Moshe Bar-Asher

Leshonot Rishonim: Studies in the Language of the Bible, the Dead Sea Scrolls and Aramaic. Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2012. Hardcover. Pp. xvii + 474. NIS 128.00/US$ 43.00. ISBN 978-965-493-639-2. (Hebrew)

Moshe Bar-Asher has long been established as the doyen of scholars of mishnaic Hebrew, as well as a central figure in the study of Jewish languages more generally. Both the quantity and the quality of his publications are extraordinary. In addition to publishing at least eight books and editing dozens more, he has written more than a hundred articles, which are scattered in both learned journals and volumes of collected essays; Bar-Asher's pivotal role in the intellectual community of philologists and linguists has meant that he has contributed to numerous Festschriften for scholars around the world. In recent years, five collections of Bar-Asher's work have appeared, four in Hebrew and one in English. The English volume, *Studies in Classical Hebrew* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), contains a selection of Bar-Asher's essays on biblical Hebrew, inscriptional material from various periods, Qumran Hebrew, and mishnaic Hebrew. I translated most of the essays in that volume and served as its editor. In fact, many of the chapters in the volume under review are found in *Studies in Classical Hebrew*, as well.

The four Hebrew collections divide Bar-Asher's work into distinct categories: (a) *Studies in Mishnaic Hebrew* (2 volumes; Jerusalem: Bialik, 2009); (b) *Studies in Modern Hebrew* (Jerusalem: Academy of the Hebrew Language, 2012); (c) *Linguistics, Traditions and Customs of Maghrebi Jews* (Jerusalem: Makhon Ben Zvi, 2010); and (d) the long history of Hebrew and Aramaic represented in the present volume, *Leshonot Rishonim*. The book is divided into four sections: (a) biblical Hebrew, (b) the languages of Qumran, (c) inscriptions (from the Iron Age through the Byzantine period), and (d) Aramaic.

Nearly all of the chapters in the book were previously published, mostly within the past decade and a half, and an opening note to each chapter gives the bibliographic information as well as other details. Two new chapters (Chs. 4 and 7) both deal with biblical themes, the first with two specific BH lexemes and the second with Gesenius' *Thesaurus* of biblical Hebrew.

There are a number of features of Bar-Asher's work that are worth drawing attention to. While some philologists emend away any phenomenon that does not accord with the standard grammatical rules of a language, Bar-Asher has an acute awareness of the many ways in which real texts often violate those rules. He expresses this explicitly a number of times. For example: "The first and primary [way that language works] is that it follows clear grammatical rules, and the construct state of *yayn* is *yēn*, and the construct and suffixed

forms of *mattānōt* are *mattənōt* and *mattənōtēhem*. Alongside this, however, there are times that language goes in a different direction; in the language of speakers there are attractions and analogies between forms within a paradigm or between more distant forms. These processes disturb the grammatical rules. In other words: there is a clash between the regular rules of grammar and the process by which one word is analogized to another, in opposition to these rules" (64–65).

A closely related feature of his work is that he takes the evidence of real texts to be paramount, and scholarly theories and constructs to be secondary. Again, to quote his formulation: "I will say just this: it cannot be that a firmly-established datum that contradicts a scholar's opinion can simply be called 'questionable evidence' " (157 n. 26).

The overarching principle is that a philologist's job is to explain real texts, written by real people who are heirs to dynamic linguistic traditions that may or may not accord with the "classical" grammar of the language. This can be seen in his studies of biblical words, such as טָרָף and עֲבָדֵיהֶם (Ch. 4), and also in his studies of inscriptions in various languages. In studying a remarkable gold amulet from Austria with the verse *shemaʿ yisrael* transcribed in Greek (Ch. 5), Bar-Asher accounts for the many phonetic and graphic oddities by reference to various traditions of pronunciation of Hebrew and Greek.

Over the past two decades, Bar-Asher has written a steady stream of articles on the Dead Sea Scrolls, many of which have the same basic structure: a difficult form appears in a text, whose meaning may be entirely unknown or is at least uncertain; through a systematic and wide-ranging study of some phenomenon known from elsewhere in the histories of Hebrew or Aramaic, Bar-Asher is able to decipher and interpret the form. Qumranists are pleased because the text is better understood; the rest of us are grateful for the broad discussion which sheds light, along the way, on many details in the language. In this volume, chapters 8–16 are excellent examples of such contributions. Chapter 17 is a synthesis of "The Hebrew in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Study of Mishnaic Hebrew," which summarizes Bar-Asher's own work (including that represented in the earlier chapters) and the work of others, and can serve as a fine introduction to some of the issues involved in situating Qumran Hebrew within the history of the language.

When it comes to epigraphic materials, Bar-Asher again brings to bear a profound awareness of the non-uniformity of real languages in the texts in front of him. His discussion of the language of the Beit ʿAmar papyrus (Ch. 20) insightfully analyzes a text that from a formal perspective represents a strange hybrid of Hebrew and Aramaic. It should be noted that some of these studies are linguistic studies of texts that were very recently discovered. This means

that although the general discussions may remain valid for a long time, the specific readings can be questioned on the basis of new photographs or better paleography. Bar-Asher's essay, "The Language of 'the Vision of Gabriel'" (Ch. 19), is quite different from the original form of this study (which was published in English translation in *Revue de Qumran* in 2008), because of new readings that obviated the need for some of the discussion. As he says in the introductory note to that chapter, quoting his teacher Prof. Ben-Hayyim, "Facts are facts, as long as they are facts." When the facts change, the interpretations must follow suit.

His studies of two Christian Palestinian Aramaic inscriptions (Chs. 21–22) and his more synthetic discussions of the CPA dialect (Chs. 23–26) remind readers of his broad knowledge of Hebrew and Aramaic from the various millennia. Chapter 24 broaches the subject of the division of the Late Aramaic dialects, emphasizing the very close similarities between CPA and Samaritan Aramaic. The claim that these are different dialects relies more on questions of script and ideology than on linguistic data.

In conclusion, I wish to emphasize one general lesson to be learned from reading Bar-Asher's work. The engagement with real texts, and not grammar according to grammar books, is an invaluable experience for any scholar. This may sound trivial, but I think such engagement has two salutary effects. The first is that it forces the scholar to tackle questions that otherwise would not be engaged, to search far and wide for data that allows for a solution to a problem or an interpretation of a crux. The second is that it teaches that texts in the real world rarely follow the rules studied in the first two years of learning a language's grammar. Knowledge of the rules is a critical first step. Knowledge of the many ways in which texts do not follow those rules is the mark of a sophisticated scholar. Studying Bar-Asher's work is to learn from a very erudite and sophisticated scholar.

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