

The Historical Nature of the Written Hebrew Texts from Second Temple Period in Comparison with Modern Spoken Palestinian Dialects

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In this interdisciplinary lecture, we rely on insights from the study of the Arabic diglossia in general¹ and the multiglotic milieu of the Palestinian Arabic dialects in particular², to shed light on the history of Hebrew during the Second Temple period. The discussion on the historical nature of Hebrew, as reflected by the remnants of texts from antiquity, has been at the center of an intensive debate in the last two decades³. The main dispute is between supporters of the "traditional" philological approach, who come from a positive point of view and claim that it is possible to draw a historical picture of Hebrew, and the "revisionist" who seek to challenge the very possibility of drawing such a picture. Based on a historical method (for example, as represented by the work of historian Marc Bloch⁴), this lecture applies the methodological tool of combining a historical discussion with a synchronic observation of modern living dialects. Our premise is that despite many differences between the ancient and modern periods, there are also aspects of similarity that can be used as a theoretical model for understanding the historical processes. Among the central aspects of this comparison are the similarities in the following elements: polyglot communities; language contact between close Semitic languages; A description of the dialects according to geographical, social and ethnic aspects; and the diglottic linguistic continuum between the canonical language and colloquial varieties. In order to illustrate these aspects, we focus on one concrete linguistic question - the form of 3ms and 3fs pronouns. The challenge regarding the ancient Hebrew remnants to date has been how to explain the fact that in the Hebrew of Qumran, the forms of these two pronouns are הַיָּאָה / הַיָּאָה, which seems typologically more archaic than those that appear in Biblical Hebrew (הַיָּאָה / הַיָּאָה)⁵. We show that this difficulty exists only to the extent that we assume a uniform and continuous historical development line of Hebrew. The comparison with the Modern Arabic Palestinian dialects in the Old City of Jerusalem and in the surrounding villages⁶ enables us to understand that the remnants of written Hebrew are actually only a few fragments of a wide range of dialects that characterized the ancient period.

¹ Badawi (1973); Hary (1996)

² Bergstrasser (1915); Bauer (1926); Blank (1953); Cleveland (1963, 1967); Palva (1984); Levin (1995); Henkin (2010); Shachmon and Faust (2017)

³ Young (2003); Zevit et al (2005, 2006); Naudé and Zevit (2012); Rezetko and Young (2014); Hendel and Joosten (2018)

⁴ Bloch (1993)

⁵ Morag (1954)

⁶ Shachmon (2013)

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