

THE ORIGIN OF THE LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTIC PLURALISM ACCORDING TO MEDIEVAL JEWISH EXEGETES

Angel Sáenz-Badillos

This paper, in honor of a distinguished Hebrew scholar, comments the views of medieval Jewish exegetes on four well-known biblical passages related to the origin of human language and linguistic pluralism.

1. THE ORIGIN OF THE LANGUAGE

Gen. 2:19 f.: *wa-yiṣṣer ... wa-yabe' 'el-ha-'adam li-r'ot mah-yiqra' lo wě-kol 'āšer yiqra' -lo ha-'adam nefēš ḥayah hu' šēmo* ("He formed ... and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name.")

This verse had particular importance in the history of thought in connection with the problem of the origin of the language. The most immediate sense of the text seems to be: following the divine dictate, the first man is the one who gives name to the living beings. This can be taken in literal sense as a declaration of the human origin of the language. No medieval thinker would deny that the Creator gave to man the faculty of language that distinguishes him from the other living beings.¹ Philosophers discuss if God did reveal the original, primeval language to the first man, if all created beings have a name that corresponds to their nature, characteristics and behavior, or if men agreed on how to call to every creature in order to understand each other by means of the language. For Jewish thinkers the question is connected with the nature and origin of "the holy tongue," the language in which God spoke with men.

¹ What is very clear, for instance, in Mēnaḥem's Introduction to his *Maḥberet*. See ed. A. Sáenz-Badillos, Granada, 1986, 1*.

Raši's interpretation of the verse has its source in a passage of *Genesis Rabbah*: God consults the ministering angels on the creation of the man, and He announces: "His wisdom will be greater than yours." He brings several animals before the angels and they do not know how to call them, while the man says their names.² The text does not intend to say that the man could give them any arbitrary name (as it would be if the language is a human invention or a convention), but that thanks to his intelligence, superior to that of the angels, he recognized their nature and found the fitting name (in consonance with a view of the language as "natural"). To give names is also a sign of the human power:

wa-yiššer ...: It also teaches you here that at the time of their forming, immediately on that day, He brought them to man to name them.³ And in the words of the Haggadah,⁴ this *yěširah* has the meaning of domination and conquest, like: "When you besiege (*tašur*) a city" (Deut. 20:19), meaning that He subjugated them under man's dominion. *wě-kol 'āšer yiqra'-lo ha-'adam nefēš ḥayah*: Transpose it and explain it: Every living creature to which man would give a name - that was to be its name forever.⁵

In his commentary to the passage, Abraham ibn 'Ezra' does not add any substantially new element. He states the syntactic meaning of the expression *nefeš ḥayah*, in a way that differs from Raši's transposition of words; thanks to his familiarity with Hebrew grammar, Ibn 'Ezra' recurs to the principle of "double duty." In both cases, however, the result is similar, since none of them thinks that it could be a "double object": "to which he called 'living creature' ..."

The *lamed* of '*āšer yiqra'-lo ha-'adam* serves in its place and further on: '*āšer yiqra'-lo ha-'adam lē-nefeš ḥayah*, since it adds something to the explanation, the same as *watirehu* (Exod. 2:6) and other many similar cases.

In his *Short Commentary* Abraham ibn 'Ezra' underlines the correspondence of the names given by Adam and the nature of the animals:

And the meaning of *li-r'ot* refers to the angels. *hu' šēmo*, conforming to its nature.

After reminding the points of view of Raši and Ibn 'Ezra', Naḥmanides prefers to explain the words of Gen. 2:19 as "double object." At the same time, he introduces the topic of the "help" that situates the verse in the context of the passage in a more clear way: *nefeš ḥayah* is the name that the man should give to the animal

² See J. Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah. The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis. A New American Translation*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985, I: 183.

³ *Avoth d. Rabbi Nathan*, ed. M. Kister, Jerusalem: JThSA, 1997, ch. 1.

⁴ *Gen. Rab.* 17:4, Neusner 1985, I: 183.

