

Envisioning Judaism

*Studies in Honor of Peter Schäfer
on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*

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Moses and Adam as Polyglots

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In recently published articles, I have been exploring both the practice of and attitudes toward multilingualism in ancient Jewish culture and society, both early rabbinic and non-rabbinic, using literary, documentary, and epigraphic evidence.¹ While Jews were by no means unique in having to navigate language choice and valorization in the multilingual contexts of the ancient eastern Mediterranean world, early rabbinic literature provides particularly rich self-reflections on such questions, both in legal and narrative registers. To the extent that multilingual facility and practice are about the interrelations not just of languages but of cultures and societies, and hence of statuses and identities thereby reflected or effected, this topic (or cluster of topics) has the potential of opening onto a much broader canvas of socio-cultural strategies (and fantasies), as well as their rhetorical implementations and ideological/theological underpinnings. In the present venue I wish to examine closely a pair of closely-connected late midrashic texts that bear directly and profoundly on this subject, but which I previously overlooked. Since this volume's honoree, Peter Schäfer, is himself a polyglot who has contributed mightily to the cross-cultural translation and transmission of ancient and medieval Jewish texts, I offer this study as a tribute to his life and scholarship, and in appreciation of his friendship.

The homiletical midrashic texts to be considered are from the *Tanhuma* literature of late-antique/Byzantine/early medieval rabbinic circles, most

¹ See S.D. Fraade, "Language Mix and Multilingualism in Ancient Palestine: Literary and Inscriptional Evidence" [Hebrew], *Lesbonenu* 73 (2011): 273–307; Fraade, "Before and After Babel: Linguistic Exceptionalism and Pluralism in Early Rabbinic Literature," *Diné Israel* 28 (2011): 31*–68*. For the function of Aramaic scriptural translation (*targum*) in a multilingual setting, see Fraade, "Rabbinic Views on the Practice of Targum, and Multilingualism in the Jewish Galilee of the Third-Sixth Centuries," in *The Galilee in Late Antiquity*, ed. L. I. Levine (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), 253–86; Fraade, "Scripture, Targum, and Talmud as Instruction: A Complex Textual Story from the *Sifra*," in *Hesed ve-Emet: Studies in Honor of Ernest S. Frerichs*, ed. J. Magness and S. Gitin (BJS 320; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 109–22; Fraade, "Locating Targum in the Textual Polysystem of Rabbinic Pedagogy," in *Bulletin of the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies* 39 (2006): 69–91; Fraade, "Targumim," in *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, ed. J.J. Collins and D.C. Harlow (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 1278–81.

likely originating in the Land of Israel.² Although it is safe to assume that these passages draw upon and creatively interweave earlier traditions, as is so typical of the *Tanhuma* literature, I have been unable to identify much by way of antecedents to their main components.³ Nor does it appear that they left much of a footprint on later sources. Thus, their significance lies principally in how they editorially combine those components so as to create a midrashic unit that is greater than the sum of its parts.

Tanhuma (Buber)

Since the version of the *Tanhuma* in Salomon Buber's edition is slightly shorter than the standard printed version, we shall begin with it:⁴

- [א] אלה הדברים אשר דבר משה (דברים א א). וז"ה אז ידלג כאיל פסח ותרון לשון אלם (ישעיה לה ו),
 [ב] בוא וראה כשאמר הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה (לך) [לכה] ואשלחך אל פרעה (שמות ג י), א"ל משה
 בייא אתה מעביר עלי, לא איש דברים אנכי (שמות ד י),
 [ג] א"ל שבעים לשון עומדין בפלטרין של פרעה, שאם יבא פרוכבוטרון ממקום אחר מדברים עמו
 בלשונו, ואני הולך בשליחותך, והם בודקין אותי לומר שאני שלוחו של מקום. וגלוי לפנייהם שאיני
 יודע להשיח עמהם, אין שוחקין עלי, לומר ראו שליח של מי שברא העולם, ואת כל הלשונות אינו יודע
 לשמוע ולהשיב, הוי בייא, לא איש דברים אנכי (שמות ד י). (הן אני) [ואני] ערל שפתים (שמות ו יב)
 [ד] א"ל הקדוש ברוך הוא והרי אדם הראשון שלא למדו בריה, מנין היה יודע שבעים לשון, שנאמר
 ויקרא להם שמות (בראשית ב כ), שם לכל הבהמה אין כתיב כאן, אלא שמות, [מי שם פה לאדם שהיה
 קורא שמות שם לכל אחד ואחד משבעים לשון].
 [ה] הפה שאמר לא איש דברים אנכי, אמר אלה הדברים,

² On this literature, see H. L. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. and ed. M. N. A. Bockmuehl (2d ed.; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 302–6.

