibboleth* asked for was probably not the word meaning "an ear of corn," but the one meaning "whirlpool in a river," and the use of *samekh* in indicating the Ephraimite pronunciation is meant to show that they still had the Proto-Semitic sound like English *th*<sup>1</sup> which in other dialects had already become *sh*. There is of course no reason why the Bible should have told us about other tribal peculiarities, which did not play such a role in historical events.

We have two poems from the time of the Judges: the Song of Deborah in Judges 5, and the Prayer of Hannah in I Samuel 2:1-10. Biblical scholars view these as part of a group of poems which also includes the Blessing of Jacob (Genesis 49), the Song of the Red Sea (Exodus 15), the poems in the story of Bileam (Numbers 24-25), the song in Deuteronomy 32, and the Blessing of Moses (Deuteronomy 33), all of which exhibit a language similar to that of the Song of Deborah. Except for the Song of Deborah, these were for a long time thought by scholars to be late fabrications, but since the researches of the late Prof. W.F. Albright and his disciples, it is usual to take them for compositions preceding the establishment of the First Temple. M.D. Cassuto (1883-1951), professor at Florence and later at Jerusalem, put forward a theory that these poems are parts of a great national epic which told of the Exodus from Egypt and the victories of Israel. An inspection of the various poems shows that they do not represent the tradition of a single tribe, but of the whole people. Their subject is "the people of the Lord" (Judges 5:11, etc.), and where tribes are mentioned by name, they are usually enumerated as working together for a common aim. Possibly the purpose of the epic was to unify the tribes for joint action, perhaps against the Philistines. It is therefore to be assumed that also the language of these poems was not the language of any one tribe, but a special language of poetry, dif-

<sup>1</sup> cf. Arabic *thubna* "hollow formed by folding clothes."

ferent from all tribal dialects but intelligible to all equally, such as we find with many peoples living at the stage of Oral Culture. Such a language would of course be based on the dialects of those tribes which used it, that is the northern tribes, and not on the dialect of Judah.

This northern origin of the poetical language of that period can be confirmed from certain features of the Song of Deborah. Judges 5:11 we read: "there they relate (*yetannu*) the triumphs of the Lord." The word we have rendered "relate" equals the Hebrew *shinnah* "to repeat, declaim," from which the name of the Mishnah is derived, but in the Aramaic form, as in Aramaic *matnita* for Mishnah. In verse 26 we have "she crushed (*maḥa-qah*) his head, she crushed (*maḥatzah*) and penetrated his temple." The first form of the word is according to the laws of early Aramaic, where we find e.g. *arqa* for Hebrew *eretz* "earth" (in later Aramaic this verb appears as *meḥa*). We must not assume that these words were taken over from Aramaic. On the contrary, in Aramaic inscriptions written centuries later than the Song of Deborah, we find the Proto-Semitic sound *th* represented by the letter *sh* (there being no other sign in the alphabet taken over from the Canaanites to write that sound), and as the late Prof. Y. Kutscher pointed out in his *History of Aramaic* (I, 1971), the Song of Deborah is by far the oldest document to show its change to *t* so typical for later Aramaic. Another northern feature is the appearance of *sha-*, also found in Phoenician, for Biblical Hebrew *asher* (verse 7). These are in all probability genuine local forms current amongst certain northern Israelite tribes. We have here the well-known phenomenon of "isoglosses": dialects or closely-related languages are not divided by sharp boundaries, on each side of which we find the speech to be different in every respect, but the features by which the two forms of speech differ have each a separate boundary of its own. Thus features we are accustomed to attribute to one language may extend quite a way into the territory of the other. Someone passing from the heartland of one language into the territory of the other (e.g. from France into Italy) would be aware that the speech he hears around him changes gradually

from village to village, without being able to say exactly when he has passed the language boundary—unless there happens to be a national frontier. Thus features we associate with Aramaic and Phoenician were also current in parts of the Israelite territory. The poetical language, being super-tribal, could adopt forms from different dialects, and even use them for stylistic effects, as we have seen with the words for “to crush.” We cannot say which was the main dialect on which the poetical language was based. It does not seem to have been the speech of the town of Shiloh, for that lies in Ephraim, and we find in the texts we have no instance of the phenomenon exhibited by *sibbolet* for *shibbolet*. It is likely, however, that this poetical language, once current, was used by the priesthood at Shiloh in order to communicate with men from all tribes.