⁵ If we do not specify any other concrete source, the translations are from the Hebrew text of the *Miqra'ot gēdolot Ha-keter*, Genesis, part I, ed. M. Cohen, Bar-Ilan: Bar-Ilan University, 1997.

that could be considered as a true help for him (and he could not find anyone that would deserve that name):

R. Šēlomoh says: *wē-kol nefēš ḥayah 'āšer yiqra'-lo ha-'adam šem hu' šēmo* (that name was to be its name) forever. And R. Abraham says that the *lamed* ... is carried forward ... It is possible that its meaning has to be with "the help," meaning that the man is a living being, like in "and man became a *nefeš ḥayah* ("living being")" (Gen. 2:7), as I have explained it there. And he brought before him all species, and every species unto which the man would give a name saying that it is a living being like himself, this would remain its name, being a help to him; he gave names to all, but as for himself he found no help deserving the name of *nefeš ḥayah*.

David Qimḥi's interpretation includes some fine nuances. To give names is not only a sign of the power of man over the creatures but also a proof of his brain-power, since he does not give them any revealed or conventional name, but the "natural" one that fits the peculiar character of every animal, its nature and behavior. Just the fishes are not included in the story, since their names belong to a different category: they are not "natural" but "conventional," agreed upon by the different nations and, in consequence, dissimilar, according to the different places. The language used for giving names is the holy language, Hebrew, in which God taught the first commandments to mankind, and in which all men spoke until the generation of the dispersion, at the time of the Babel's tower. According to the view shared by most Jewish thinkers, and found in the *Kuzari*, the first names mentioned in the Bible can have full meaning only in Hebrew:

... And when He created man and told him to dominate over all [the animals], He brought them before him saying that he should govern them all in the way he was seeing them before him, as a servant before the lord; and that he gives them names in agreement with the nature that they had received, according to the wisdom that God had granted him above all. The meaning of *li-r'ot* is that those that came after him saw and knew his wisdom, because he had given them the names that corresponded them, as a father to his son; the names that he gave to each one were adjusted to its nature that he knew thanks to his wisdom; since the man knew, when he saw them, which was the nature and the behavior of each one ... And he did not mention the fishes of the sea, because according to the nature that God gave them, it was not possible that they came before him, since they can live only in the water, and when one takes them out of the water, they die; they do not have members to walk, but just to swim. And the names given to the fishes of the sea were names agreed in consonance with the fishes, and consequently their names change according to the different places. *wē-kol 'āšer yiqra'-lo ha-'adam nefēš ḥayah* means that for every living being to which the man gave a name, that would be its name The meaning of *hu' šemo* is that it was the name that suited it according to its nature ... And the names that Adam gave were in the sacred language, because that is the language in which he spoke and in which all humans spoke until the generation of the dispersion. And in that language God spoke with him and gave him the commandment relative to the tree; the proof is that God called him Adam (*'Adam*), derived from *'ādamah*, "earth," from which he was created; and he called his wife Eva (*Ḥawah*) "because she was the mother of every living being (*ḥay*)." And in all the divided languages the names of "Adam" and "Eva" did not change in the speakers' mouth. In the same way, Eva gave to her son the name "Cain" (*Qayin*), and

she said "I have acquired (*qaniti*) a male thanks to God" (Gen. 4:1); and also Noah (*Noah*) comes from *yēnahamenu* (Gen. 5:29).

As said, medieval Jewish philosophers used to see the origin of language in the divine revelation, in the nature of the things, or in the agreement or convention among men.⁶ Although the Hebrew text in its literal sense seems to support the third of these options, some thinkers found arguments in it in favor of the first or the second option.

For instance, Yēhudah ha-Levi describes in the *Kuzari* the divine origin of the holy tongue:

The language created by God, which He taught Adam and placed on his tongue and in his heart, is without any doubt the most perfect and most fitted to express the things specified, as it is written: "And whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof" (Gen. 2:19). This means that it deserved such name which fitted and characterized it. This shows the excellence of the "holy tongue" as well as the reason why the angels employed it in preference to any other.⁷

Abraham ibn 'Ezra' clearly maintains in his *Defense of Saadia*, against R. 'Ādonim, that God did not give a complete language to men, even not the language of the Torah or the Prophecy: what He gave to the chosen ones was the

