MENAHEM AND DUNAŠ IN SEARCH OF THE FOUNDATIONS OF HEBREW LANGUAGE

Angel Sáenz-Badillos

Similarly[1] as the grammatical studies of Arabic, Hebrew philology begun in the East and arrived some time later to al-Andalus, to Muslim Spain. Following the steps of the Muslim grammarians, from 8th to 10th centuries Masoretes[2] and Karaites[3] started to occupy themselves on the philological problems of the Holy Language. The first half of the 10th century was a particularly active period in the field of Hebrew philology both in the Orient and in North Africa; it is in this time, when the first comprehensive work on the Hebrew language was written (in Judeo-Arabic) by Saadia Gaon (Dotan 1997).

As it is well documented, at the middle of the 10th century, Ḥasday ben Šapruṭ, a high officer in the court of Cordova, wishing to promote the development of Jewish civilization, encouraged his secretary, Mĕnaḥem ben Saruq (born in Tortosa, in North Spain), to dedicate himself to the study of the Hebrew language. Mĕnaḥem started immediately to compose the first Hebrew-Hebrew Dictionary, in which he collected more than twelve thousand passages of the Bible, organizing them according to their common basic elements and dividing them in groups of meanings: the *Maḥberet*. It was a very ambitious project that required an unusual industry and knowledge; with all its limitations, it was a true innovative work.[4]

As it is also well-known, almost immediately Dunas ben Labraṭ, a young scholar born in Morocco and one of the last disciples of Saadia in Babylon, called

---

1 The article is based on a paper read at the Seventh Scandinavian Congress of Jewish Studies, Järvenpää, Finland, May 14, 2000.

2 See Dotan 1990.

3 Cf. Khan 1999. According to him, "on the basis of this linguistic evidence it is likely that the Karaite grammatical tradition had its root in masoretic circles in the ninth century" (Khan 1999: 198). "There are important parallels between the old grammatical works of the Karaites and that of Saadia, but in general they are more based on the masoretic works of the 9th century than that of Saadia himself " (Khan 1999: 201).

4 See Sáenz-Badillos & Targarona 1988: 23ff.

also to Cordova by Ḥasday, wrote the *Tĕsuḇot 'al Menaḥem*, 180 responses criticizing with hardness different aspects and explanations of his opponent's dictionary. In his opinion, this work could represent a serious threat for simple people, since, instead of exposing the meanings of the holy language in an appropriate way, it destroyed its foundations, and at the same time it endangered not a few basic theological principles of Judaism.

Although these first grammarians from al-Andalus were working directly on the texts, without paying particular attention to the definition of theoretical principles, we can find in their words some hints about their view on capital subjects such as the origin and the nature of language, and in consequence, on the way one had to chose for approaching the study of the holy tongue.

1. ON THE ORIGIN AND NATURE OF HEBREW LANGUAGE

One of the first questions that a medieval Arabic or Hebrew linguist asks himself concerns the origin of language: is language an outcome of human nature, something taught by God himself to the first man or to the Prophet(s), or is it the result of human convention? Such were some of the basic views, already formulated in late antiquity, which were known and sustained both by Arabs and Jews during the Middle Ages.[5]

For Greek philosophers alternative opinions about the origin of language were defined by the terms *physei* ('by nature') / *thesei* ('by convention'), to which the old theory of language as a divine gift was frequently added.[6] Muslim thinkers discussed this question at length. In principle, the words of the Qur'ān (II, 31) complementing the verse of Genesis 2, "He taught to Adam all the names", encouraged some religious thinkers to adopt the idea that language was revealed. But of course this was not unanimous opinion.[7] Summing up in a systematic way[8] the different positions maintained by Muslim thinkers, it is possible to recognize besides these three fundamental conceptions about the origin of language (the

5 I read a paper on this topic at the Cornell University in 1994: "Philologians and poets in search of the Hebrew language", see Sáenz-Badillos 1997. In 1997 the interesting dissertation of I. Zwiep (1997) appeared in Amsterdam; it deals largely with the same questions in a very detailed way. I agree with most of her analysis.

6 So in Plato's *Cratylon*; cf. Rijlaarsdam 1978. About the problem among the Greeks, cf. Allen 1948.

7 The change of perspective introduced by the Qur'ān is very significant, since it puts the initiative in God's hand, and not in man, as it happens in the Bible. On the question of the origin of language according to Arab writers, cf. Asín Palacios 1936–39; Arnaldez: 1956: 37ff.; Loucel 1963; 1964. Christian interpretation followed, like the Jewish one, a different way. For instance, as Zwiep (1997: 113) has observed, the *impositio nominum* meant for Augustine that the origin of language was the man's first and principal act of rationality.