Under the Philistine threat, the tribes achieved a measure of unification. King Saul did much to reinforce that unity of the northern tribes, and even managed to obtain limited cooperation from the tribe of Judah, particularly by getting David to join him. After Saul's death, David seized power over all tribes and proceeded to conquer Jerusalem, thereby liquidating the strip of Canaanite-held territory that prevented effective collaboration between the northern and southern tribes. David settled Jerusalem with men drawn from all tribes. He also organized an army in which members of all tribes served side by side. Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem and drew to its service priests and levites from all over the country. The Temple attracted people from all parts for the Pilgrimage Festivals and during the rest of the years for private sacrifices. Around the Temple and the royal court, there arose an intelligentsia of scribes, Wisdom exponents, and prophets, which not only was composed of men hailing from different tribes, but was interesting in making its message heard in such a way that it could reach all tribes and be understood by all equally well. Perhaps the most important thing from the point of view of language development was that Solomon set up a civil service spread over the whole country, with whom all came into contact, and that in *corvée* duties men from everywhere worked outside their

home area together with men from other parts of the country.

The highly-centralized régime demanded a unified language. The administration needed a written and spoken language which could be understood without hindrance in all parts of the kingdom, and which every civil servant was able to learn quickly, and which on the other hand was sufficiently rich and adaptable to express efficiently the mass of new concepts connected with the involved administration, the *corvée*, the Temple cult, and the rapidly growing foreign trade described in I Kings 10. It seems probable that this language was at first created in the capital through the contacts between men from different tribes, especially at court, and that owing to its prestige as language of the capital and the court it spread, carried by the officials sent out from Jerusalem. Once this new common language began to be used in official documents, it came as a matter of course also to be employed by the authors of the royal chronicles, and no doubt the Books of Kings, which were in part based on extracts from such chronicles, also reflect their language.

This language form, due to the unification of the nation under David and Solomon (ca. 998-926 B.C.E.), is the Classical Hebrew of the First Temple period. We can observe two outstanding features of this language: it avoided forms that resembled Aramaic (such as the verb *tinnah* we discussed in connection with the Song of Deborah), and it consistently employs the conjunction *asher*, avoiding the *sha-* of the previous period. Both these features are of a type characteristic for languages of peoples that have just attained unity and independence. As we have seen above, there are ordinarily no sharp boundaries between related languages. National independence in cases where adjacent states speak such languages which gradually pass into the area of the newly-formed state, tends to lead to a desire to stress features that differentiate "our" language from those of the neighbours. If some dialects have forms not found in the neighbouring language, and others forms in common with the latter, or if both forms are possible as alternatives, preference will be given to the pronunciation, grammatical form, or word that is not to be found in the other language. In this connec-

tion there is special value in forms or words that recur frequently in speech or writing, and thus serve as signals by which "our" language is easily and immediately identified. The conjunction *asher* fills this role to perfection because of its frequency, particularly in official style where subordinate clauses abound. It is also easy to learn its correct use, as it simply replaces another word, *sha-*, in all its uses. The origin of *asher* is unknown, and its etymology is something of a riddle. Apparently it was used in the dialect of Judah, as we can learn from the phrase *asher le-* for expressing the genitive, which outside the Book of Genesis occurs mainly in verses connected with the royal house of Judah and with the Temple. The use of *asher* provides a clear distinction between Classical Hebrew and Phoenician, which used *sh-*, though not with regard to Moabite, where *asher* also appears. In the same way the avoidance of Hebrew dialect forms resembling Aramaic was a convenient way of individuating Hebrew. Here another factor came into play. About the same time as David's all-Israelite state, there came into being the kingdom of Aram-Damascus, which appears to have been the first awakening of Aramaean nationalism, and stood in political opposition to the new Hebrew kingdom. It has been claimed with some probability that this was where the "Old Aramaic" language was formed which we later find used throughout Syria. What we have said about the mechanism of "new" national languages makes it probable that similar tendencies of individuation also played a role in determining the standards of royal Aramaic, with a special edge against Hebrew. Forms like *tinnah*, *maḥaq*, etc., thus acquired the character of words reminiscent of an enemy language, which could not decently be used, at least not in official discourse. In the villages such words no doubt continued to be used as before, and from peasant speech entered into the language of literature, as in the case of *naṭar* "to guard fields" as opposed to the more Hebrew *natzar* "to guard (in general)", "to watch." Interestingly enough, the "Aramaic" form also remained in use in the sense of "to bear rancour," where the semantic connection with the concept of "guarding" was not so obvious.

