

Review on the Philological Impact of Biblical Hebrew on the English Language

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Abstract

This study focuses on the extensive but unacknowledged influence of biblical Hebrew on Western languages, especially English. My contention that biblical Hebrew has contributed towards molding our language, enhancing it with added depth and merit was the motivating force to pursue this work and hopefully will constitute a creative contribution to diachronic linguistics. As a student of Hebrew and the Bible I sought to detect the more precise and earlier source for words, expressions, and phrases that, rooted in the Bible, encompass inspiring historical, ideological, and philosophical concepts. Attention is also given to historical factors that have accounted for the influence of Hebrew on the Greek language, on the Latin language of Roman rule and on the languages of lands of the Roman Empire before and after the dispersion of 70. My findings are mostly arranged in categories that span our speech, ranging from the mundane to the sublime, from which these excerpts are cited. The concluding section of the article browses selected interrelated vocabulary of the Western languages, and their correspondent biblical precedents. Several examples are chosen for this mini review.

Keywords: Mobile • Levitate • Ruby • Pizzazz • Stymie • Amazon

Introduction

The aim of this study is to restore credit to the Hebrew language for its philological contribution to Western languages, especially English. While the Hebrew Bible is generally recognized for its cultural and moral contribution to society, biblical Hebrew is not accorded commensurate credit. There are numerous words and expressions that appear to have connections to the Hebrew Language. Some can be called cognates. However, Greek and Latin are generally credited, although Hebrew preceded and contributed to the evolution of these languages [1]. True, the Land of Israel was only a province of the Greek Empire from 332-142 BCE; nevertheless there is a palpable influence of Hebrew on Greek, which in turn impacted our English language. Moreover, the fact that the Greek language had infiltrated and was spoken in the Land of Israel during the Second Temple Period as a result of Greek Rule reflects the natural reciprocity that Hebrew words merged into the Greek language, as did Greek words into Hebrew. Surprisingly, the Sages, although they were opposed to any infiltration of Hellenistic ideology, were not tolerant of the Greek language because of its esthetic quality; nor did they consider the language assimilatory [2]. Indeed, Rabbi Judah the Prince, the first century Tanna and redactor of the Mishnah, put spoken Greek on a par with Hebrew, and Greek words were incorporated in his Mishnah [3]. It is also justifiable to assume

that Hebrew had influenced the Latin language of Roman Rule that ensued from 53 BCE until the destruction of 70 AD as well as the languages of the countries of the Roman Empire to which the Judeans were exiled, as is evidenced by this study.

Literature Review

Based on Obadiah (1:20), the Hebrew language may very well have impacted Western countries centuries before, from the time of the exile of the Ten Tribes in 722 BCE and the exile of Judah in 586 BCE. According to Rashi and Abarbanel on this verse, the exiles were in France, Germany, and Spain from that time. The Abarbanel (1437-1508; Spanish statesman, philosopher and leading biblical exegete) [4] comments that England is not mentioned but was actually included because it was originally part of France [Zarefat]: The implication is that these lands were inhabited by the early exiles of 722 BCE and 586 BCE and ipso facto were exposed to the Hebrew language from that early era [5-7]. That being said, I have detected what I believe is a considerable influence of biblical Hebrew on our English language. Here are several samples of my study.

Mobile

The adjective for the ability to move was appropriately adopted by the Mobil Oil Corporation to signify travel and transportation. The

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identical word is found in Hebrew: *Movil* [transporting, or moving, hauling, carrying] conjugated from the root *y.b.l* in the *hif'il* [causative] verb action. Ramban associates this verb with the naming of the Jubilee year, *yoveil*, described in Leviticus (25:8-12) in the sense of "sending forth": that *yoveil* indicates bringing everyone back to his possession and family, since property reverts to its original owner and slaves are freed. *Yoveil* he means that it is a year (he/she referring to year, which is a feminine noun) in which every man is transported back to his family and home. Ramban supports his view with biblical sources wherein this verb refers to conveying or bringing, including Isaiah (18:7) [Yuval] there shall be brought a present unto the Eternal; Isaiah (30:25), streams and [yoveil mayim] channels in which water is conveyed [8, 9].