8 By Weiss 1974.

"naturalist" theory, the "conventionalist" theory and the "revelationist" theory) several combinations of them.[9]

In the 10th century there existed among the Arab linguists a well-known confrontation between the conventionalists and the champions of the revelationist position. But a further group of scholars promulgated a more subtle, diplomatic view on the earliest stages of language: they held that God had revealed only as much of language as was necessary to make interaction possible among men. The rest of language was the effect of a human convention.[10] At the beginning of the 11th century Ibn Ḥazm sustained in Cordova a rather traditionalist position, being, however, open to compromise: language is the result of divine inspiration but human convention plays a role in the origin of the multiplicity of languages.[11] In general terms most Muʿtazilites were distinctly conventionalist, while the traditionalist defenders of the "uncreated Qurʾān" and the integrity of revelation maintained the revelationist position.[12]

Medieval Jewish linguistic thought received both the question and its solutions from its Arab neighbours. The Muslim interest in the subject originated different responses among Jewish scholars. Although they did not pay the same attention to the question as their Muslim colleagues, we find in medieval Hebrew thinkers traces of a certain interest in defining their positions in favour of the conventionalist or the revelationist theories. In the first generations of Hebrew linguists the question was usually not discussed as a theoretical problem, but the general consensus saw language as a gift of God to man. In the coming generations, the same as it happened among Muslim thinkers, the most traditionalist and religious intellectuals adopted the revelationist position while the more liberal ones were conventionalists. The naturalist view of language, well represented among early Arabic linguists, was not very common among Jewish writers, at

9 ʿAbbād ibn Sulaymān (d. 864), for instance, maintained the first position, according to which language has its origin in a natural affinity between expressions and the things they signify. Abū Hāshim (d. 933) defended the conventionalist theory, maintaining that language is a social convention, the result of an arbitrary choice of names made by men. Abūʾl-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī (d. 935/936) represented the revelationist theory, arguing that language was originally revealed by God who gave names to everything. Other Muslim thinkers sought compromises merging these theories. See Weiss 1974: 34f.

10 See Zwiep 1997: 122f. And she adds: "Below I will contend that in fact it became the principal Jewish theory on the origin of language during the Middle Ages".

11 "It is therefore demonstrated that language owes its origin to divine teaching and instruction. But at the same time we do not deny that common agreement of men has originated the innovation of many languages, after having had only one, thanks to which they knew the essences of things, their modalities and definitions." (*Kitāb al-iḥkām fī uṣūl al-aḥkām*, I: 29ff., Cairo, 1952–55, quoted by Asín Palacios 1936–39: 276.)

12 Ashʿarites interpreted Divine Speech as an abstract quality and declared (at the end of the 11th century) that both positions were plausible and that there was no conclusive solution to the problem.

least in its purest form, even if there can be traces of it in some of the views sustained by Abraham ibn Ezra in the 12th century, and a combination of this premise with a more general conventionalism in the work of Abraham Abulafia at the 13th century.

The fact that during the 10th and 11th centuries most Hebrew philologists thought that language is a divine gift did not mean that they adopted the revelationist position, since it was not specified if the gift consisted in the faculty of the speech or in the language itself. The former was probably true in most cases. For most Andalusian Hebrew linguists, God is the "Creator of language"[13], by which they very likely mean the Creator of the faculty of language.[14] Yonah ibn Janāḥ states: "Praise to the eternal God who created man and taught him logic and speech and instructed him how to exalt His divinity and proclaim His unity with them."[15] And Abraham ibn 'Ezra' declares in the introductory poem of his *Šefer ṣaḥot*: "He puts language in the mouth and science in the heart ..."[16]

Yĕhudah ha-Levi's *Kuzari* upholds the typical revelationist attitude in medieval Judaism.[17] In contrast with this attitude, the views of Maimonides and of some of his disciples represent a clear defense of the conventional character of the Hebrew language, the tongue of the primaeval humanity.[18]

Naḥmanides, the great spiritual leader of the Catalonian communities at the middle of the 13th century and a well-known Kabbalist, opposed the Maimo-

13 *Maḥberet*, 1*.

14 The conviction that Hebrew is a holy language inspired by God could be the basis of his opposition and that of his disciples to comparative linguistics, as practised in Rabbanite and Karaite circles.

15 *Sefer ha-riqmah*. Introd. Ed. Wilensky-Téné. Jerusalem: Academy of the Hebrew Language, 1964, p. 8. Yosef Qimḥi expresses the same view in the Introduction to his *Sefer ha-galuy*. See *Sepher ha-galuj von R. Joseph Kimchi*. Ed. H. J. Mathews. Berlin, 1887, p. 1ff.

16 See *Sefer Ṣaḥot de Abraham ibn 'Ezra*. Edición crítica y versión castellana C. del Valle. Salamanca: Universidad Pontificia, 1977, 1 (99). Nevertheless, in the same book he goes on to establish a parallel between the basic movements of the world and the Hebrew vowels, or between the planets and the vowels, a view that seems close to a "naturalistic conception" of language.