⁶ For Greek philosophers alternative opinions about the origin of language are defined by the terms *physei* ("by nature") / *thesei* ("by convention"), to which the old theory of language as a divine gift was frequently added: see Plato's *Cratylon*; cf. J. C. Rijlaarsdam, *Plato über die Sprache. Ein Kommentar zum Kratylus* (Utrecht: Bohn, Scheltema & Holkema, 1978). About the problem among the Greeks, cf. W. S. Allen, "Ancient ideas on the origin and development of language," *Transactions of the Philological Society of London* (London: Blackwell, 1948), 35–60. Muslim thinkers discussed this question at length. In principle, the words of the Qur'ān (II, 31: "He taught to Adam all the names") caused many religious thinkers to adopt the idea that language was revealed. But of course this was not unanimous opinion. On the question of the origin of language according to Arab writers, cf. Miguel Asín Palacios, "El origen del lenguaje y problemas conexos, en Algazel, Ibn Sida e Ibn Ḥazm," *Al-Andalus* 4 (1936–39): 253–281; R. Arnaldez, *Grammaire et théologie chez Ibn Ḥazm de Cordoue* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1956), 37ff.; H. Loucel, "L'origine du langage d'après les grammairiens arabes," *Arabica* 10 (1963): 188–208, 253–81; 11 (1964): 57–72, 157–87. The different positions maintained by Muslim thinkers have been presented in a very systematic and precise way by B. G. Weiss, "Medieval Muslim discussions of the origin of language," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 124 (1974): 33–41, distinguishing six main theories about the origin of language, i.e., the three known fundamental conceptions (the "naturalist" theory, the "conventionalist" theory and the "revelationist theory") and combinations of them. In general terms most Mu'tazilites were distinctly conventionalist, while the traditionalist defenders of the "uncreated Qur'ān" maintained the revelationist position. Ash'arites interpreted Divine Speech as an abstract quality and declared (end of the 11th century) that both positions were plausible and that there was no conclusive solution to the problem.

⁷ *Kuzari*, transl. Hartwig Hirschfeld, (Brooklyn, N. Y.: P. Shalom, 1969), 4, 25, p. 229. See also 1, 26; 2, 68; Yonah Ibn Yānāh, *Sepher ha-riqmah*, ed. M. Wilensky, 2. ed., Jerusalem: Academy of the Hebrew Language, 8.

faculty of expressing the divine message in their own words, and for that reason it is possible to find true differences in the language used by the biblical authors.⁸

Maimonides, and most of his disciples, stated the conventional character of Hebrew language. According to Maimonides, primeval humanity lived in one place and spoke a single language.⁹ Commenting on Gen. 2:20 he adds:

Among the things you ought to know and have your attention aroused to is the dictum: "And the man gave names, and so on." It informs us that languages are conventional and not natural, as has sometimes been thought.¹⁰

Nahmanides opposed the Maimonidean view. For him to consider Hebrew language a convention (like all other languages) was tantamount to denying the divine character of the Torah. In his *Essay on the Internal Character of the Torah* he objects the words of those who consider the holy language a matter of human agreement:

What makes that there is nothing conventional in their languages, as some of the leaders of the preceding generations said, is that if we were saying that the language of the Torah is conventional like all the rest of the languages, we would be denying the gift of the Torah, which was given to us totally by the hand of the Almighty.¹¹

Interpreting the same passage, a disciple of Maimonides, Ibn Falaquera, maintains that language is an agreement among men, and that there are no "natural languages."¹² But for Profayt Duran, at the beginning of 15th century, this verse

⁸ See *Sefer ha-haganah 'al Rav Še'adyah Ga'on (ha-mēkunneh "Šēfat yeter")*, M. A. dissertation, Y. Osri, Univers. Bar-Ilan, Ramat-Gan 1988, 84. On the double perception of Hebrew as the language of Canaan, a conventional language as all the rest, and the "holy tongue", cf. L. Charlap, *Rabbi Abraham ibn-Ezra's Linguistic System. Tradition and Innovation* (Hebr.), Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 1999, 260f.; U. Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms: From Saadiah Gaon to Abraham ibn Ezra*, Albany: State University of NY Press, 1991, 267–268.

⁹ *The Guide of the Perplexed*, transl. Shlomo Pines (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, sec. impr. 1969), 613f. [III, 50].

¹⁰ *The Guide of the Perplexed*, II, 30, pp. 357f. He maintains similar conventionalist theories in several passages of his works, see Isadore Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides*. New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 1980, 324ff.

¹¹ *Kitbe R. Mošeh ben Naḥman*, ed. C. B. Chavel, Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-Rav Kook, 1964, II: 467.