³ See J. Mann, *Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1931), 1:646, lines 47–49. This is a book inventory from the Cairo Geniza, which lists a book called דאלה הרברים ("Aggadah [Midrash] on 'These are the words'"), which begins: משה וז"ה מי היה זה משה (Deut 1:1). This [should be understood in relation to what] is said by the verse, "Then the lame shall leap like a deer" etc. [Isa 35:6]. Who was this? This is Moses." None of the extant parallels begins with this question and answer.

⁴ *Midrash Tanhuma*, ed. S. Buber (Wilna, 1885; repr. Jerusalem: Orstel, 1964), 5:3–4. Buber prints this as an "addition," based on "manuscript 5 from Oxford and a Sephardic manuscript." See Buber's note ad loc., as well as his "Introduction," 143–47, 150. See also M. Kasher, *Torah Sheleimah* (Jerusalem: Beth Torah Sheleimah, 1992), 1:239, no. 264 with note. The translation is my own and can be compared with that of J. T. Townsend, *Midrash Tanhuma*, vol. 3: *Numbers and Deuteronomy* (Jersey City: KTAV, 2003), 275–76. For a paraphrase, see L. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, trans. H. Szold (Philadelphia: JPS, 1969), 2:322–23. I have divided the text into sub-units to facilitate analysis and comparison.

[ו] והנביא צווח ואומר אז ידלג כאיל פסח ותרון לשון אלם, למה כי נבקעו במדבר מים ונחלים בערבה (ישעיה לה ו), לכך נאמר אלה הדברים.

[A] "These are the words which Moses spoke" (Deut 1:1). This [should be understood in relation to what] is said by the verse, "Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb shall shout aloud" (Isa 35:6).

[B] Come and see how when the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses, "Go, I will send you to Pharaoh" (Exod 3:10), Moses said to him, "You are treating me unjustly!" "I am not a man of words" (Exod 4:10).

[C] He [Moses] said to him [God]: "There are seventy languages spoken in Pharaoh's palace, so that if an ambassador comes from another place they can speak to him in his own language. And I am going as your emissary and they will examine me to say [whether] I am the emissary of the Omnipresent. It will be evident to them that I do not know how to converse with them. Will they not mock me, saying, 'Look at the emissary of He who created the universe, but who does not know how to understand or respond in all seventy languages'? Such injustice! 'I am not a man of words' (Exod 4:10), 'and I am a man of impeded speech' (Exod 6:12)."

[D] The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: "Behold the first man, whom no creature taught. From whence did he know seventy languages? For it is said, 'And he called them by names' (cf. Gen 2:20). 'A name for each animal' is not written here, but 'names.'" [Who gave speech to Adam that he could give 'names,' a name to each and every one in (each of) the seventy languages?]

[E] The mouth which said, "I am not a man of words" (Exod 4:10), said, "These are the words" (Deut 1:1).

[F] And the prophet cries out, saying, "Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb shall shout aloud" (Isa 35:6a). How so? "For waters shall burst forth in the desert (במדבר), streams in the wilderness (בערבה)" (Isa 35:6b). Therefore it says, "These are the words [which Moses spoke ... in the desert (במדבר) in the wilderness (בערבה)]" (Deut 1:1).

[A] The midrash begins as a comment on Deuteronomy 1:1, the narrative opening to Moses' long swan song to the Israelites in the land of Moab, forty years after the Exodus and just prior to his death and the people's entry into the land. That verse is immediately connected to Isaiah 35:6, the exegetical significance of that juxtaposition being the work of the midrash to uncover. At the very least, the two verses are about verbal expression ("spoke" and "shout"). However, the astute scholar of Scripture might already know that the continuation of *both* verses mentions the "desert" ("wilderness" (ערבה), as if to say that the two verses are very similarly sited. This semantic link will not be made explicit by the midrash until its very end.

[B] The midrash next flashes back from the end of Moses' career to its beginning, in which he repeatedly resists (strongly protests in the midrash's retelling) his commission to be God's prophetic mouthpiece to both Israel

be to Moses, thereby obviating his excuse.¹⁴ This concords with other rabbinic traditions that understand the existence and use of seventy languages to originate prior to, rather than as a consequence of, the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1–9. Multilingualism is, therefore, primordial rather than the consequence of a linguistic “fall.”¹⁵ Our passage is less clear whether Adam came up with the name for each animal in seventy languages on his own, or only announced their pre-existent names, this ambiguity resting on two ways of understanding the verb קרא as “call.”

[E] With Moses’ excuses (scriptural as well as midrashic) for not serving as God’s prophetic emissary denied, our midrash brings us back to the lemma, Deuteronomy 1:1, with its use of דברים (“words”) contrastively linking it to the same word in Exodus 4:10, framing thereby Moses’ career with a question: how could the very same man who had trouble speaking at the beginning of his prophetic career know no verbal limits at its end?

[F] The answer is provided by returning to the complementary verse to the lemma, with which the midrash began and with which it concludes, Isaiah 35:6. While that verse in its own scriptural context speaks of an eschatological and universal longing, through its verbal linkage with Deuteronomy 1:1 (“desert” and “wilderness”) it is made to speak of Moses in particular as the fulfillment of the prophecy of the dumb shouting aloud, as one who was transformed by God from being “not a man of words” to the speaker of many (multilingual) “words.” While we might think of revelation (and creation) as pointing forward to redemption, here it is a vision of redemption that informs our understanding of revelation.

Tanhuma (Standard)

The standard printed version of the *Tanhuma* is very close to the version published by Salomon Buber, yet seems at several points to be more replete, perhaps reflecting an internal process of editorial elaboration.¹⁶ In what follows, the text as underlined appears here but not in the Buber version:

[א] אלה הדברים אשר דבר משה וגו' אמרו ישראל אתמול אמרת לא איש דברים אנכי ועכשיו אתה מדבר כל כך, א"ר יצחק אם אתה חייך שנה את התורה והתרפא משה כבר למד את כל התורה. במדבר בערבה מול סוף, וזה"כ אז ידלג כאיל פסח ותרון לשון אלם (ישעיה לה).

¹⁴ On Joseph having been taught the seventy languages by the angel Gabriel, see above. For Adam as culture hero in this regard, see Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 1:62; 5:83–84 (n. 31).

¹⁵ See Fraade, “Before and After Babel,” 42*–45*. For Adam as the “inventor” of the seventy languages, see Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 1:62; 5:83–84.

¹⁶ While I do not wish to deliberate with certainty whether this repleteness reflects a later or earlier stage of transmission, the main differences appear to me most likely to be additions.

[ב] בא וראה כשאמר הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה לך ואשלחך אל פרעה א"ל משה בייא אתה מעביר עלי לא איש דברים אנכי,

[ג] א"ל שבעים לשון עומדין בפלטרין של פרעה שאם יבא אדם אחד ממקום אחר מדברים עמו בלשונו ואני הולך בשליחותך והם בודקין אותי לומר שאני שלוחו של מקום וגלוי לפניהם שא"י להשיח עמהם אין שוחקין עלי לומר ראו שליח של מי שברא העולם ואת כל הלשונות אינו יודע לשמוע ולהשיב הוי בייא לא איש דברים אנכי, הן אני ערל שפתים (שמות ו).

[ד] א"ל הקדוש ברוך הוא והרי אדם הראשון שלא למדו בריה מגין היה יודע שבעים לשון שנאמר (בראשית ב) ויקרא להם שמות, שם לכל הבהמה אין כתיב כאן אלא שמות, ואתה אומר לא איש דברים אנכי. בסוף ארבעים שנה שיצאו ישראל ממצרים התחיל מפרש התורה בשבעים לשון. באר את התורה הונאת, (דברים א ה)

[ה] הפה שאמר לא איש דברים אנכי אמר אלה הדברים,

[ו] והנביא צווח ואמר אז ידלג כאיל פסח ותרון לשון אלם, למה כי נבקעו במדבר מים ונחלים בערבה, לכך נאמר אלה הדברים.

[A] “These are the words which Moses spoke” etc. (Deut 1:1a). Israel said: “Yesterday you said, ‘I am not a man of words’ (Exod 4:10), but now you speak so much.” R. Isaac said: If you have a speech impediment, study the Torah and be cured. [Similarly,] Moses already studied the whole Torah [over forty years], “in the desert, in the wilderness, opposite Suf” (Deut 1:1b). This [should be understood in relation to what] is said by the verse, “Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb shall shout aloud” (Isa 35:6).

[B] Come and see how when the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses, “Go, I will send you to Pharaoh” (Exod 3:10), Moses said to him, “You are treating me unjustly!” “I am not a man of words” (Exod 4:10).

[C] He [Moses] said to him [God]: “There are seventy languages spoken in Pharaoh’s palace, so that if a person comes from another place they can speak to him in his own language. And I am going as your emissary and they will examine me to say [whether] I am the emissary of the Omnipresent. And it will be evident to them that I do not know how to converse with them. Will they not mock me, saying, ‘Look at the emissary of He who created the universe, but who does not know how to understand or respond in all of the languages?’ Such injustice! ‘I am not a man of words’ (Exod 4:10), behold, ‘I am a man of impeded speech’ (Exod 6:12).”

[D] The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: “Behold the first man, whom no creature taught. From whence did he know seventy languages? For it is said, ‘And he called them by names’ (cf. Gen 2:20). ‘A name for each animal’ is not written here, but ‘names.’ And you say, ‘I am not a man of words’ (Exod 4:10).” At the end of forty years from when Israel left Egypt he [Moses] began to interpret the Torah in seventy languages. [as it says,] “He expounded (באר) this Torah” (Deut 1:5).

[E] The mouth which said, “I am not a man of words” (Exod 4:10), said “These are the words” (Deut 1:1).

[F] And the prophet cries out, saying, “Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb shall shout aloud” (Isa 35:6a). How so? “For waters shall burst forth in the desert (במדבר), streams in the wilderness (בערבה)” (Isa 35:6b). Therefore

it says, "These are the words [which Moses spoke ... in the desert (במדבר) in the wilderness (בערבה)]" (Deut 1:1).

I will focus on the underlined "additions":

[A] The "added" words bring to the beginning of the midrash the contrast between Deuteronomy 1:1 and Exodus 4:10, for which we would otherwise have to wait (as in the Buber version) for it to be explicitly stated in Section E. This contrast is placed into the mouths of the Israelites who notice (somewhat mockingly) the sharp contrast between Moses' reticence to speak at the beginning of his career and his verbosity at its end. As a general rule it prescribes Torah study as a cure for speech impediment.¹⁷ This suggests that Moses' remarkable transformation from laconic to loquacious was the product of his studying/teaching all of the Torah for the forty years in the wilderness, prior to ("already") arriving at Moab, the site of his lengthy orations in the Book of Deuteronomy. By citing here the second half of Deuteronomy 1:1, the midrash signals that Moses studied/taught Torah throughout the length of the wilderness wandering, with "desert," "wilderness," and "opposite Suf" understood to denote in abbreviated form the full itinerary (in reverse direction) of the forty years of desert wandering and Mosaic Torah study.¹⁸