17 "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." (*Kuzari*, p. 229 [IV, 25])

18 *The Guide of the Perplexed*, III, 50, pp. 613f. 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' (Gen 2,20). It informs us that languages are conventional and not natural, as has sometimes been thought." (*The Guide of the Perplexed*, II, 30, pp. 357f.) He maintains similar conventionalist theories in several passages of his works, see Twersky 1980: 324ff.

nidean view. He thought that to consider Hebrew language a convention (like all other languages) was tantamount to denying the divine character of the Torah.[19] But even among Kabbalists different opinions were possible: for most of them the Hebrew language was a divine gift. Others, as in the case of Abraham Abulafia, maintained that it is a natural language – *the* natural language, which was chosen by God due to its special qualities and chosen by the Prophets for communicating the divine message.[20] Hebrew is the "mother of all languages", from which all the other languages derive.[21] Yosef ibn Gikatilla, Abulafia's disciple, sustained a more traditional position with respect to the first language, opposing to the conventionalist theory.[22]

---

19 In his *Essay on the Internal Character of the Torah* Naḥmanides objects 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." (*Kitbe R. Mošeh ben Naḥman*, II, p. 467. Ed. by C. B. Chavel. Jerusalem: Mosad Ha-Rav Kook, 1964.)

20 "Know that for any conventional language to have arisen there had to have been an earlier language in existence. For if such a language did not precede it there couldn't have been mutual agreement to call a given object by a different name from what it was previously called, for how would the second person understand the second name if he doesn't know the original name, in order to be able to agree to the changes?" *Sefer 'or ha-śeḳel*, according to Idel 1989: 14.

21 "Know that the mother of all conventional languages is the natural Hebrew language. For it is only by means of a natural language that all the conventional languages arose. And this served as the elementary matter for all of them. Such is also the case regarding natural writing out of which all other written language arose. This is likened to the first created human form, from whom all other human beings were created ..." (*Likkute ḥamiṣ*, ms. Oxford 2239, 125b; according to Idel 1989: 14.) Commenting on the words of the Book of Genesis Abulafia writes: "And the entire land was of one language and one speech: this verse instructs us as to the nature of the language, each of which, according to our tradition, has its origin in the sacred language, which is the Mother of all Languages." (*Sefer mafteaḥ ha-ḥoḳmot*. Ms. Moscú 133, 16b; see Idel 1989: 14.) Regarding the other languages Abulafia agrees with Maimonides and maintains that they were created by human convention. Those languages imitate Hebrew: "The other languages are likened to Hebrew as an ape, who upon observing the actions of a human being wants to do likewise, and like a person who visually appears to another, through a mirror, and he mimics his actions and does not attempt to add or diminish from them – but [still] they are not human." (*Sefer 'Imre Shefer*, quoted by Idel 1989: 21).

22 "And it is necessary that we believe that the language of the Torah is not a result of convention as some illustrious rabbis of previous generations had thought. For if one were to say that the language that the Torah employs is a result of convention, as is the case with the other languages, we would end up denying the [Divine Revelation] of the Torah, which was in its entirety imparted to us from God ... And if the language of the Torah is, originally, conventional like all other languages ... it [Hebrew] would be like all other languages." (*Ma'ămar 'al pĕnimiyyut ha-Torah*, published by Gershom Scholem, *Kiryat Sefer* 6 (1930): 111f., quoted by Idel 1989: 11f.) As Moshe Idel observes, the difference between Abulafia and Ibn Gikatilla is that for Abulafia the Hebrew language (in contrast with all other

But let us return to Mĕnaḥem and Dunas in 10th-century Cordova. We have no complete information about the attitude that both of them adopted in respect to this problem. It is not known who was the teacher of Mĕnaḥem, and although a certain Karaite influence can be detected in his work, it is difficult to say if he had read a significant part of the linguistic works of Saadia,[23] or was familiar with Muslim philologists who had dealt with the topic. The case of Dunaš ben Labraṭ is clearer in this respect, since he was a student of Saadia, although if the scholars who sustain that he was the author of the *Hasagot 'al Saadia* are right, he may have distanced himself from the great master.

The Hebrew tradition on the origin of the language can have a specific, notable importance as background of Mĕnaḥem and Dunaš' attitudes. The sages emphasized the constitutive nature of language, professing their belief in the pre-existence of the Hebrew language as the language of the pre-existent Torah and its role in the creation of the world, which they saw reflected in the Hebrew lexicon.[24] It is worth to pay attention to Mĕnaḥem's statements on this topic.

