

THE HEBREW LANGUAGE IN THE EUROPEAN DIASPORA

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INTRODUCTORY

The early history of the Hebrew language in Europe is a tantalisingly difficult subject of investigation, on account of an acute shortage of evidence. A complete picture can certainly not be painted. Yet it is such an important aspect of Jewish cultural history that it cannot be simply brushed to one side. It is a fundamental factor in questions concerning the character of Jewish society and culture, as well as relations between Jews and gentiles and relations between Jews in different countries. Consequently even a partial or fragmentary account can be of value. The purpose of this essay is to survey the current state of our knowledge of the question, and to try to map out the limits of what can be known about it.

The history of Hebrew is of course an integral part of the broader question of Jewish linguistic history. The scarcity of sources does not only affect our understanding of the history of Hebrew; we know far too little also about the use of other languages by Jews, notably Greek and Latin. Indeed, the questions about the different languages are inter-related. To give just one obvious example, in places where the liturgical language of the Jews was Greek, there would be a relatively limited scope for the use of Hebrew. But were there such places, and can we identify them? And what happened in such places if the decision was taken to replace the use of Greek in the liturgy by the use of Hebrew, or to employ both languages side by side? Or again, where we find a Jewish epitaph inscribed in all three languages, Hebrew, Greek and Latin, is it possible for us to draw any inferences about the use of the

various languages: the purposes for which each was used, the place of each in Jewish education, the social implications of each? If we knew more about the use of Greek or Latin among the Jews of Europe, we would certainly know more about their use of Hebrew; unfortunately a similar darkness surrounds all three questions.

It is perhaps worth emphasising from the outset one point which ought to be obvious: in the very fragmentary state of the evidence, nothing is to be taken for granted. No general assumptions are possible about the use of various languages for various purposes. The discussion must begin from the evidence, and it is only with the utmost caution that we can advance beyond it. We cannot assume, for example, that the situation prevailing in one place also prevailed elsewhere. Nor can we assume that the history we are concerned with is a history of gradual development or evolution in one direction or another. Still less can we assume that there is a 'natural' situation from which any deviation is abnormal, for example that Jews naturally speak Hebrew, or that they naturally pray in Hebrew, or that they naturally use two or more languages side by side. Such unwarranted assumptions are more likely to lead to a deformation than to a correct understanding of the facts.

With this preamble in mind, we may proceed cautiously to the formulation of a few uncontroversial generalisations which will serve as a preliminary sketch-map of the terrain, and which will also help us to define the main problems.

First of all, there is no hard evidence for the use of Hebrew as a spoken language in normal use in Europe at any time.¹ Whether in the very earliest days of the European diaspora (whenever that may have been) there were some Jews who had Hebrew as their mother tongue is a question that lies far beyond the scope of the surviving evidence. By

1 See B. Blumenkranz, *Juifs et chrétiens dans le Monde Occidental 430–1096* (Études Juives, 2) (Paris/The Hague 1960), p. 4.

the time we begin to have information about the European diaspora it seems to be predominantly Greek-speaking, although the use of other local languages cannot be ruled out. From the first century CE until modern times we can be reasonably confident in saying that Hebrew was only spoken by foreign immigrants or travellers, or in other exceptional situations.

On the other hand, from the eleventh century on we have abundant and reliable evidence from many different parts of Europe that Hebrew was used as a language – perhaps even the only language – of 'high' culture among Jews. It was the language of literary compositions, ranging from the intricate secular and sacred poetry of Samuel ben Nagrela and Solomon Ibn Gabirol in Spain to the biblical commentaries of Rashi in Troyes or Tobias ben Eliezer in Thessalonica, and embracing also the more ostensibly linguistic work of a lexicographer such as Nathan ben Yehiel in Rome or a translator like Tobias ben Moses in Constantinople. By this time it would seem that Hebrew was the only language that Jews normally learned to read and write, and it would be reasonable to assume that it was the usual language of synagogue worship and Bible reading in most if not all European Jewish communities.² Its use was thus in many ways analogous to that of Latin by western Christians.

These secure and relatively uncontroversial propositions may be taken as our starting point: they indicate, as it were, the solid ice on which we may skate in safety. But when we try to go any further the ice soon becomes decidedly thin and dangerous. For example, we have some European works written in Hebrew which may be dated to the tenth and even perhaps the ninth century. But the regions which produced them seem to be very strictly limited: they are essentially confined to Spain (where interest in Hebrew first surfaces explicitly among Arabic-speakers such as Menahem Ibn Saruq and Dunash ben

2 On vernacular worship in the middle ages see the interesting article of H. Peri (Pflaum) in *Tarbiz* 24 (5715 A.M.) 426–440.