¹² *Rešit ḥokmah*, ed. M. David, Berlin: M. Papfelofer, 1902: 26. He describes how the language originated among the first men or the "first people." When the first man wanted to express to another man what he felt, he began pointing with signs (*remizot*) to the things that they had close; later on he began to emit sounds: first inarticulate screams, then, different (mono-syllabic) voices to allude to the beings around him, using a different voice for each thing. The tongue brought the air towards the diverse organs of phonation, and these produced words naming concrete and intelligible realities. As language always tends towards simplicity, people that live in the same place and have similar natural characteristics speak the same

does not prove the human origin of language, it only indicates that God wanted to test Adam: the animals had already a name that He had given them according to their nature, and He wanted to see if Adam's wisdom allowed him to reach these "natural" names of the living beings.¹³

2. THE PRIMEVAL LANGUAGE

Gen. 11:1: *wa-yēhi kol-ha-'areš safah 'eḥat u-dēbarim 'āḥadim* ("Now the whole earth had the same language and the same words").

The literal sense of this verse seems to allude to the use of a single language shared by all men. All medieval Jewish exegetes are of the opinion that the first language, the language used by all men until the division of the nations was the holy tongue, Hebrew.

There are, however, small differences in the interpretation of the passage in the rabbinical exegesis. It may seem surprising that *Genesis Rabbah* understands this verse in negative sense: they had not learned anything (of the experience of the flood), they only knew one language ...¹⁴ But it also includes a more positive explanation: the generation of the dispersion received a better deal than that of the flood that perished completely: they loved each other, and at least a rest survived that spoke a single language. The expression *dēḥarim 'aḥadim* is interpreted as "and a few words."¹⁵

Raši mentions several rabbinic explanations of the passage:

śafah 'eḥat: the holy tongue.¹⁶ *u-dēbarim 'āḥadim:* They came with one scheme and said: "He had no right to select for Himself the upper regions. Let us ascend to the sky and wage war with Him."¹⁷ Another explanation: [they spoke] against the Sole One of the world. Another explanation: *dēḥarim ḥadim*, sharp words. They said: "Once every 1,656 years, the sky totters, as it did in the time of the Flood. Come and let us make supports for it."¹⁸

Abraham ibn 'Ezra' adds a few grammatical precisions and some arguments, similar to those of the *Kuzari*, showing that this one common language was the

language, while those living in different places have a different natural constitution and look for different linguistic signs (*Ibid.* 21ff.).

¹³ *Ma'āsheh 'Eḥod*, ed. J. Friedländer und J. Kohn. Wien: J. Holzwarth, 1865: 30.

¹⁴ Cf. *Gen. Rab.* 38:1f., Neusner 1985, II: 46.

¹⁵ See *Gen. Rab.* 38:6, Neusner 1985, II: 49f.

¹⁶ Cf. *Tan. Buber, Noach* 28.

¹⁷ Cf. *Gen. Rab.* 38:6, Neusner 1985, II: 49f.

¹⁸ Cf. *Gen. Rab.* 38:1, Neusner 1985, II: 46; *Tan. Buber, Noach* 24.

holy tongue, Hebrew. The first names mentioned in the Bible have a meaning only in Hebrew, not in Aramaic nor in Arabic:¹⁹

śafah 'eḥat, with *pataḥ qatan* under the *'alef*, since it is in absolute state; if it was in construct state it would take *pataḥ gadol*. In the book on grammar²⁰ I have explained why the *dalet* of *'eḥad* is lacking ... The meaning of *śafah 'eḥat* is “one language,” and very likely it was the sacred language. The proof of it can be found in the names of Adam, Eve, Cain, Seth and Peleg. The sense of *dēḥarim 'aḥadim* is that today there are in all languages some words that even the linguists don't understand, but in those days, the words of sages and fools were a single thing, *'aḥadim*; this is the plural of *'eḥad*.

And in his *Short Commentary*:

śafah 'eḥat, the holy tongue; the proof is in Adam, who was created from the *'ādamah*, “earth,” and Seth from *ki śat-li 'Ēlohim*, “since God has appointed me another offspring” (Gen. 4:25), and Noah, from *zeh yēnahāmenu*, “this one will give us rest” (Gen. 5:29), and it is not the same in Aramaic nor in Arabic, although the grammar of the three languages is similar. And *dēḥarim 'aḥadim*, since you may find different words in each language, according to the usage of each country.

