# FROM GESENIUS TO BAUER-LEANDER HEBREW GRAMMAR AND THE CHALLENGE OF COMPARATIVE LINGUISTICS

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RESUMO: *Este artigo analisa a influência da gramática comparativa de línguas semíticas sobre o estudo do hebraico no século XIX. Pela comparação entre as obras de Gesenius (1817) e Bauer & Leander (1918), o autor pontua alguns aspectos dessa influência no século XIX, e as mudanças de perspectiva ocorridas sob a influência da Lingüística do século XX.*

ABSTRACT: *This article analyses the influence of comparative grammars of Semitic languages on the study of Hebrew in the 19$^{th}$ century. By comparing the works of Gesenius (1817) e Bauer & Leander (1918), the author points out some aspects of this influence in the 19$^{th}$ century, as well as the changes of perspective occurred under the influence of 20$^{th}$ century Linguistics.*

## Introduction

At the beginning of the 19$^{th}$ century, the study of Hebrew grammar was profoundly influenced by the comparative grammar of Semitic languages. The impact of Semitic philology on *Wissenschaft des Judentums* in general has already been examined from the perspective of the Sociology of Science by Perrine Simon-Nahum (1991) and Jean Baumgarten (1991). However, since neither of these authors dealt with the methodological implications of the encounter between Hebrew grammar and the comparative linguistics of Semitic languages, I should like to explore some of the more concrete aspects that pertain specifically to grammatical description.

The foundation of the comparative linguistics of the Japhetic languages led to a corresponding search for similarities between Hebrew and its cognate languages, designated as "Semitic" by Ludwig Schlözer as early as 1781, even before the re-discovery of Sanskrit. The transformation of

Hebrew grammar as a result of the comparative approach was contemporaneous with the decipherment of Akkadian and several Canaanite languages, all of which challenged the preeminence of Hebrew within the Semitic family. These momentous developments in the field of Hebrew grammar occurred between 1817, the year Heinrich Friedrich Wilhelm Gesenius' *Lehrgebäude der hebräischen Sprache* appeared, and 1918, when Hans Bauer and Pontus Leander published their *Historische Grammatik der hebräischen Sprache des alten Testaments*.

## 1. Comparatism as an auxiliary of hebrew grammar

Due to the particular background of the comparatists of Semitic languages, the Hebrew language remained for a long time the point of reference of the comparative endeavor. Moreover, it seems that the comparisons between Hebrew and cognate language were only intended to provide a better understanding of the structure of the Sacred Tongue. Thus, the comparative linguistics of the Semitic languages was no more than an auxiliary discipline of Hebrew grammar, as in the days of Yehuda Ibn Kuraish and Yonah ibn Janah. The term by which Gesenius refers to the cognate language of Hebrew is *dialekt* (Gesenius 1817: i), as though all other Semitic languages were merely secondary specifications of Hebrew. This belief in the preeminence of Hebrew, characteristic of mediaeval Jewish grammarians and of the Christian grammarians of the Renaissance (Kessler-Mesguich 2001: 23-24; 29-30), is still perceptible in the work of a 19th century grammarian like Gesenius.

Despite the persistence of this belief in the centrality of Hebrew, Gesenius' grammar displays a secularized perception of the Hebrew language, as shown by his resorting to diachrony. Idioms were no longer conceived of as specificities of the Sacred Tongue but rather as phenomena to be compared with similar phenomena in cognate languages.

The question of apocopated futures (Gesenius 1817: 287-289) provides a good example of the rationalization of grammatical analysis as a result of the integration of diachronic and comparative dimensions. Once he had enumerated the four cases in which a future may be apocopated, Gesenius tried to discern criteria that could determine apocope. The solution to the problem lay in a comparison with the use of the subjunctive in Arabic.

In the same grammar, Gesenius tried to explain the origins of the conversive *waw*, an idiomatic construction of Biblical Hebrew, through a comparison with Arabic syntax (Gesenius 1817: 292-296). He assumed that the conversive *waw*, which bestows a value of future on the perfective

form and a value of past on the imperfective one, was a remnant of the verbal form *hawah*, the Aramaic equivalent of Hebrew *hayah* (3d person singular of the perfective form of the verb "to be"). Gesenius tried to find a parallel to his farfetched reconstruction in the Arabic periphrasis *kâna yaqtul* "he was killing", where the auxiliary *kâna* is supposed to confer a durative value on the imperfect *yaqtul* "he kills". It is worth noting that Gesenius conducted this comparison in spite of the lexical difference between the verb *hawah* / *hayah* on the one hand and the verb *kâna* on the other. Unlike the Jewish grammarians of the Middle Ages who compared Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic on the basis of morphological and lexical similarities alone, Gesenius extended the comparison between the languages to the study of syntactic structures.