Pain, pan, pan de molde

The words for bread in French, Spanish, and Italian are much the same: *pain* in French, *pan* and *pan de molde* in Spanish, *pan* and *panini* (pl.) in Italian. It is conceivable that these hark back to the *Lehem Ha-Panim* [the Showbread, or Bread of Display/Bread of Presence], the twelve loaves of bread changed every Sabbath and eaten by the priests at the time of the desert Tabernacle and later in the Temple. *Lehem* is bread and *panim* means face. According to Rashi on Exodus (25:30), it was called bread with faces because the bread had faces (surfaces) in both directions towards the sides of the Tabernacle and the Temple; while according to Nahmanides and Abraham ibn Ezra, because it was *lefani tamid* [it is before me always] [10-12]. The peculiar addition of the phrase *de molde* in the Spanish *pan de molde* reinforces the likely derivation from *lehem Ha-Panim*, since special molds [kearot] were used to fit the shape of the bread, both an iron mold and a golden mold. The *Lehem Ha-Panim* was originally baked in the iron mold, and then placed on the golden one until the next day, the Sabbath, when it was arranged on the table, and the mold was removed.

Amazon/amitz

The Oxford English Dictionary claims that *amazon* derives from an 'unknown foreign word'. That unknown entity may be identified with the Hebrew root *a.m.tz*-to be strong or bold [le'emotz], and in the intensive *pi'el* verb action, to encourage or adopt [le'ametz]. The popular biblical phrase of encouragement (Deut. 31:7), *hazak ve-ematz* [Be strong and of good courage] were Moses' words of support to Joshua who would lead the newborn nation into the Promised Land; Moses' farewell to Israel (Deut. 31:6) on the day of his demise urges the Israelites be strong and of good courage [hizku v'imtzu], fear not.... Isaiah uses this term (Isa.40:26) to describe the power of the Holy one over the celestial spheres: Lift up your eye on high and behold who has created these things. That brings out their host by number, because of the greatness of His might, [me-rov onim v'amitz koah]. His comforting prophecy (Isa. 41:10) stresses that God will strengthen his people: for I am your God, I will strengthen you [imatztikha], I will help you, I will uphold you.... And the Woman of Valor (Prov. 31:16), is endowed with strength of loins and arms: She girds her loins with strength and she makes her arms strong [vateametz zroroteha] [13,14].

Ruby and levitate

Aside from the relevance of the actual names of the twelve tribes, words that derive from these names have not been ascribed to their likely Hebrew source. The association of ruby with Reuben relates to the fact that each tribe had a representative stone engraved on the breastplate of the High Priest (Ex. 28). Reuben's was the *odem*, which is a red stone, and in this case the stone's name is reflective of the name of tribe. The Spanish biblical commentator, Rabbeinu Bahya (1255-1340) states: "Odem is Reuben's stone, which is called rubin. Its color is red." [15]. The concept of rising or causing to hover in the air, as in *levitate*, *lever*, or the French *lever* (to rise) may be associated with the Levites, the descendants of Levi who were chosen to serve in the desert Sanctuary and later, in the Temple. Numbers 8 describes the dedication ceremony of the Levites to God and to the service of the Sanctuary that specifically included the lifting and the waving of the Levites three times before God (Nu. 8:11,13,15).

Pizzazz

The Oxford English Dictionary tells us is said to have been invented by Diana Vreeland, fashion editor of Harper's Bazaar in the 1930's. Yet, *le-fazez* [to dance], from the root *p.z.z.*, describes King David dancing with the masses in celebration of the repossession of the Holy Ark from the Philistines. Two Samuel (6:16) relates: Saul's daughter looked through a window and saw King David dancing [mefazez] and leaping before the Lord....The same root also connotes being covered in gold [paz], as Joseph is described in Genesis (49:2), *Vyafozu zroei yadav*[and his arms were covered in gold] [16-18]. Indeed, the fashion editor's conception of *pizzazz*, knowingly or unknowingly, agreed with the connotation of glitter and dance of the Hebrew verb.