In the introduction to his *Śafah bērurah*, Ibn 'Ezra clearly states that Hebrew is the primeval language (1*),²¹ even if Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic were “the same language and the same words” (2*), a fact that justifies the linguistic comparatism. The rules of this first language were established by Adam.²² He maintains also that the language spoken in Canaan, *śēfat Kēna'an*, was the holy tongue.²³

David Qimḥi tries to define the nature of the “agreement” (i.e., the conventional nature of the language, in consonance with Maimonides), including a peculiar explanation of *dēḥarim 'aḥadim*:

All the men on the earth had *śafah 'eḥat*, i.e., all of them spoke a single language, the holy tongue, as we have explained (*Com. to Gen. 2:20*). And *dēḥarim 'aḥadim*: they had a single agreement, the same as in “they gathered themselves together with one accord to fight with Joshua” (Josh. 9:2), i.e., they had attained an agreement; they accorded to go to the Country, to search for a large place, and to reside all of them on it, without dispersing themselves in different directions, in order to continue being a numerous people. This happened 340 years after the Flood. But it seems that Noah and his sons, Sem, Yaphet and 'Eber, who were wise and right, did not include themselves in this agreement ... Such an agreement was meaningless for the wise men of the

¹⁹ The same proof is explained in *Śafah bērurah* (ed. E. Ruiz & A. Sáenz-Badillos, Córdoba: El Alandro, 2004) 3*.

²⁰ *Yēsod diqduq*, ed. N. Allony, Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1984, 167f.

²¹ Although the idea that Aramaic was the first language can be found even in some Rabbinic writings: Cfr. *TB Sanh.* 38b.

²² *Second Introd. to the Pentateuch*, ed. Weiser, Vol. I, p. 137, commented by Simon 1991: 268.

²³ In his *Commentary to Isah.* 19:18.

generation, even if against their will they had to follow the not-wise majority in the construction of the city and the tower. And since all of them spoke the same language, it was easier to attain a common agreement ...

Yosef Bėkor Šor takes a well-known topic from the *hagaddah*:²⁴

šafah 'eḥat u-dēbarim 'āḥadim, that all of them knew seventy languages.

And he reminds *Gen. Rab.* stating that all men spoke in the holy tongue.

3. THE PLURALITY OF LANGUAGES

Gen. 11:7: *habah nerdah wē-nabēlah šam šēfatam 'āšer lo' yišmē'u 'iš šēfat re'ehu* ("Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, so that they will not understand one another's speech").

Genesis Rabbah includes a particular interpretation of *Gen 11:6*: the cause of human rebellion against God was the fact that they were one people with one language. It insists also in the divine disposition to forgive them in case of repenting.²⁵ It gives a practical example of the confusion that affected to the builders of the tower.

Leaving aside the discussion of the meaning of the plural, Raši pays attention to the confusion of languages as the punishment that men deserve for trying to build the Tower:

habah nerdah: He took counsel with His tribunal due to His extraordinary humility.²⁶
habah: Measure for measure. They said: "Come, let us build," and He said consequently "Come, let us descend."²⁷ *wē-nabēlah šam šēfatam: u-nēḥalbel*, "and let us confuse." The "nun" is used for the [first person] plural, and the final "he" is superfluous like the "he" of *nerdah*, "let us descend."²⁸ *'āšer lo' yišmē'u*: This one requests a brick, and that one brings mortar, the first one stands and cracks his skull.²⁹

²⁴ Cf. *Bē-midbar Rabbah* 19:3, *The Midrash Rabbah*, transl. H. Freedman, M. Simon, London: The Soncino Press, III: 750, o *Tanḥ Dēḥ*. 2, etc., corresponding to the "70 nations" mentioned, for example, in *Bē-midbar Rabbah* 21:24, *The Midrash Rabbah*, III: 851.

²⁵ Cf. *Gen. Rab.* 38:9f., Neusner 1985, II: 53. In respect to the plural *nerdah*, it alludes to the change introduced by the Greek version of the Bible that preferred the singular. However, this change cannot be found in the apparatus of the critical edition of the Septuagint: *Genesis*, ed. J. W. Wevers, Göttingen; Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1974, 142.

²⁶ Cf. *Sanh.* 38b.

²⁷ Cf. *Tan. Buber, Noach* 25.

²⁸ See Targum Onkelos.