He begins his Dictionary stating that God created "the fruit of the lips", i.e., speech, a property common to all of humankind. "*Bore' niḇšĕfatayim*" is the first title that Mĕnaḥem gives to God, "Creator of the language" (*Maḥberet* 1*). This is clearly differentiated from other denominations that he specifically confers to Hebrew language: *lĕšon limmudim*, 'the language of instruction' or 'the tongue fit to teach', *šĕfat yeter*, 'the language of excellence' or 'the most excellent language',[25] *miḇḥar kol miḇṭa' wĕ-roš kol 'imre šefer*, 'the choicest form of idiom and the peak of all beautiful expressions'. This language, "refined in the crucible", is, according to Mĕnaḥem, "superior to all the languages inherited by men upon the surface of earth since the time when peoples were dispersed, each with his own language". We should in consequence distinguish the faculty of speech, given by God to all the men, and Hebrew language, that is in no way presented as a "revealed language". The first element, the "faculty of speech"

languages) is the natural language chosen by God, and not a gift of God. Only the form of the letters comes directly from the Creator: "For whereas all languages exist by convention, the forms of the letters of the Hebrew language are Divine." (*Sefer Gan Na'ul*, ms. Munich 58, fol. 333a.) Idel (1989: 16) points out: "Abulafia, like Maimonides, uses the terms *Divine* and *natural* interchangeably". The problematic was still full of meaning in the 15th century, as shown by its echo in the work of Profiat Duran: "I say that in our opinion, we, i.e., the congregation of those who believe in the creation of the world, must necessarily believe that the imposer of the language spoken and agreed upon by man was either God, blessed be He – in that language is part of the totality of things created by Him – or the first man by himself." ('*Efod*, 29; the text of Duran is presented and discussed by Zwiep 1997: 107ff.)

23 Whose Dictionary is mentioned only once in the *Maḥberet*, see *Tĕšuḇot*, p. 47.

24 Zwiep 1997: 120f. See, for instance, *Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer*, 3,2: the Torah is the first of the things created before the creation of the world.

25 Raši understands this biblical expression in the sense of "the proud language" (ad Pr 17,7).

("making light his tongue with the articulation of his lips") was accompanied, according to his words, by "the required knowledge for speaking with correctness" (*la-da'at nĕḵonah lĕ-dabber ṣaḥot*), that was given also to men by God.

The next coming words of this Introduction to the *Maḥberet* establish a parallel between the creation of the living beings and the speaking ones, and between the peoples of the earth and the chosen people, Israel. If the excellence of man with the faculty of speech over the rest of living beings is clear, the same happens with the language of the chosen people when compared to all of the human languages (l. 10 ff.). Mĕnaḥem specifies the finality of the divine gift of speech for man: "so that he may relate the strength of His works, His great deeds and His numerous marvels". After praising the functions of language in man, he states:

> But even before He implanted reason and word to the dwellers of the universe, our God chose this language, the same as He engraved it on the tablets and spoke it the day He revealed Himself on Mount Horeb. (*Maḥberet* 1*, l.15f.)

Is this divine election of the Hebrew language equivalent to "pre-existence" and revelation of the "holy language" to men? In the opinion of Irene Zwiep, "Menaḥem ben Saruq also [i.e. similarly as Ḥayyūj and Ibn Gabirol][26] flirted with the traditional idea of the pre-existent status of Hebrew." "God's choosing Hebrew as His vernacular had been an utterly transcendent act that had taken place during the prehistoric era that preceded the creation of mankind" (p. 151). For Zwiep it is significant that Mĕnaḥem "made a distinction between a God who created the universally human faculty of speech and a God who spoke the Hebrew language and even used it in writing" (p. 152). Mĕnaḥem, Ḥayyūj and Ibn Gabirol "were confused by two irreconcilable aspects of the holy tongue, notably its divine and its human nature" (p. 152). They distinguish "God the Creator of *speech* from God the First Speaker of the Hebrew *language*" (p. 152). There is in the Middle Ages a dichotomy of language: "language as a *faculty of speech* was received from God, language as *a means of communication* was acquired and subsequently developed by man" (p. 156).[27] In the history of Hebrew grammar, says Zwiep, there are representatives of the conventional theory and of the revelationist one, but also several linguists that see language as "a joint adventure

---

26 Ḥayyūj and Ibn Gabirol appear to Zwiep somewhat ambiguous on the origin of language: "They seem to refer to the faculty of speech in general rather than to the revelation of (the Hebrew language) in particular ... Both authors expressed their gratitude for having been endowed with so superb a quality ... They were influenced by certain Muslim philosophers." (Zwiep 1997: 150.)

27 Versteegh 1977 has demonstrated in the case of Muslim philology "that the same Stoic compromise between the natural and the conventional character of language lay at the root of this particular theory" (Zwiep 1997: 157). See also Versteegh 1980; 1990; 1993.

between God and man. Whereas it was God who, by creating the faculty of speech, equipped man with the basic linguistic tools, it was man who developed the actual language by articulating sounds and imposing names" (p. 160).