Gesenius' *Lehrgebäude der hebräischen Sprache* was published one year after Franz Bopp's pioneering work *Über die Konjugationsystem der Sanskritsprache* (1816). This work seems to have integrated the purpose of systematic comparison that characterizes Bopp's methodology. However, Gesenius did not go as far as Bopp. Where Bopp strove to reconstruct the morphological system of a proto-language, Gesenius resorted to a comparison between Hebrew and Arabic phonemes, morphemes or syntactical constructions with the sole intention of giving an account of the anomalies of the Hebrew language.

Gesenius' reticence concerning reconstruction seems to have been motivated by a common prejudice of his time with regard to the essential difference between the Indo-European and the Semitic languages. In the introduction to the 1st edition of Bopp's aforementioned treatise, the father of comparatism asserts that the kinship between the various Indo-European languages sometimes hides "in the most arcane conducts of the language organism" (*in die geheimsten Gänge des Sprachorganismus*), whereas the Semitic languages are of a "harder nature" (*von einer derberen Natur*) and of "a far scarcer tendency" (Bopp 1833: I iv-v). Following this logic, Bopp states that, "those languages had little to lose and ought to transmit to the future times whatever had been bestowed on them" (*sie hatten wenig zu verlieren und mussten das, was ihnen vom Anbeginn mitgebeben war, allen zukünftigen Zeiten überliefern*) (ibid.). One may discern here a metaphor according to which the Indo-European languages may be likened to organic soil hiding its richness, whereas the Semitic languages resemble poor, "hard" (*derb*) soil. In order to understand what is at stake in this metaphor, it is worth bearing in mind that a contemporary of Bopp, August Wilhelm von Schlegel, compares the inflected languages, the most perfect type of which would be the Indo-European idioms, to "an abundant and prolific vegetation" (Schlegel 1818: 14-15). Later on, Ernest Renan also resorted

to this comparison between the organic richness of the Indo-European language and the aridity of the Semitic ones when he likened the material of Semitic philology to a metallic body (Renan 1863: I xi-xiii).

The bias expressed in Bopp's metaphor had important consequences at the methodological level as well, for Gesenius and Bopp's contemporaries interpreted the tight kinship between Hebrew and Arabic as an indication of immobilism in the diachronic development of these languages on the basis of a common stock.

Both Bopp and Gesenius seem to have conceived the process of diachronic evolution as a diversification from the simple to the complex. This methodological bias led Gesenius to reduce the five vowels of Joseph and David Qimhi's classification to a three-range system, in which the three Hebrew *matres lectionis* (*aleph, waw, yod*) correspond to the three vowels [a], [w], [i] of Classical Arabic (Gesenius 1817: 34-37). As for Bopp, he accounts for the differences between the vocalism of Greek and Latin on the one hand and that of Indo-Iranian on the other, considering that Latin and Greek [e] and [o] are a later differentiation of a primordial [a] instead of assuming that Indo-Iranian [a] may result from the merging of original [a], [e] and [o] (Bopp 1833: 9-13). Besides the belief in the fundamental precedence of Sanskrit, what induced Bopp to suppose that [e] and [o] derived from [a] and not the other way round was the basic postulate according to which the simple was necessarily older than the complex.

The same principle applied to the study of Semitic consonants proved equally wrong. Gesenius' task was to account for the discrepancy between the 28 Arabic consonants and the 22 Hebrew consonants. Nowadays, the explanation that would spontaneously come in mind to a comparatist would be that the 22 consonants of Hebrew result from processes of syncretism from Proto-Semitic to Hebrew. However, this perspectivism was foreign to Gesenius who was still attached to the idea that Hebrew was the primordial Semitic language. This led him to assume that "in the Hebrew *heth*, there were two graduations of the same guttural sound that the Arabs split into two signs" (*in dem hebräischen* heth *liegen zwey Abstufungen des Kehllautes, welche die Araber in zwey Zeichen getrennt haben*) (Gesenius 1817: 16). The German Hebraist seems to have confused the phonetic level with the graphematic one, for he refers to "signs" (*Zeichen*) to indicate that the Arabs conferred a fixed status on facultative variations at the level of Hebrew. Another aspect of this confusion is the credit he is giving to the Arabic graphemes. Since the pairs of graphemes *dâl* and *dhâl*, *tâ'* and *thâ'*, *'ain* and *ghain* are differentiated only by the addition of a diacritical sign, Gesenius assumed that the phonetic differences between these consonants were nothing

but secondary variations (Gesenius 1817: 14-15). The fact that these consonants tend to merge in most of the spoken dialects gave him further legitimization for stating that the original consonantal system of the Semitic languages was closer to the simplicity of Hebrew than to the complexity of Arabic.