The official language used by the royal bureaucracy was no doubt somewhat dry, but it soon acquired literary polish when it was used in the Temple by priests accustomed to rhetoric and the pithy formulations of traditional lore. Those who wrote the texts for the Temple singers, while guarding the general character of Classical Hebrew, drew of course on the existing poetical tradition of pre-royal days (and besides the northern poetry we described, there may well have been an independent Judean strain). The full incorporation of the Canaanite population into the state under Solomon enabled the poets to draw more fully from the resources of what H.L. Ginsberg has called "the regular stock-in-trade of Canaanite poets" and to develop their own skill in spinning words by the study of existing models. Of special importance for the development of Hebrew style was the fact that there appears to have been a type of public speaking which used the forms of poetry, especially parallelism, and that this style was adopted by most of the Prophets. The combination of rhetoric and poetry, fired by the intensity of prophetic thought, turned Classical Hebrew into that noble vehicle of expression which we find in the speeches of Isaiah and Jeremiah.

It is a moot question to what extent the Hebrew of the monarchy was open to borrowing from other languages. As we have seen, it is likely that most of the foreign borrowings in Hebrew date from early contacts between Hebrews and Canaanites, and by the time of David had already become an integral part of the language. The Prophets, especially Isaiah, were prone to employ foreign words from the language of the country about which they happened to prophesy, but these are milieu trappings, and we have no evidence that they penetrated into common usage at the time. The question which has been most discussed is that whether pre-exilic Hebrew contained words borrowed from Aramaic. Present-day scholarship is mostly inclined to be very cautious in assuming Aramaic origin for a word appearing in the texts from the time of the monarchy. As we have seen, words with an Aramaic look about them could also stem from northern dialects of Hebrew, and if our theory about the conscious avoidance of Aramaic-looking forms is correct, this would

make it unlikely that actual words from Aramaic would at that period have entered the literary language. On the other hand, it seems that terms brought by foreign trade were freely used, and so we get South Indian words like *ahalot* for a wood used for incense and *tukkiyyim* for the peacocks imported by Solomon, or South Arabian words like *mor* "myrrh" as well as *sharot* "caravans" and *ma'arav* "trade" in Ezekiel 27. Greek words were formerly considered to be a sure indication of the late (end of Second Temple period) origin of the text in which they were found. Since the discovery of Greek commercial and other texts in the "Linear B" syllabic script at Mycene of the 15th century B.C.E., there is nothing to prevent us from admitting to the possibility of Greek loanwords in pre-Israelite Canaanite. During the time of the monarchy, Greek seafarers doubtlessly visited the shores of Palestine. From them, the Israelite population not only learnt the names of far-away places, but also of goods and inventions. If indeed *talpiyot* in Song of Songs 4:4 should be a Greek word (which is far from certain), this would not prevent us from placing it even into the days of Solomon, when we find the undoubtedly Greek *lishkah* "hall," from Greek *leshkè* "public hall," lit. "place for chatting."

We learn from II Kings 18:26 (Isaiah 36:11) that this official language of the time of the monarchy was called *yehudit* "Judaean." We may see in this designation an additional piece of evidence for our contention that the emergence of Classical Hebrew was intimately linked with the events which made the tribe of Judah an integral part of the Israelite polity.