Even if I agree with many of her estimations on Mĕnaḥem's opinion, I would not subscribe the "flirting" of Mĕnaḥem with the pre-existence of the language as a characteristic of his view. I do not find in Mĕnaḥem's work the statement that God was actually "the First Speaker of the Hebrew language", and even not the topic that He created the world "in Hebrew", that was present in some rabbinical writings.[28] According to Mĕnaḥem, God "speaks" and "writes" Hebrew just in the revelation on the Mount Ḥoreb.

From another point of view, it is important to notice the peculiar character of "holiness" that Mĕnaḥem attributes to Hebrew in his dictionary, a concept that is also to be found in his disciples. For them, due to this "holy" character, Hebrew is absolutely exclusive and different from all the rest of created languages. Their opposition to linguistic comparatism is well-known:

> What do Hebrew and Aramaic have in common? If in the case of every word that has no similar forms we say that there are parallels in Aramaic or Arabic, these languages would be identical, without differences ... (*Těs. Tal. Mĕn.* Ed. S. Benavente, 54*).

In his excellent analysis of the lexicographic theory of the *Maḥberet*, J. Elwolde[29] explains this in reference to Mĕnaḥem's general theory of language: "that a language should be explicable from within itself, and does not need to be mapped onto a second-target-language. Or, put another way, a language can provide its own metalanguage" (Elwolde 1995: 463f.).

Dunaš in his introduction to the *Těšuḇot* calls also Hebrew *'imre šefer*, 'the most beautiful of the tongues' (*Těšuḇot* 21,16*), taking an expression used by his opponent; but he is a pragmatic scholar and does not usually deal with this kind of global questions. There is a single statement in the *Hasagot 'al Saadia* where the author (be it Dunaš or another philologist) says, "in this language (the holy language) the angels in heavens and Israel on earth sing to our God" (ed. Schrötter, p. 2, no. 4).

Since we have no explicit asserts on this topic, we can imagine that he was not far away from the views of his master, Saadia, who in the Hebrew introduction to the first edition of the *Egron* says:

---

28 See, for instance, *Targ. Neof.* to Gen. 11,1. Or, according to Yĕhudah ha-Levi, God spoke in Hebrew to Adam and Eva (*Kuzari* II, p. 67).

29 Elwolde underlines the fact that Mĕnaḥem decided to write in Hebrew since "a language should be explicable from within itself" (Elwolde 1995: 463) and qualifies Mĕnaḥem's method as a "distributional/taxonomic/inductive approach to semantic description" (p. 464).

a) God chose the holy language *minni 'ad*, "from old."[30]

b) the angels and all heavenly creatures sing and venerate God (*bo yĕzammĕruhu ... u-bo ya'ăriṣuhu*) in this language (ll. 2f.)

c) there was a single language in the whole world from the moment of the creation until the separation of the peoples (tower of Babel). This language was, of course, Hebrew (ll. 3ff.).[31]

What is the meaning of these statements for the problem we are dealing with? In words of Irene Zwiep, "God had chosen – the apparently pre-existent – Hebrew idiom, a language that was sung in heaven, to be revealed to humanity, and to serve as a medium of communication in a world that was originally intended to be the equivalent of heavenly paradise" (Zwiep 150f.).

Saadia's words are in my opinion not clear enough: Did God in Saadia's opinion "create" the holy tongue (and in consequence did he reveal it to men), or did He simply chose from the very beginning, as "holy language", the language spoken by men (and angels) from the very moment of the creation? Strictly speaking, even if there are some hints of "pre-existence" of the Hebrew language, it is not the only possible interpretation of Saadia's words. I do not see in his words any direct influence of Arabic "revelationist" theories on the origin of the language, but rather a continuation of the rabbinic ideas about the creation of the angels and the Torah before the creation of the world and the man. And we may assume that Dunaš, his disciple, had a similar opinion on the topic.

2. THE "WORK ON THE HOLY LANGUAGE"

As a way to encourage the formation of an auto-sufficient model of Jewish culture, Ḥasday ben Šapruṭ suggested to his secretary Mĕnaḥem to prepare "a work on the sacred language", and this one accepted the idea with enthusiasm. He proposed himself to achieve the description and explanation of the whole of the language of the Bible, and for that he had to organize the complete biblical corpus, reducing the biblical language to its foundations. He says in the introduction to the *Maḥberet*:

> I have investigated, according to the small capacity of my intelligence, in order to clarify the language of the Jews in agreement with the essential content of its foundations and the essence of its roots. I will apply the plumb line of the reason and

30 *Egron* p. 156, line 1f. It is a reference to Job 20,4: "from time immemorial, since man was placed on the earth".

31 This is the translation of the passage: "This is the book *Egron*, written for the holy tongue, which God has chosen from old, in which His holy angels sing His praises, and in which the dwellers of heaven venerate Him. 'One language and the same words' (Gen. 11,1) prevailed upon the earth from the day God created man upon the face of the earth and endowed him with His wisdom." (*Egron*, p. 156.)