²⁹ Cf. *Gen. Rab.* 38:10, Neusner 1985, II: 53.

Abraham ibn 'Ezra' explains the passage in both commentaries against Ḥayyuṣ and other grammarians, avoiding the understanding of the sentence as a passive ("their language was there confused") and attributing to God the full responsibility in consonance with the first person of plural in the Hebrew text: "let Us go down and there confuse their language."³⁰ He leaves open, however, the form in which the divine decision or punishment took place, pointing to possible interpretations of the forgetfulness of the first language and the origin of linguistic pluralism. His own opinion is of historicist or naturalistic nature, not needing a direct divine intervention in the facts themselves:

ḥabāh nerdah: God with the angels. And all the grammarians³¹ say that the words *wē-nabēlah šam šēfatam* is from the *binyan nif'al*, the same as *wē-nabēqah ruah-Miṣrayim* (Isa. 19:3), and *'a ḥēlah nabēlah* (Isa. 24:4), but this is far from truth, since which would be the meaning of *nered wē-titbalbel lēšonam* if the confusion of the language has nothing to do with the descent? In fact, *wē-nabēlah* is like *wē-na'āseh* ("let Us make," Gen. 11:4), and the proof is that it is said at the end *balal 'Ādonay* (Gen. 11:9). According to the grammatical study, this form is from the *binyan hif'il*; its full form would be *nablēlah*, and with assimilation of the gemination, *wē-nabellah*, with the scheme of *wē-nasebbah 'et 'aron 'Ādonay* (cf. 1Cron. 13:3), or without gemination, *wē-nabēlah šam*. The old translators translated it in the right way: *'abēlah* for *nabēlah* (Meg. 8:1). If it was as the grammarians say, why should they take off the *nun*? Some interpreters say that having changed their heart, they hated each other and altered their language. According to others, the one who taught knowledge to men made them forget their language. My opinion is that they were scattered from the place, and after the dispersion Nimrod was king of Babel (Gen. 10:10), and other kings reigned too, and after many years, when the first generation died, the first language was forgotten ...

In the *Short Commentary*:

wē-nabēlah šam šēfatam: the grammarians of Sefarad agreed that the *nun* is from the *binyan nif'al*, like *wē-nabēqah ruah-Miṣrayim* (Isa. 19:3), from the root *bqq*; the same as *wē-raḥāḥah wē-nasēḥah* (Ezech. 41:7), from the root *sbb*, and not from *nbg*, *nsb*, as a grammarian from our time thought; this last said that *wē-nabēlah šam* is from the root *nbl*, like *wē-nafēlah wē-lo'-tosif qum* (Isa. 24:20). That explanation has no meaning and no flavor. I think that the *nun* is a plural mark, as it is shown by *ki šam balal 'Ādonay* (Gen. 11:9) ...

Peruṣ: *ḥabāh nerdah*, and now they will think that nothing that they imagine shall be impossible for them. Therefore, I will mess up their projects and in this way they will fear me.

David Qimḥi introduces his metaphorical interpretation of the divine deliberation. With an eclectic attitude, he accepts the two possibilities mentioned by Abraham ibn 'Ezra' (first person of plural or *nif'al*) attributing to them a similar degree of

³⁰ However, in *Com. Isah.* to 24:4 Ibn 'Ezra' maintains that *nabēlah* is *nif'al* from *bll*. See also *Moznayim*, ed. L. Jiménez Patón & A. Sáenz-Badillos, Córdoba: El Almendro, 2002: 44*.

³¹ Cf. Ḥayyuṣ, *Šēlošah Sifre Diqduq*. Repr. Jerusalem, 1968: 104.

possibility. His commentary deals only with grammatical questions, without dealing with the origin of linguistic pluralism:

haḥah nerdah. I have already explained the word *haḥah*, and it is only in metaphorical sense (*mašal*), since the Creator does not deliberate with the creatures; for that reason the prophet said: “With whom did He consult and who gave Him understanding?” (Isa. 40:14); in the same sense He said *nerdah*, *naḥēlah*, alluding to the angels, who are intermediate beings, and everything is on a metaphorical way; *wē-naḥēlah*: the *nun* is of the first plural person; or it may be the *nun* of *nif'al*, feminine, meaning “on their language”; in both cases the form is “light,” although it should have *dageš*: *wē-naḥellah*, because the root is *bl* if the *nun* is from the first person, plural; if it is from *qal* the *bet* should have *holem*, and if it is *hif'il*, the *bet* should have *šere* ...