This error of perspective induced Gesenius to misinterpret the real value of the emphatic sibilant *çadeh* in Biblical Hebrew. Since the corresponding Arabic consonants are *sâd* and *dâd*, the German Hebraist supposed that these Arabic equivalents are later developments of an original value [ts] (Gesenius 1817: 21), which is attested in some traditions of Hebrew (Ashkenazic and Italian).

For Gesenius, the diachronical change was necessarily a process of differentiation. It is as if this grammarian was still influenced by the Biblical myth of the division of tongues (Genesis 11: 6-9). Moreover, he wasn't really able to reconstruct a state of language anterior to Hebrew. To be sure the concept of proto-language was implicitly acknowledged by both Gesenius and Bopp. However, they preferred to compare the historically attested languages, bestowing a special status on the earliest documented: Hebrew among the Semitic languages (Akkadian hadn't yet been rediscovered), Sanskrit among the Indo-European languages. It was not until the 1860's that a method of reconstructing the proto-forms on the basis of the attested data was finally accepted (Kiparsky 1974: 338). This methodological change, first applied in the field of the Indo-European languages, was progressively adopted by the Semitists only when Akkadian and various Canaanite languages began to appear on the epistemological horizon of Semitic studies. It should be noted here that the rediscovery of Akkadian was itself an indirect result of progress in the field of Indo-European linguistics. Indeed, it was on the basis of Old Persian material that the decipherment of the cuneiform script was made possible.

## 2. The era of taxonomy

The above-mentioned methodological improvement and expanding knowledge of ancient Semitic languages led to the restructuring of former taxonomies. Whereas Gesenius' contemporary G.H.A. Ewald (1827: 1-2) was still applying a tripartition North-Center-South, imitated from Rivarol's *Discours sur l'universalité de la langue française* (Rivarol 1966: 119), the rediscovery of Akkadian put an end to the application of the theory of climates to the field of Semitic studies. But Akkadian did not immediately enjoy a preferential status among the Semitic languages. Such a status was reserved for Arabic, either because the data provided by Assyriology had not yet been integrated by comparatists or because

the archaic character of Arabic compensated for the relative newness of its first written attestation. This mitigated attitude towards Akkadian led the comparatist William Wright to sketch a very short description of Akkadian (Wright 1890: 12-14) without really reckoning with it in his taxonomy of the Semitic languages. Wright mostly relied on the achievements of Northwest Semitic epigraphy and of Aramaic studies in order to summarize available data within the framework of the classical triad, Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic.

The postulate according to which Arabic was closer than any other Semitic language to Proto-Semitic induced the comparatists of the last decades of the 20th century to distinguish between two groups of Semitic languages: a Northern one, including Canaanite, Aramaic and Assyro-Babylonian and a Southern one, consisting of Arabic, South-Arabic and Ethiopian. This taxonomy, adopting a line of demarcation between North and South appears in Nöldeke's study *Die semitischen Sprachen: eine Skizze* (Nöldeke 1899: 19), an expanded version of his article published in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* in 1887. Although Nöldeke doesn't exclude the possibility that Assyro-Babylonian was a separate branch of the Semitic languages (ibid.: 47), this concession is not expressed in his taxonomy.

In the margins of the controversy between the Assyriologists and the Arabocentric Semitists, there was a third stand, that of the Hebraists who persisted in their endeavor to bestow a preferential status on Hebrew. In his introduction to the reissuing of Gesenius' *Hebräische Grammatik*, Ernst Kautzsch adopted two classifications to explain the kinship between the Semitic languages (Kautzsch 1896: 1-3). The first classification resumes the above mentioned bipartition between North and South, whereas the second one establishes four sub-groups reflecting a division of the Middle East into four zones: South, North, Center and East. In this second taxonomy, Arabic occupies the southern zone, Aramaic the northern one, Assyro-Babylonian the eastern one and Canaanite the central one. It is possible to recognize here Ewald's tripartition with two changes: firstly, the central group includes the entire Canaanite branch, not merely Hebrew; secondly, there is a fourth group constituted by the Assyro-Babylonian. This, however, does not challenge the central position of the Canaanite group, to which Hebrew belongs. The same taxonomy was taken up again by Gotthelf Bergsträsser in his *Hebräische Grammatik* (Bergsträsser 1918: 3-4).

