

Lewis Glinert, *The Story of Hebrew*, (Princeton-Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017), pp. 263.

by Alessandro Guetta

The history of Hebrew is particularly interesting for many reasons. The most influential collection of books of all times, the Bible, was written in this language, except for a few sections in Aramaic; Hebrew was considered by Jews and Christians, until modern times, the original language of mankind or the perfect one, of divine origin – God created the world in this language, according to the age-old understanding of the Book of Genesis. A third reason is historical: its resurrection or revitalization, which occurred in the 20th century, and transformed a written language limited to religious purposes into the living idiom of an entire nation. We could add to these features the stunning variety of this language, whose pronunciation was declined in many different ways, as an effect of the dispersion of the Jewish people across the lands of Europe, Northern Africa and the Middle East.

Lewis Glinert, professor of Hebrew Studies at the Dartmouth College, author and editor of a series of books on the Hebrew language,¹ retraces the history of Hebrew in a lively and readable way, displaying breadth of scholarly knowledge while avoiding the jargon of specialists. The book presents, as the author describes it in the introduction, a “stirring and suspenseful tale;” a “story” more than a “history,” recounted with passion and with clear empathy. The reader is taken through a journey across times, regions, peoples: from the almost obvious beginning quoting the beginning (the first verse of the Bible, opening *be-reshit*) to the fonts of Microsoft.

Besides its remarkable style, this book contains some original developments in comparison to earlier works on the same topic. It expounds at length, for example, the Christian knowledge and conception of Hebrew in the Middle Ages and Renaissance (and beyond) as an important stage of the story. The contribution of the English Hebraists of the 16th (William Tyndale, translator of the Pentateuch) and 17th (the King James Bible) centuries is opportunely recalled, alongside the better known activity of the German Protestant scholars of the

¹ Lewis Glinert, *The Joys of Hebrew*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Id., *Modern Hebrew. An Essential Grammar*, (London-New York: Routledge, 1994); *Hebrew in Ashkenaz. A Language in Exile*, ed. Lewis Glinert, (Oxford: Oxford university press, 1993).

same periods. Another interesting contribution is the mention of the popular Hasidic tales of the 19th century, which forged, according to Lewis Glinert, a type of language completely different from the sophisticated prose of the *maskilim*, and which constituted a basis for the further evolution into modern spoken Hebrew. Study of the once meaningful and now almost completely forgotten American Hebrew literature is also an interesting and original contribution of the book; who remembers today the poets Binyamin Silkiner, Ephraim Lisitzky and Gavriel Preil, the last representatives of a rich Hebrew literature composed outside the *Yishuv* and, later, the State of Israel?

The section dedicated to the development of Hebrew in Israel is, quite understandably, the most detailed one. Here, too, Glinert is at once correct and original in recalling the participation of Orthodox Jews, the *haredim*, in the collective construction of a common national language, in spite of the ideological differences which are, in this case, a source of enrichment.

The book is highly recommended for all these qualities: its style, the scholarship displayed, the originality of some of its contributions.

It also has some shortcomings. The downside of the author's palpable passion is his tendency to insist on the exceptionality of Hebrew, which the reader would easily associate with the exceptionality of the people who used and conveyed it, the Jews. The omnipresent absent of the book is the comparative dimension. We would probably learn more about Hebrew by comparing it to other languages which have or had a comparable structure and evolution. The implicit insistence on its unicity risks flattening its features instead of highlighting them, and produces a rhetoric a little misplaced in a scholarly book, even if it is destined for a wide readership.²

We can also reproach the use of a traditional historiographic scheme, which envisages three or four fundamental phases of the history of Hebrew: 1) the biblical stage, 2) the Middle Ages, mainly in Islamic and Arabic-speaking Spain, 3) the *Haskala* in Germany and Eastern Europe, which further developed into 4) contemporary, i.e. Israeli, Hebrew. This outlook embraces the Bible as a unity – the author compares the literary styles of books such as Exodus, Ezekiel,

² See, for example, in the "Epilogue," p. 247: "Is there, one wonders, a parallel anywhere on earth to the intimate and unbroken engagement of Jews with their ancient literature, in its original tongue?... Crucial to the story is the extraordinary social and political history of the Jews and their treatment by non-Jews."

Ecclesiastes and the Psalms, concluding on the “stylistic breadth of the Bible.” The important span of time and the different social addressees of these texts are not taken into account: the Bible is a collection of texts, far from making a literary and conceptual unity.

Besides, this temporal scansion accepts the vision of a “long Middle Age” for Jewish history, applied to the history of language. The Renaissance and the early modern period are treated only in relation to Christian Hebraism, as if Hebrew had stagnated for three centuries. It is time to extend to linguistic research the numerous historiographic contributions of the last decades, which point to a reappraisal of the uniqueness and innovativeness of these periods in Jewish history. The story of Hebrew from the 15th to the first half of the 18th century is still awaiting serious studies.

Some minor remarks to be made concern the relatively little space allotted to Karaism, the religious dissenting group that placed Hebrew at the center of their intellectual agenda and contributed powerfully to its early linguistic and theoretical analysis. Some of the first biblical translations and grammatical studies were made by Karaite authors not later than the 10th century; it was the Karaites who at a later time (Judah Hadassi, 12th century) considered the knowledge of Hebrew a fundamental religious duty.

Another subject simply mentioned but which probably deserves more careful study is the Hebrew spoken fluently, though as a second language, by the Arab citizens of the State of Israel and of some of the Palestinian-controlled territories today.

Also, recognition of the existing histories of the Hebrew language would have been welcome, for instance, the ones written by Angel Sáenz-Badillos³ and Mireille Hadas-Lebel.⁴ True, Glinert’s book takes into consideration more facets of the history of Hebrew, such as its sociological and philosophical aspects, and is not solely concentrated on linguistics, but its work does not come out of a scientific desert.

³ Angel Sáenz-Badillos, *Historia de la Lengua Hebrea*, (Sabadell: AUSA, 1988) (English translation 1993, Italian translation 2007).

⁴ Mireille Hadas-Lebel, *L’hébreu. 3000 ans d’histoire*, (Paris : A. Michel, 1992) (Italian translation 1994).

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Notwithstanding these remarks, *The Story of Hebrew* is a very good book. Its reading is not only extremely enjoyable but also useful for students, for specialists and for a public of readers interested in the fascinating history of a language so important for the shaping of European culture, so ancient – and still exuberant.

Alessandro Guetta, INALCO, Paris

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