> the line of measuring of the language of instruction to explain the senses of their species according to regular laws, to expose the classes of meanings in their divisions. I will show the sense of the word according to its different forms, presenting the letters that are part of the root and those that have function of servants in the middle of the word and in its two ends, until we fully embrace the language of the Jews and its many characteristics. (1*)

It is a concrete and defined program of the philological activity that Mĕnaḥem will carry out, that has been defined by Elwolde (1995: 464) as "a pure structuralist semantics, in which meanings are conveyed merely through the contrastive distribution of texts". He employs in this paragraph some images taken from the world of the construction of a building: in reference to 2 Reg. 21,13, it is necessary to apply to the Hebrew language the *mišqolet* (i.e. the plumb line, or in words of Rasi, "the line upon which the builders of a wall tie a lead to make the wall exact"), and the *qaw* or "measuring line" of the reason. Here the language is seen as an edifice, a coherent and consistent structure that has to be examined in a technical way, as an architect would do. The search of the "foundations," *yĕsodato*, of the language is another image taken from the same semantic field, that contributes to underline the structural aspect of the language, while the second term, its "roots", *šorašaw*, is obviously taken from another semantic context, close to agriculture. Both terms had been previously used by Hebrew linguists and did not represent a true innovation, even if they were employed by Mĕnaḥem in a very specific way that we shall analyse soon. The central interest in the question of "the letters that are part of the root and those that have function of servants" deserves also particular attention from our side, as one of the main principles of Mĕnaḥem's dictionary: *lĕ-hitbonen mah me-hem la-yĕsod u-mah me-hem la-mĕlaḵah*.

The idea of "regularity" is an important one too. Mĕnaḥem, the same as numerous Muslim philologists, uses many new technical words taken from the area of the Law for describing the function of a grammarian in respect to the language. According to his view, the forms and meanings of the words that he tries to define and to distinguish in his Dictionary are not arbitrary, but follow a regular pattern: *kĕ-ḥuqqot mišpaṭ*, and to reveal these laws is the function of the linguist. A few pages later, in the same Introduction, Mĕnaḥem speaks of his quest of the "secret of the letters and reason of the words" (*sod ha-'otiyyot wĕ-śeḵel ha-millim*, 6*), in order "to rise every letter upon its true law (*ḥuqqat 'ămittah*) and its right structure (*ṣedeq matkunto*)". The language has a regular, rational structure with some secret or mysterious aspects, and the grammarian has to discover them. In modern terms, he is defending a "normative" grammar.[32]

32 The passage includes other interesting technical terms that we cannot discuss in this context. See my study of Mĕnaḥem's terminology in Sáenz-Badillos 1976.

He tried to be consequent in the development of his plan, grouping most of the biblical forms according to their "foundations" and different meanings.

In the introduction to the *Tĕšuḇot 'al Mĕnaḥem*[33] Dunaš explains the reasons that have moved him to refute the book of Mĕnaḥem, and at the same time exposes some central principles of his vision of the language. The long enumeration of features of fundamental expertise which are required, according to Dunaš, for writing a book on Hebrew grammar, is preceded by following words:

> It is not possible to write a book on the interpretation of the language and its laws, rules and precepts unless you are able to stick together following foundations and fields ... (13*)

The normative vision of the language is still clearer in Dunaš' words: *ha-ḥuqqim wĕ-ha-mišpaṭim wĕ-ha-torot*, the "laws, rules and precepts" of the language. In another passage, Dunaš alludes to the "law of wisdom and norm of the instruction" (*min mišpaṭ ha-ḥokmah u-mi-din ha-musar*, 15*). We find also a significant coincidence in the concept of the "correctness of the language" (*ṣaḥut ha-lašon*), mentioned by both grammarians,[34] that represents in its last consequences a new aspect of the normative vision of the language.

Another coincidence is the use of images taken from the area of the building; Dunaš uses several times the image of the walls which in his opinion can be destroyed or broken due to the mistakes of his opponent (17*, 49*, etc.). But this is only one of the numerous motives and images employed by Dunaš, particularly at the end of his answers.

From another point of view, the mention of "the Aramaic and the Arabic" among the required knowledge for the linguist, and the constant use of both languages in order to explain difficult Hebrew words, is a proof of the different view of Dunaš and Mĕnaḥem on the nature of the language. In difference to Mĕnaḥem, for Dunaš the "holiness" of Hebrew does not suffer when we compare this tongue with other close languages.