Labrat in the later tenth century) and to southern Italy (where against a mixed Greek and Latin background we find a wide range of Hebrew writing, including the medical works of Shabbetai Donnolo in the tenth century, the historical text known as the Josephon, which dates from the tenth or perhaps the ninth century, and Hebrew hymns by various liturgical poets of the tenth and ninth centuries, such as Zevadia and Silano). How should this interesting but limited evidence be interpreted? Should we adopt a 'minimalist' interpretation, ascribing this Hebrew-writing activity to strictly local factors, or is it legitimate to extrapolate to other, less well-documented, periods and places? In the case of Spain we may well feel that the Muslim conquest in the early eighth century marks a crucial watershed in the history of Jewish culture (although there is some evidence for a knowledge of Hebrew before this time); in the case of Byzantine south Italy there is no such obvious external factor, and the claims of a continuous tradition may seem to be stronger.

In surveying the evidence we shall endeavour to respect the following principles, the neglect of which has led to confusion or error in the past:

1. Sweeping generalisations are to be avoided; the severe limitations of the available evidence are to be respected.
2. Care must be taken to eliminate anachronistic assumptions (for example about the extent of Jewish literacy, about the use of Hebrew in the synagogue service, or about its use as a spoken language).
3. Evidence from the eastern diaspora, including the Babylonian Talmud, is not directly relevant; evidence from the eastern Mediterranean area (mainly Israel and Egypt) must be used with extreme care, as the circumstances there are very different from those prevailing in Europe.
4. It is important to keep in mind the different uses to which a language may be put: it may be a mother-tongue or a second spoken language, written but not spoken, confined to an educated

elite, used in worship (alone or with another language); it may even be used in a religious context without being widely understood.

5. Other things being equal, priority is to be given to dated or securely datable sources. It is risky to build on the foundation of sources that cannot be dated.

The sources available to us are of two basic types: literary and non-literary. The Jewish literary sources are not very helpful for our quest. As we have already remarked, Jewish writing in Hebrew is a phenomenon that is not attested in Europe before the ninth century; its appearance at this time marks a turning-point in European Jewish culture and constitutes therefore an important point of reference for our investigation. Whether European Jews wrote in other languages, and whether any such writings are extant, are questions that have hardly been investigated at all. A Latin epistle published in 1984 from a ninth-century manuscript³ has been held to be a Jewish apologetic work of around the fourth century addressed to potential proselytes from paganism. Another, longer, apologetic epistle, purporting to have been written originally in Greek by the Jew Mardocheus and sent to Alexander the Great to persuade him to abandon the worship of idols and acknowledge the Most High God, is preserved in one version of the Latin Alexander Romance.⁴ Such texts (and there may well be others) provide some useful evidence of the use of other languages by Jews, but the value for our enquiry of apologetic texts, addressed by their nature to gentiles, is clearly very limited. We shall make use,

3 First published in Bernhard Bischoff, *Anecdota Novissima, Texte des vierten bis sechzehnten Jahrhunderts*, Stuttgart, 1984. See A.D. Momigliano, 'The New Letter by "Anna" to "Seneca"', *Athenaeum* NS 63 (1985) 217–219, reprinted in his *On Pagans, Jews and Christians* (1987) pp. 202–205.

4 Karl Steffens, *Die Historia de preliis Alexandri Magni Rezension J3* (Beitraege zur klassischen Philologie, 73) (Meisenheim am Glan 1975), pp. 208–218.

however, of some references to Jews and to the Hebrew language in the abundant Christian literature from the relevant period.

The non-literary evidence is mainly epigraphic. We have substantial numbers of Jewish tombstones from various European sites from late antiquity and the early middle ages. Very few of them are dated, but even the undated ones can supply us with some approximate information; less tendentious than the Christian literary sources, they are also frustratingly inarticulate about the matter in hand. We shall also look at an important Greek legal source directly concerned with the language question and dated to the mid-sixth century. The rabbinic legal sources bearing on the language question are interesting but will not be considered because they do not explicitly address themselves to the situation in Europe.

CHRISTIAN LITERARY SOURCES

It is perhaps worth underlining from the outset the general fact that the early Christian literature consistently takes it for granted that language is not a barrier between Christians and Jews: in other words Jews everywhere, in the period that interests us, spoke the same languages as their Christian neighbours.⁵ This is not to say, of course, that Jews may not have had certain expressions which only they used (as indeed the Christians did). But the phenomena of peculiarly Jewish dialects and of Jewish communities using different languages from the surrounding population (e.g. Spanish in the Ottoman Empire) belong to a later and very different historical situation. The only question in our period which deserves further investigation is whether in some places in the Latin West Jews continued to speak Greek after its use was abandoned by Christians. It is possible that this question will never be satisfactorily answered with the tools at our disposal.