The unification of the tribes ended after 70 years, in 926 B.C.E. Once more there was a political frontier between the tribes, except that this time it ran north of the territory of Benjamin, and the two parts of the nation were in direct contact, with no alien territory separating them. The two kingdoms of Judah and Israel went different ways in religion, culture, and political association. Nevertheless, it seems that the national language did not lapse with the cessation of national unity. There are indeed some indications that at least in certain fields of language use the northern kingdom had a somewhat different



variety of Hebrew. This is illustrated by the Samaritan Ostraca, a collection of potsherds inscribed with ink—as was the custom of the time—and recording payments to the royal treasury of wine and oil. Though monotonous, these inscriptions exhibit two forms not found in our Bible: *shatt* for *shenat* “the year of” (as in Phoenician), and *yn*, no doubt pronounced *yēn*, for *yayin* “wine”—the word has not been found in Phoenician inscriptions so far, and is not used in Aramaic, but the spelling corresponds to that of Phoenician *bt* for Hebrew *bayit* “house” (but in Early Aramaic *byt*). These were probably forms of the local speech around the city of Samaria, and we have to look upon them in the same way as we did regarding the forms that looked like Aramaic, i.e. as evidence of isoglosses that ran across Israelite territory, where part of Hebrew speech went with the north, and part with the south. It may well be that officials of the kingdom of Israel insisted that in official documents of this kind the local spelling should be employed. As against this, we possess two literary works from the northern kingdom, the books of Amos and Hosea. Amos was a native of Judah, but it is difficult to believe that he would have insisted on addressing his northern audience in a language to which they were not used. Hosea was a northerner, and uses words not to be found in other Biblical books, some of which may be picturesque slang used in Samaria. Yet even Hosea never uses the conjunction *she-* (*sha-*), but only *asher*, and has none of the forms which look like Aramaic. The conclusion we must draw from this is that the northern kingdom continued to employ, at least for literary purposes, the Classical Hebrew of the time of David and Solomon, even though it may have acquired a certain local colouring. Examples of the continued use of standard languages after separation from the political bodies that created them, abound in history, e.g. English in the United States, Spanish in South America, German in the Austrian empire, and Aramaic after the fall of Aram-Damascus.

Classical Hebrew was used for 400 years, until the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. It would be impossible that during this long time the spoken language should not have

changed, even in the city of Jerusalem. But the written language remained the same in grammar and in all essentials of vocabulary, only the style changed. This means that Classical Hebrew was a literary language, acquired through education, which mainly served the social elite, even if it was understood by the people. A contributory factor to the conservatism of the language was the custom of that time, that letters and books were not actually written down by their authors, but writing was done by professional scribes who had learnt the language of writing together with the script. These scribes had a professional interest in maintaining the language standards as rigidly as possible, for the bigger the gap between spoken and written language, the greater the standing of those that could handle the latter correctly.

When Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem, he transferred to Babylonia the priests, scribes, and craftsmen, and left in Judaea only "vintners and ploughmen" (II Kings 25:12), i.e. villagers. There was thus no one left in Judaea to continue to foster the Classical literary language. The Exile lasted 70 years, which means that people born in the foreign country might already have had grandchildren. During this period, the exiles learnt to speak the language of their surroundings. The spoken language in Babylonia at that time was Aramaic, the ancient Babylonian (Akkadian) language being used only in written communication. When Cyrus, king of Persia, conquered the Babylonian empire in 539 B.C.E., he abolished the use of Babylonian in official documents and substituted for it the more easily written Aramaic, and the Persian kings introduced it also into parts of their empire which had not been under Babylonian rule. Thus Aramaic, which already had been the most widespread language in the Middle East, now also became the language of written communication between the many peoples of this far-flung empire, from India to Nubia (Esther 1:1). Inscriptions in the Aramaic language have been discovered in India, both in the parts under Persian domination, and in the inscriptions set up in N.W. India by the ruler of all India, King Ashoka, who came to the throne in 272 B.C.E. As for Nubia, now northern Sudan, we possess a large

collection of letters and contracts from the town of Yeb (Elephantine), next to modern Assuan, which emanated from a Jewish military garrison installed there by the Persians next to the Nubian frontier. All these documents are in Aramaic, although scholars have been able to discern the influence of the Hebrew speech of their authors.