Another notable coincidence with Mĕnaḥem, included among the first and most important knowledge, is the distinction between the *mĕšarĕtim*, "servile consonants", and *mĕlaḵim*, "kings" (13*). Both terms are understood in a similar way by Mĕnaḥem and Dunaš, even if the confusion between these two categories is one of the alleged mistakes that Dunaš reproaches many times to his opponent: "you have made servants from the kings" (*u-min ha-mĕlaḵim mĕšarĕtim ʿaśitah*,

33 Well studied by Allony 1962.

34 As we have already commented, Mĕnaḥem mentions it (*lĕ-dabber ṣaḥot*) from the very beginning of his Dictionary (1*), while the expression is used also by Dunaš in passages like: *ha-lašon ha-ṣaḥah 'al ha-mišqal ha-zeh*, 'the correct language is built according to this pattern' (84*).

17*). What is the exact meaning of these terms for both of them? The two concepts are related to one of the main tasks that the 10th-century linguists take on themselves: the search of the *yĕsod*, the "base" of the Hebrew language.

For Mĕnaḥem the base of the language[35] is constituted by a certain number of firm consonants (*mĕlaḵim*) that subsist by themselves or, when they are less than three, with the help of other auxiliary consonants, the "servants" (*mĕšarĕtim*).[36] Accepting the existence in Hebrew of basic units, i.e. from one to five consonants (like other philologists of the time, such as the Karaite al-Fāsī), he has serious problems in explaining the so-called "weak" verbs, grouping together (with a synchronic criterion) forms that have completely different morphological and lexical origins.[37] However, the *Maḥberet* has an internal logic. Mĕnaḥem did not seek with a diachronic perspective what we call today the "verbal root", i.e. the form that historically underlies all possible variations that result from the inflection. He wrote a dictionary of "bases", not of "roots", a substantial difference in relation to other medieval lexica, like those of Ibn Janāḥ or David Qimḥi, that are dictionaries of "roots".

As a lexicographer, Mĕnaḥem was concerned to group together all the biblical forms sharing common firm consonants (*mĕlaḵim*), classifying them according to the difference of meaning. An important statement of Mĕnaḥem on the basic structure of the word in Hebrew can have been misinterpreted or even overseen:

> You have to know that every word with three consonants in its root stands by its own might and does not need the service of any other consonant, since it has enough strength and fullness. But words with two consonants or with only one, need assistance due to the shortness of their structure, since a short word can only stand up with the help of the servants added at the beginning or the end of the word. (2*)

That means that Mĕnaḥem, although still far away from the "triliterism" sustained by Ḥayyūj, shares with him the view that the standard pattern of Hebrew words includes at least three consonants which may be all of them "kings" (*mĕlaḵim*) or "kings" completed with "servants" (*mĕżarĕtim*).

No substantial change in the concept of "base" was introduced by Dunaš ben Labraṭ in his *Tĕšuḇot ʿal Mĕnaḥem* where he discusses his opponent's applications of the principles more than the principles themselves. In spite of his criticism, Dunaš did not overcome Mĕnaḥem's positions in a clear way. Only the *Tĕšuḇot ʿal Sĕʿadyah* marked a notable progress in the recognition of the triliteral

35 He gives to this structural kernel the name of *yĕsod*, 'base', or synonyms like *sores*, 'root', or *ʿiqar*, 'essence'. See, for example, *Maḥberet*, 73*, ll. 20ff.

36 *Maḥberet*, 2*. See Goldenberg 1979–80.

37 In doing so, Mĕnaḥem is far apart from the philologists of Bosra, and also from Saadia. See Khan 1999: 186ff.; Eldar 1989: 30.

root, but the problems concerning the authorship of this work and the difficulty in dating it before or after Ḥayyūj's work should make us very cautious.

Mĕnaḥem had made a notable effort to apply a rational scheme to the language, recognizing some particularly complex forms of the biblical text and explaining concrete aspects of the syntax of the Scripture. The precisions that Dunaš felt obliged to formulate were not always justified, but occasionally contributed with new light to a better understanding of the texts, especially when he sought for clearness in the comparison with Arabic or Aramaic, or in the rabbinical writings. The linguistic debate that take place in Cordova in the second half of the 10th century was not friendly, and the tone was not always a pleasant one, but it is necessary to recognize that it contributed to the development of the knowledge of Hebrew, to tinge questions that were not clearly defined or that were doubtful. Surprisingly, in some obscure biblical passages that are object of debate among the exegetes of our days, we still hear opposing interpretations in coincidence with those that Mĕnaḥem and Dunaš defended ten centuries ago.

The opinion that later grammarians formulated about these first steps of linguistics in al-Andalus was not very positive. It is true, the concept of "base" (*yĕsod*) on which Mĕnaḥem founded his analysis of Hebrew lexicon, as something immobile and permanent, would be replaced soon by the most dynamic of "root", introduced by Ḥayyūj, an expert in the Arabic grammar of Bosra, and thanks to it he could attain a qualitative jump forward. But it should not fade the merits of these true pioneers of Hebrew linguistics in al-Andalus.