Yosef Bēkor Šor searches for a natural explanation of the linguistic pluralism, seeing it as a consequence of forgetfulness that reduced men to the usage of only one language. All these languages, taught by God to mankind, existed from the moment of the creation and were not formed after the episode of the Tower:

'āšer lo' yišmē'u 'iš šēfat re'ehu, since each one forgot all languages but one, and the language that one of them knew, was ignored by the other, even if all together they knew seventy languages. Since I do not think that you can say according to the literal meaning (*pēšaʿ*) that languages were created for them in this moment.

Gen. 11:8-9: *wa-yafes 'Ādonay 'otam mi-šam ... 'al-ken qara' šemah Babel ki-šam balal 'Ādonay šēfat kol-ha-'areš* (“So the Lord scattered them abroad from there ... Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of the whole earth”).

Raši interprets the passage in consonance with the Rabbinic *dēraš*:

wa-yafes 'Ādonay 'otam mi-šam, in this world ... *u-mi-šam hēfišam*: This teaches that they have no share in the world to come.³²

Abraham ibn 'Ezra' gives a peculiar etymology of the name of the city, alluding to the confusion of languages:

Babel is two words, and the *'alef* is lacking, the same as in *bgd* (Gen. 30:11), *bmh* (Ezech. 20:29).³³

For David Qimḥi the confusion of languages originated by God was the cause of the dispersion of the human groups. They were no more able to understand each other, since they lacked an agreed common language. The confusion or plurality of languages (the “seventy languages”) that came after the period of “one and the same language” took place already in the location where they were together.

³² Cf. *Sanh.* 107b.

³³ The same in *Sefer ha-haganah 'al Rav Sē'adyah*, 14.

“Confusion came over” (*Ba’ bel*),³⁴ and it produced the separation of the groups with their different languages:

wa-yafes’ Adonay, confusing their languages, *hešifam* (“scattered them”); since no one could understand the language of the other, their agreement was nullified and they could not build: every group of them with the same language took a different way and they populated the Earth from East to West (cf. Psal. 50:1) slowly, when they were growing and growing ... They gave it *šemah Babel*, *ki-šam balal Adonay šēfat kol-ha-areš*, and from there languages were divided, because while they were all together in the place all languages were mixed and confused. *u-mi-šam hešifam*, He scattered most of them, since they divided in seventy languages; and the “one language” remained there. The mixture (*bilbul*) took place there, and for that reason he gave the city the name of *Babel*; and the *qore’* was one of them, the first one that spoke the holy tongue; *Babel* and *balal* are words of the holy tongue: *balal* is from *bl*; which is the meaning of *Babel*? the word is composed of two, for better explaining its meaning: it means *ba’ bel*, i.e., the confusion (*ha-bilbul*) overcame from heaven, and the full form of *bel* is *bl*, the same as *qen* is from *qnn*, *hen* from *hnn*, etc. *kol-ha-areš*, all the peoples of the Earth, whose languages had been divided, were there intermingled, although they had had only one language.

Gersonides explains that it was not convenient that all men live in only one place, since in case of a catastrophe all of them could die. It was better that they disperse and go to all parts of the Earth:

And the Lord tried to call off their projects, and according to their families, in an exemplary way, granted them the desire to change the language that every family spoke; when this was widespread, the last ones knew only the language of their families. This was the reason why the agreement among the families disappeared.

But we may find also a completely “natural” explanation of the plurality of the languages, like Ibn Falaquera’s:

It happened that in the case of men that resided in the countries, being their members in their form and constitution different from the members of the others, their words became different from the language of the others, since the voices that they used as signs to indicate each other what they thought were diverse, and this was the first cause of the change of languages among the peoples.³⁵

Such is the view of a philosopher of the 13th century that was more influenced by Alfarabi’s thought than by the biblical story of the tower of Babel.³⁶

³⁴ In the same direction of the commentary by Abraham ibn ‘Ezra’.

³⁵ Ed. David 1902: 22.

³⁶ Cf. I. Zwiép, *Mother of Reason and Revelation. A Short History of Medieval Jewish Linguistic Thought*. Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben. 1997: 127ff., 163ff., 193ff.