As for Bauer and Leander's grammar, it was first published in 1918, the very year when Bergsträsser's *Hebräische Grammatik* appeared. Unlike Bergsträsser's taxonomy which contained few innovations, that of Bauer and Leander displays an attempt to reconsider the facts. Bauer

and Leander distinguished between two main ramifications, an eastern one including Assyro-Babylonian and a western one divided into two sub-groups: the northwestern one, comprising Canaanite and Aramaic; and the southwestern one, with Arabic and Ethiopian (Bauer-Leander 1918: 6). This is the classification that was accepted for several decades, until a number of leading comparatists began to question it in the last quarter of the 20th century (Faber 1998: 6-13).

Bauer and Leander were still influenced by the hesitations of their predecessors. They tried to explain why Hebrew, though it shared most of the innovations of the northwestern sub-group (Bauer-Leander 1918: 20-21), nevertheless displays many of the phonetic, morphological, syntactic and lexical isoglosses of the eastern branch of Semitic languages (ibid.: 6-8). In order to justify the coexistence of innovations and archaisms in Hebrew, Bauer and Leander considered this tongue a "mixed language" (*Mischsprache*), the archaic substratum of which should be related to Assyro-Babylonian, whereas the superstratum may belong to the new generation of Semitic tongues including Phoenician, Aramaic, Arabic and Ethiopian (ibid.: 8; 17). Thanks to the concept of mixed language developed by the Romanist Hugo Schuchardt (Baggioni 2000: 256-258), Bauer and Leander managed to reintegrate Assyro-Babylonian in the field of comparison, redeeming it from the marginal status it had been confined to by the Arabocentrists.

## 3. The era of reconstruction

It was Carl Brockelmann who really applied the rigorous equations of Indo-European comparatism to the field of Semitic languages. Unlike his predecessors in the field who had merely ascertained the similarities between the languages without accounting for them, Brockelmann tried to describe the way various Semitic idioms had separated from each other. A good example of his contribution to the improvement of Semitic comparatism is provided by his methodical treatment of dentals and sibilants. Whereas Wright was still relying on an empirical method, searching for parallels of Old Aramaic evolutions (Wright 1890: 57) in Modern Arabic dialects, Brockelmann's approach to the question of the dentals and sibilants was deeply influenced by the systematicity of Indo-European comparison. Having reconstructed no less than 12 dentals and sibilants at the stage of Proto-Semitic, he analyzes their reflection in five Semitic languages: Arabic, which he considered the most archaic and the closest to Proto-Semitic; Ethiopian; Hebrew; Aramaic; Assyro-Babylonian (Brockelmann 1908-13: I 128). Unlike his above-mentioned predecessors, Brockelmann admitted that complexity is anterior to simplicity.

However, it was not Brockelmann's intention to reconstruct the Proto-Semitic language. His resort to this hypothetical language only helped him understand the crystallization of the historically attested idioms. He explicitly criticized the naivete of Indo-European comparatists who regarded Indo-European as a reality rather than a working hypothesis (Brockelmann 1908-13: 34-35). Brockelmann's distrust of the concept of Proto-Language may have been due to his Arabocentrist perspective. Since Arabic is so close to the early stages of the Semitic languages, he believed there was no real need to go back any farther. During the same period, however, there was a trend towards reconstruction, as illustrated by Bauer and Leander's endeavor to promote a Hebrew-centered comparatism. Whereas Brockelmann saw in the binary opposition between perfect and imperfect a reflection of the original structure of the Semitic languages (Brockelmann 1908: I 504), Bauer and Leander tried to deconstruct this postulate, suggesting that the imperfect was the primeval form, which they called aorist in order to suggest that it was aspectual rather than temporal (Bauer-Leander 1918: 270). As for the perfect, they coined it *nominal* (ibid.) for they considered it a combination of the nominal forms *qatal, qatil, qatul* with pronominal suffixes. They assumed that it was a relatively recent formation that was endowed with a perfective or present value, which consequently conferred a historical value on the originally timeless aorist (ibid.: 271-272). Now the identification of the imperfect with the aorist and of the perfect with a nominal form reflected the influence of Indo-European comparative linguistics. Bauer and Leander (ibid.: 270) explicitly recognized their debt to this discipline when they quoted Brugmann's statement about the originally timeless value of the Indo-European verb (Brugmann, 1904: 491-492).