As per curses, one may infer that the terms to 'put the kibosh on,' *damnify*, and the word *curse* evolved from the Bible: The unknown origin for the phrase 'put the kibosh on' may be identified with the Hebrew verb root *k.b.h.* [to curse] in regard to the episode concerning Bilaam (Nu. 23:8,11) hired by Balak King of Moab to curse the Israelites: *V'kaboso lee mesham* [And curse them for me from there] [19]. The word, *curse*, may be the actual Hebrew word *kares* [to cut off or to die prematurely by divine punishment], as in Leviticus (17:4,9). The Hebrew *dam* [blood] corresponds to the adverb *damning*, which suggests guilt, including the spilling of blood. The plural form, *dammim*, refers to loss of blood and money, often owed for compensation, and corresponds with the English; *damnify*, to cause loss or damage. King David (Ps. 51:16) implores God: *Hatzileinee me-dammim* [deliver me from blood guiltiness]. Cities of refuge were established (Deut.19:10) to avoid spilling of *dam* [blood], so that *dammim* [the guilt of more murder] not be incurred. Conversely, *indemnify* is to free from loss or damage, i.e., to free from *dammim*.

The origin of *hail* is claimed to be Middle English: 'from the obsolete adjective *hail* 'healthy' (occurring in greetings and toasts), from Old Norse *heill*, related to *hale* and *whole*.' Perhaps a more accurate source is the Hebrew *hayyil* [strength or valor, also a soldier]. The Bible abounds in its references to *anshei hayyil* [men of strength] as in Genesis (47:6), *gibborei hayyil* [heroes of strength], or as in (I Sam.14:52) *hayyil* in the sense of successes and valor (Deut. 8:18) and praise, epitomized by the *eshet hayyil*, [the woman of valor]

of Proverbs 31. Hail as a greeting is also found in the Bible (Ps. 84:8), specifically the blessing to go mehayil el hayyil [from strength to strength]. Here also, the salutations and acclamations in the lyrics of the United States Presidential Anthem (Hail to the Chief) agree with the biblical concepts of hayyil [20-23].

Discussion and Conclusion

In the year 70 Rome destroyed the second temple and exiled the Judeans to all lands of the Roman Empire, including Italy, France, Germany, and Spain. The impact of Hebrew on the languages of these countries would be a natural consequence. The article continues with

Citations of biblical words that penetrated the Western languages- words that preceded Greek, Latin, French, German, Italian, or Middle English. These are but several examples:

Stymie, similar in French and Italian, recalls the Hebrew satum [closed] and its verb s.t.m in Sfarid pronunciation or s.s.m in Ashkenaz pronunciation. The origin of "open sesame," the magical phrase in "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" used to open a cave with a hidden treasure has been debated by scholars, but the obvious explanation eluded them. Psalms (51:8) may have directly inspired the author: u-ba-sasum hakhmah todienee [teach me wisdom in the inmost heart].

Masque, maschera, mascara, mask were preceded by the Hebrew mesekh [curtain, screen, or covering], found repeatedly in Exodus referring to the covering of the ark and the curtains at the entrance of the Tabernacle and the court gate (Ex. 35:12; 39:34,40,21; Num. 4:5). See also Ezekiel (28:13), every precious stone was your covering [mesukhatekh].

The pervasiveness of the words ami, amiable, amigo, amico, amicable correlates with is [nation] and amie, the contraction of am shelie [the nation of mine], connoting oneness and friendship. Amongst the numerous biblical references is in the description of the world previous to the Tower of Babel (Gen.11:6), Behold the people [am] is one, and they all have one language; or Exodus (3:10), and take my nation [amie] out of Egypt.

Miroire in French, or our English mirror, parallels the Hebrew mar'eh [a vision or a mirror] from the Hebrew verb of seeing [r.a.h.]: Daniel was astonished at the [mar'eh] vision that he saw (Dan.8:27); the communication of Moses with God (Nu.12:18) was apparent and not in riddles [u'mareh v'lo behidot]; the visions [mar'ot] of Ezekiel (Ez.43:3) were similar to those he saw on the River Kevar. And our English mystery, the French mystère, the Italian mistero and the Spanish misterio were all preceded by the biblical Hebrew mister [secret], based on the verb root s.t.r. [to hide]. See, for example, Psalms (10:9) wherein King David likens the wicked who prey on the poor to a lion who lies in wait secretly [ba-mistar], or the prophecy of Isaiah (45:3) concerning Cyrus to whom God will give treasures of darknes [matmunei mistarim].

Hopefully recognition will be given to the true origin of the many words that have enriched our language, which is the actual meaning

of etymology: allegedly from the Greek etimos, meaning true, but really from the Hebrew emet, which is truth.

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