As we have seen, in spite of the bitter debate that took place at the 10th century in Cordova, both grammarians shared many of the basic principles of the linguistic science of the epoch. Their differences were serious in some aspects, but in most cases the distance was found specifically in the application of the principles and in the praxis of the linguistic analysis, while they were marching together trying to establish the foundations of the biblical language.[38]

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ALLEN, W. S. 1948. Ancient ideas on the origin and development of language. *Transactions of the Philological Society of London*: 35–60. London: Blackwell.

ALLONY, N. 1962. Haqdamat Dunas li-tsuḇotaw ḷ-'Maḥberet' Mĕnaḥem. *Bet Miqra'* 22: 45–63.

ARNALDEZ, R. 1956. *Grammaire et théologie chez Ibn Ḥazm de Cordoue*. Paris: J. Vrin.

38 This paper has been prepared as a part of the Research Project "Judaísmo Medieval Español: Cuestiones de Lengua, Literatura e Historia" sponsored by the DGICYT of the Spanish Ministry of Education and Culture (PB96-0654-C02-01).

ASÍN PALACIOS, Miguel 1936–39. El origen del lenguaje y problemas conexos, en Algazel, Ibn Sida e Ibn Ḥazm. *Al-Andalus* 4: 253–281.

DOTAN, A. 1990. De la Massora à la grammaire. Les débuts de la pensée grammaticale dans l'Hébreu. *Journal Asiatique* 278: 13–30.

------ 1997 (ed.). *The Dawn of Hebrew Linguistics. The Book of Elegance of the Language of the Hebrews by Saadia Gaon*, I-II. Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies.

Egron. Ed. N. Allony. Jerusalem: The Academy of the Hebrew Language, 1969.

ELDAR, I. 1989. 'Askolat ha-diqduq ha-'andalusit: tĕqufat ha-rešit. *Pĕ'amim* 38.

ELWOLDE, J. 1995. The *Maḥberet* of Menaḥem. Proposals for a lexicographic theory, with sample translation and notes. In: J. Davies, G. Harvey & W. G. E. Watson (eds.), *Words Remembered, Texts Renewed. Essays in Honour of John F. A. Sawyer*: 462–479. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

GOLDENBERG, G. 1979–80. 'Al ha-soḳen he-ḥalaq wĕ-ha-šoreš ha-'iḇri. *Lĕšonenu* 44: 281–292.

The Guide of the Perplexed. Transl. by Shlomo Pines. 2nd impr. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969.

IDEL, Moshe 1989. *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

KHAN, G. 1999. The Karaite tradition of Hebrew grammatical thought. In: W. Horbury (ed.), *Hebrew Study from Ezra to Ben-Yehuda*: 186–203. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark.

Kuzari = Yĕhudah ha-Levi 1969. *Kuzari*. Transl. by Hartwig Hirschfeld. Brooklyn: P. Shalom.

LOUCEL, H. 1963. L'origine du langage d'après les grammairiens arabes. *Arabica* 10: 188–208, 253–281.

------ 1964. L'origine du langage d'après les grammairiens arabes. *Arabica* 11: 57–72, 157–187.

Maḥberet = Mĕnaḥem ben Saruq, *Maḥberet*. Ed. crítica e introducción de Angel Sáenz-Badillos. Granada: Univ. de Granada, 1986.

RIJLAARSDAM, J. C. 1978. *Plato über die Sprache. Ein Kommentar zum Kratylus*. Utrecht: Bohn, Scheltema & Holkema.

SÁENZ-BADILLOS, A. 1976. En torno al Mahberet de Menahem ben Saruq. *Miscelánea de Estudios Árabes y Hebraicos* 25(2): 11–50.

------ 1997. Philologians and poets in search of the Hebrew language. In: R. Brann (ed.), *Languages of Power in Islamic Spain*: 49–75. Bethesda, MD: CDL Press.

SÁENZ-BADILLOS, A. & J. TARGARONA 1988. *Gramáticos hebreos de al-Andalus (Siglos X–XII). Filología y Biblia*. Córdoba: El Almendro.

Tĕšuḇot = *Tĕšuḇot de Dunaš ben Labrat*. Edición crítica y traducción española de Angel Sáenz-Badillos. Granada: Univ. de Granada, 1980.

TWERSKY, Isadore 1980. *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

WEISS, B. G. 1974. Medieval Muslim discussions of the origin of language. *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 124: 33–41.

VERSTEEGH, C. H. M. 1977. *Greek Elements in Arabic Linguistic Thinking*. Leiden: Brill.

------ 1980. The origin of the term "QIYAS" in Arabic grammar. *ZAL* 4: 7–30.

------ 1990. Grammar and exegesis. The origins of Kufan grammar and the *Tafsir Muqātil*. *Der Islam* 67: 206–242.

------ 1993. *Arabic Grammar and Qur'ānic Exegesis in Early Islam*. Leiden: Brill.

ZWIEP, I. 1997. *Mother of Reason and Revelation. A Short History of Mediaeval Jewish Linguistic Thought*. Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben.