

V. MISHNAIC HEBREW

At the very outset, the student of Hebrew meets with maxims from the Talmud, stories from the Midrash about the Patriarchs, etc., and may even read portions of the "Ethics of the Fathers." If he is at all sensitive to language, he cannot fail to notice that in those texts he is faced with a language very different from that of the Bible. But when the same student learns something of the history of Hebrew literature, he will discover that the latest books of the Bible (such as Esther and Kohelet) were composed only a short time, about a hundred years, before the lifetime of the earliest Sages mentioned in the Mishnah, such as Simeon the Just or Jose ben Joezer. Maybe he has already heard of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and knows that for the most part they are in a language closely resembling that of the Bible, although according to the most widely accepted dating their composition took place after the time of Simeon the Just. Moreover, among the Dead Sea Scrolls there is one text, written on a copper strip, in a Hebrew rather similar to that used by the Sages of the Mishnah.

How did it come about that Hebrew, to all appearances, underwent such a complete change in such a short time?

The question has been much discussed, and many different solutions have been offered. One says that the language of the Mishnaic Sages did not really exist: Biblical Hebrew (according to that view) had died before their time, and the Sages spoke Aramaic. When they tried to write down their teachings in Hebrew, all they succeeded in producing was a mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic, which is Mishnaic Hebrew! But this view has been shown to be wrong, and the most probable view is that the Hebrew of the Mishnah, or as it is also called, the language

of the Sages, was indeed a living, spoken language, and that the Sages wrote as they talked.

The change of language, however, was not as sudden as might appear at first glance. This apparently abrupt change only took place superficially, in the written language, but at the back of it there was a slow, gradual change in the spoken language. True, in the period of the Maccabeans people still wrote in the Hebrew of the Bible, but an expert examining the latest books of the Bible can discern that it was no longer the natural language of the books written in the period of the First Temple. One can see that the authors of the later books were not sure of themselves in using the language correctly, and tried to imitate the style of the writers of the time of the Kings of Judah and Israel, not always successfully. It is assumed, therefore, that although they learnt in school to write Biblical Hebrew, their written usage was not backed by living speech in the same form of language, but in daily life they used another kind of language. This was Mishnaic Hebrew.

Scholars think that as a result of the major social upheaval which consisted in the banishment of the elite of the Jewish people to Babylonia in 598 and 587 B.C.E., and their partial return and the creation of a new Jewish community from 538 onwards, the influence of those parts of the nation who spoke dialects divergent from Biblical Hebrew grew and the ensuing linguistic confusion led to the evolution of a new common language in Judaea, which became Mishnaic Hebrew. At first, however, this colloquial language was not thought fit for writing books, and people endeavoured to continue writing the language that had been used before the exile. In this way they went on for about three hundred years, until the end of the second century B.C.E., when the influence of the Pharisee sect became felt, to which the earlier Sages belonged and from which Rabbinic Judaism evolved. The Pharisees were close to the common people, and taught them the Law in public lectures. As their instruction was oral, they used the spoken language even when, in the end, they wrote down their teachings, for they considered it important to hand down every saying in the very

words in which its author had expressed it. When, however, the same Sages composed prayers, which were considered literature, they couched them in a vocabulary derived mainly from the Bible, and in a style resembling that of the Bible. This has remained till the present day the style of the prayer-book.

Thus a new literary language, Mishnaic Hebrew, emerged in the Jewish Community, which also served to express new themes, viz. *Halachah* and *Aggadah* (legal and ritual law, and homiletic teaching). Biblical Hebrew was by no means forgotten: every Jew studied the Bible, and the whole of Rabbinic literature revolves around the Pentateuchal Law. Only, people stopped composing books that looked like books of the Bible. This restriction did apply only to that part of the nation which followed the Sages. The people of the Dead Sea Scrolls and other sects did not hesitate to write works intended to create the impression of Biblical books, which even pretended to have been written by such men as Ezra the Scribe, Enoch, or Adam! Some of these books have been preserved in translations by the Christian churches, and are referred to as Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha. In the Dead Sea caves, in which the Scrolls were found, there came to light also a few fragments of those books, and we are able to discover what their original language was like.

A short time after people started to write books in Mishnaic Hebrew, there took place the terrible wars that devastated Judaea: The war of Pompey and his conquest of Jerusalem, the war of Titus and the destruction of Jerusalem, and the war of Bar-Kochba. The destruction also meant the death-knell of the Hebrew language. As far as our information goes, Hebrew ceased to be spoken about two generations later, around 200 C.E., after the completion of the Mishnah.

The literature of the Sages did not end with the Mishnah. Large parts of it appear in the Tosephta and in the Midrashim. The last Midrashim were written after 1000 C.E. Thus Mishnaic Hebrew had a similar fate to Biblical Hebrew: it continued to be written for centuries after it ceased to be spoken, according to tradition and by imitation of the earlier books.

The place of Mishnaic Hebrew in speech was inherited by

Aramaic. In the Second Temple period it was also a second language for the Palestinian Jews, and perhaps, for certain social strata, the main language. At the time of the Mishnah, three languages were spoken in Palestine: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. In the caves near Ein-Gedi, letters of Bar-Kochba in those three languages were found. The influence of Aramaic upon Mishnaic Hebrew is overwhelming, but Greek also contributed not a few words to its vocabulary.

Even while Hebrew was still spoken, books in Aramaic were composed in Palestine, such as parts of Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah, and some of the Dead Sea Scrolls; and large parts of the Bible were translated into that language, our *Targum*. No wonder that as Hebrew receded, Aramaic became a kind of "Holy Tongue," and in it were written down the most important parts of the Babylonian and the Palestinian Talmuds and some Midrashim of note. The Jews of Egypt and other countries, on their part, had long been accustomed to speaking and writing Greek, translated the Bible into that language, and composed in it important works.

However, the end of Hebrew had not yet come!