[D] Although Moses' forty years of teaching Torah cured him of his speech impediment, it is only at the end of that period that he begins to expound (מפרש) the Torah in seventy languages, an idea absent from the Buber version of our midrash, as from other parallels. The Moses who used his lack of knowledge of seventy languages to avoid his being sent to Pharaoh, in whose palace all languages are spoken, now applies his own knowledge of seventy languages to interpret the Torah to Israel. This is derived from the use of the verb (בִּאֵר) in Deuteronomy 1:5, understanding it to mean not simply "to set forth or state in detail," or "clearly," but "to explain," "to clarify," as do the ancient translations.¹⁹ While this could mean that Moses produced interpretations (or translations) of the Torah in all seventy languages, it could just as well mean that he employed his knowledge of seventy languages to interpret the Torah in all of its linguistic plenitude. Although, once again, I can find no clear antecedent to this tradition, it very likely is influenced by the Mishnah's interpretation (*Sotah*

¹⁷ For this understanding of הייך (deriving from חך, "palate"), see E. Ben Yehuda, מילון (Jerusalem: Makor, 1980), 3:1531, citing our passage. I thank Robert Brody for assistance with this. For Torah as a cure for speech impediments, using Moses' life as evidence, see *Deuteronomy Rabbah* 1:1. Cf. *b. Arakhin* 15b.

¹⁸ On the difficulties of understanding Deut 1:1b in the context of Deut 1:1-3, see J. H. Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1996), 3.

¹⁹ See Tigay, *JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy*, 5, with notes. For this interpretation of Deut 1:5, see *Midrash Leqah Tov* to Deut 1:5 (ed. Buber, 3) and Rashi to Deut 1:5.

7:5) of Deuteronomy 27:8, בִּאֵר הֵיטֵב ("most distinctly"), to mean that Moses instructed the people to inscribe the Torah on stones in seventy languages.²⁰ Later commentators derive this interpretation from the *gematria* of the word הֵיטֵב, calculated from the sum of its successive stages of formation: (ה = 5) + (הי = 15) + (היט = 24) + (היטב = 26) = 70.²¹ While some understand the interpretation of the Torah in seventy languages to be for the sake of those who did not understand Hebrew (either among the Israelites or the other peoples), others understand it to be for the sake of the fullest possible disclosure of the Torah's meanings. In any case, the transformation of Moses as orator is not simply in his ability to speak clearly and convincingly, but in his ability to master and convey the potential linguistic plenitude of the Torah by enlisting all of the languages spoken by humans and created by God.²² While Adam appears to have been able to employ the seventy languages from the very beginning (implanted within him, as it were, by God at his creation), Moses, it would appear, acquires the ability to employ the seventy languages, only at the very end of his life, as a consequence of his forty years of study and teaching. Thus, the linguistic "fall," if we can call it that, whether after Adam or after the Tower of Babel, is the difference between knowing all seventy languages "naturally" or through studied acquisition.

Conclusions

As stated at the outset, the passages that we have examined, with their recurring emphases on multilingualism, need to be understood within the broader contexts of rabbinic literature's frequent thematizing and practice of multilingualism as well as that of the surrounding cultures, both Jewish and non-Jewish, both literary and material. We have encountered several motifs that are editorially combined and juxtaposed in the examined midrashim of the *Tanhuma* literature in ways not fully evidenced elsewhere: multilingualism associated with the practice of statesmanship, with the study and teaching of Torah, and with primordial speech of the first human, and especially with Moses as both leader and teacher. Multilingualism is viewed as something "natural" to creation, divinely revealed, and acquired through study. The editorial combining and shaping of received traditions

²⁰ For a detailed treatment of this passage and its parallels, see Fraade, "Before and After Babel," 49*-55*.

²¹ See the medieval super-commentaries of R. Judah Löw b. Bezalel (*Gur Aryeh*) and R. Elijah Mizrahi to Rashi to Deut 1:5 and 27:8.

²² Compare traditions that the Torah was revealed at Sinai in multiple (four or seventy) languages. See Fraade, "Before and After Babel," 45*-49*; Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 3:97, 350-51, 439; 6:39 n. 214, 121 nn. 710, 711, 150 nn. 898-99.

produces midrashic amalgams that are themselves multivocal and fluid. My intent has been neither to homogenize nor harmonize these elements, but to offer them, in both their concordance and discordance, which is to say in their redactional complexity, in tribute to a master teacher and scholar who moves between several languages as deftly as he does between the subjects and disciplines of Jewish literature, history, and thought to which he has and will continue to contribute so much substance and insight.