With Aramaic enjoying such prestige, little wonder that those exiles who followed Cyrus's invitation to return to Judaea, brought with them the habit to use Aramaic both in private and in public. It may well be that the use of Aramaic in public affairs was even demanded from them so as to enable the Persian authorities to keep an eye on them. Thus we are told in Nehemiah 8:8 that Ezra the Scribe performed a public reading of the Pentateuch in the square next to the Water-Gate: "and they read in the book in the Law of God interpreted (*mephorash*) and giving the sense, and they instructed in that which was read." It is made clear in the same chapter that "they instructed" refers to the explanations which the Levites gave to the people. As for the other term, "interpreted," the Babylonian Talmud (Megillah 3a) explains: "Interpreted means translation (*targum*)," using the word which denotes the Aramaic translations of the Bible. It has been pointed out that it was usual in the Persian empire for documents written in Aramaic to be read out, in a kind of simultaneous translation, in the language of the addressee, and attention has been drawn to a Persian word of the same meaning "interpretation" which denotes the Persian readings of words written in Persian texts before 500 A.D. in Aramaic (as in English one writes "lb." and reads "pound"). If this explanation of the term is correct, we may assume that this translation was necessary for exiles but recently returned, who could not understand the Hebrew of the Bible; but it is also quite likely that the translation into Aramaic had the purpose of giving the reading the character of a public proclamation in the eyes of the Persian authorities.

In Nehemiah 9 we learn about a campaign to free the Jewish community from alien elements, and in the course of this account (Nehemiah 13:24), we are told that this also included

action against the penetration of foreign languages, for the result of the mixed marriages was that "their sons half of them speak Ashdodian, and are unable to speak Judaeen." Note that nothing is said about a campaign against the use of Aramaic, which was not connected with mixed marriages. On the other hand, the mention of "Judaeen" as a contrast to "Ashdodian" clearly implies that Hebrew was still spoken.

Scholars, however, concluded from the mention of translation in the Book of Nehemiah and a number of other indications that after the Babylonian Exile Hebrew ceased to be spoken altogether. The people, they claimed, spoke Aramaic, and only used Hebrew as a language for reading and writing on religious matters. Few still hold that view nowadays. Of course those who lived outside Palestine spoke Aramaic in countries where this was the general language, and Greek in areas and cities where Greek was spoken. Even in some parts of Palestine, such as Galilee and the coastal plain, where the Jews formed part of a mixed population, they spoke Aramaic and Greek. Both Aramaic and Greek were also used by Jews in writing, not only outside Palestine, but also in Judaea, and even for religious matters, as we know from the Aramaic texts found amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls and the fragments of a Greek Bible translation found in caves near the Dead Sea. But in Judaea almost certainly Hebrew continued to be spoken, in a new form, which we shall discuss in the next chapter, and continued to be written extensively in the same Classical idiom that had been used before the Exile. Naturally the Judaeen Jews did not consider their spoken language and Biblical Hebrew to be two distinct languages, but saw in Biblical Hebrew the literary form of the language they spoke. This literary form was studied in schools (*bet midrash*, cf. Ben Sira 52:23). Whoever wrote anything, used this language as well as his education would allow him; some were most successful in imitating the ancient sources, while others made mistakes which betray their spoken language.

In course of time, the influence of the spoken language increased, and there resulted a mixed style, combining grammar, syntax and vocabulary of Biblical and spoken Hebrew. In the

Talmuds and Midrashim there are a few passages which show that such a style was used in popular history books. This was also the period during which people started to pray in synagogues throughout the country in addition to the traditional prayers of the priests in the Temple of Jerusalem. We can judge of the style of these prayers from the language used in later, Pharisaic, prayer, which is identical with that of the older parts of the Jewish prayer-book as used today. This, too, is a mixed style, mainly a combination of Mishnaic syntax and Biblical vocabulary, including many rare Biblical words. On the other hand the writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls, according to the most widespread opinion in the first century B.C.E., employed a Hebrew which is much more like that of the Bible, and has only few traits of the spoken language. This effort at purism was probably not a function of superior linguistic training, but part of the self-identification of that group with the generation of the Exodus from Egypt and the will to imitate not only the latter's religious customs, but also their way of speaking. This was achieved mainly by extensive use of actual fragments from Bible verses, and this practice may well have had for them the additional significance of applying the content of the original verses to themselves. For the history of the language, however, the most important aspect is that these writings were understood by the members of the sect, so that they imply a high general degree of ability to understand Biblical Hebrew.