Following Brugmann's example, Bauer and Leander strove to reconstruct the system and structures of the Proto-language, which allowed them to reconsider the data provided by historically attested languages. Thus the confrontation of the long and short forms of Hebrew and Arabic imperfects (which they call "aorists", as mentioned above) induced them to sketch a four-fold system (Bauer-Leander 1918: 272-275). The first form, that is, the allegedly original form of Proto-Semitic, was thought to be *\*yaqtul*, the Hebrew reflection of which is *yiqtol* "he kills". The second and third forms are expanded by means of suffixes which Bauer and Leander considered non-verbal. In the Arabic imperfect *yaqtulu* they recognized the pronoun *hu* of the 3rd person singular masculine (Hebrew *hu'*; Arabic *huwa*). As for the Arabic subjunctive *yaqtula*, they viewed it as a combination of the basic form *yaqtul* with the interjection *a!*. Lastly, the fourth form they counted is the above-

mentioned conversive *waw*. Whereas for Brockelmann the Arabic imperfective *yaqtulu* is a primary form the abbreviation of which is *yaqtul* (Brockelmann 1908: I 554), Bauer and Leander collocated the historically attested forms within a broader picture reconstructed on the basis of the Hebrew, Arabic and Assyro-Babylonian data. Following the example of Brugmann (1904: 2), they relied on the most ancient languages and deconstructed their structures in order to reconstruct the diasystem that helps to understand the crystallization of the historically attested systems.

## 4. Conclusion

In spite of the chronological gap between the publication of Gesenius' *Lehrgebäude der hebräischen Sprache* in 1817 and that of Bauer and Leander's *Historische Grammatik der hebräischen Sprache* in 1918, both works resort to the achievements of comparative linguistics for a better understanding of Hebrew. But Semitic comparatism had registered significant progress in the intervening century. Whereas Gesenius still relied on the heritage of Jewish medieval grammar and on Silvestre de Sacy's *Grammaire arabe*, Bauer and Leander's grammar profited from the application of Indo-Europeanist methodology to the fields of Semitic languages.

One of the great achievements of Bauer and Leander was their ability to look beyond the controversy that opposed Arabocentrists and Assyriocentrists and to refocus the Semitic studies around Hebrew. In this shift of focus, the influence of the Indo-Europeanist model was also at work, for the major Indo-Europeanists of the period combined the task of lateral comparison and vertical reconstruction with a deepening knowledge of what was thought to be the most anciently attested language of the group, namely Vedic Sanskrit. In this mutual emulation between comparatism and philology, one may perceive a reversal of the relation of dependence between comparative linguistics and Hebrew grammar. Whereas in Gesenius' days, comparatism was subordinated to the task of describing Biblical Hebrew, the beginning of the 20th century is marked by the contribution of Hebrew grammar to the comparative linguistics of the Semitic languages.

The impact of Indo-European comparative linguistics on the development of Semitic comparatism and Hebrew grammar is not only a transfer of methods from one field of research to another. The decipherment of the languages in one field was also determinant in the rediscovery of more languages in the other. It was the progress made in the knowledge of Old Persian that made possible the decipherment of Akkadian. On the other hand, the development of cuneiform epigraphy cleared the way for the rediscovery of Hittite and its identification as an

Indo-European language. These processes of mutual stimulation illustrate the tight solidarity between the two fields of research. The invention of the comparative method may be ascribed to the Jewish medieval grammarians. Later on, the crystallization of Indo-European comparatism as a separate field of research opened an era when Semitists relied mostly on the models provided by their Indo-Europeanist colleagues.

However, the 20th century was marked by the reversal of the influence, for many innovations in the field of Indo-European linguistics are ascribable to the latent influence of Semitic comparatism. Ferdinand de Saussure's intuition as to the existence of laryngeal consonants in Proto-Indo-European and as to their reflection as vowels in later stages of the same proto-language is obviously dictated by the parallel of the Semitic languages where some laryngeal or pharyngeal consonants have developed in specific phonetic contexts a vocalic element [a] called "furtive *patah*" in the Hebrew grammatical tradition. The very name of *schwa* is a direct borrowing from Hebrew grammatical terminology. As for Emile Benveniste's reduction of Indo-European roots to a triliteral structure, it seems to reflect the pressure of the triliteral model adopted by Arab and Jewish grammarians in order to describe the consonantal roots of their respective languages. To be sure, the triliteral root according to Indo-Europeanists displays a CVC structure, which makes it quite different from the CCC model of the Semitic languages. Nevertheless, the trigger to Benveniste's reduction of the complex structure of Indo-European roots, with all their expansions and alternations, to a uniform scheme was the parallel of Semitic linguistics. It seems that the constant and mutual exchanges between Indo-European and Semitic comparatisms reflect their complementarity in the process by which Western civilization tries to rediscover its dual origin, both classical and Biblical.

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