It would be a useless labour to cite many witnesses to support this general picture. Let one stand for the rest; Gregory of Tours in the sixth

⁵ See Blumenkranz, *Juifs et chrétiens*, p.4.

century refers frequently in his writings to contacts of various kinds between Jews and Christians.⁶ Language is apparently never an issue, except once: when king Gontrand entered Orleans in 585, there were many Jews among the crowds that acclaimed him, and they called out in their own language: 'Let all peoples bend the knee before thee, let all be subject to thee'.⁷ But, as Blumenkranz justly points out, this acclamation, which is based on a biblical text, even if it was pronounced in Hebrew, tell us nothing about the Jews' everyday language.⁸

On the other hand we have a specific reference to language in a letter written by Agobard, archbishop of Lyons, in 822, concerning the problem of pagan slaves owned by Jews and wishing to be baptized⁹: it seems that these slaves have learned the language of the land from their Jewish masters, a clear indication that even at this late date the Jews spoke the local vernacular.

If the Jews of Orleans really did salute the king in Hebrew in 585 this would be an indication that there was some use of Hebrew as a language of prayer at this time. There is an earlier indication that points in the same direction in the description of the funeral of Hilary of Arles (d. 449) compiled by one of his disciples, whose name is uncertain: in the large crowd of Christians present there were also many Jews who chanted psalms in Hebrew.¹⁰ It is hard to know how much force to give to these testimonies, which may boil down to nothing more than a

6 See the texts collected in B. Blumenkranz, *Les Auteurs chrétiens latins du Moyen Age sur les Juifs et le judaïsme* (Études Juives, 4) (Paris/The Hague 1963), pp. 67–73.

7 *Historia Francorum* 8.1, Blumenkranz, *ibid.*, no. 62.

8 *Juifs et chrétiens*, p. 4; cf. S. Katz, *The Jews in the Visigothic and Frankish Kingdoms of Spain and Gaul* (Cambridge, Mass. 1937), pp. 61f.

9 Blumenkranz, *ibid.*

10 Katz, *The Jews*, p. 61; Blumenkranz, *Auteurs*, p. 67.

'literary cliché'.¹¹

So far as homilies in the synagogue are concerned, we have no indication that they were delivered in any other language than the local vernacular. Indeed we have some direct evidence of this as late as the early ninth century, in the accusation that some ignorant Christians claim that Jewish sermons are superior to Christian ones.¹² Surely such sermons must have been in a language they could understand.

What of Jewish literacy and literature: is there any indication of the languages Jews could read and write? We have already seen evidence that some Jews could write in Hebrew from as early as the ninth century in the specific and very localised milieu of Byzantine South Italy, although the earliest extant Hebrew sources, such as the Josephon and the medical writings of Shabbetai Donnolo, testify also to a reading knowledge of Latin and Greek. Elsewhere in Europe such direct evidence is lacking, but there are some hints in Christian sources. Interestingly, nothing of any substance is found before the beginning of the ninth century: a reference in the epistle of Severus of Minorca to a Spanish Jew who was 'educated not only in Latin but also in Greek literature'¹³ is too isolated and too uncertain to be of much help to us.¹⁴ It is only in the first half of the ninth century, the period of the Carolingian renaissance with its revival of interest in the Hebrew Bible, that we do at last find scattered but substantial references to Jewish

11 Blumenkranz, *Auteurs*, p. 67.

12 The charge is found in Agobard, see Blumenkranz, *Auteurs*, p. 162, and again in Amulo, see *ibid.*, p. 199.

13 'Latinis sed etiam Graecis litteris eruditum'. See Katz, *The Jews*, p. 62.

14 This encyclical letter concerning the mass conversion of the Jews of Minorca to Christianity at the beginning of the 5th century is categorised by Blumenkranz, *Auteurs*, pp. 106f., as a forgery written in the 7th century. No such doubts are entertained by E.D. Hunt, 'St. Stephen in Minorca. An episode in Jewish-Christian relations in the early 5th century A.D.', *JTS* NS 33 (1982) 106-123.

writings and also, at the same time, to the knowledge of Hebrew.

To give one example, Agobard, who became archbishop of Lyons in 816, displays a knowledge of Jewish polemic about the life of Jesus, of the kind that we find in the Hebrew *Toldot Yeshu*. He is also familiar with ideas which are found in the Midrash, in the *Shiur Komah* and in the *Sefer Yetsira*, including, significantly, the belief that the letters of the Hebrew alphabet existed before the creation of the world and are themselves endowed with a supernatural power. He also knows the Hebrew names for two of the heavens.¹⁵ How did he arrive at all this knowledge: from written sources in Latin, or by personal contact with Jews, perhaps Jews converted to Christianity? We cannot know. But at any rate there is a significant Hebrew component which suggests a knowledge of Hebrew language and of Hebrew literature among the Jews of Lyons at this time.

In the writing of his younger contemporary, the Benedictine Paschasius Radbertus, we find many passing references to Hebrew words, which he tends to attribute to Jews of his acquaintance. It is not certain, however, that we can trust him on this point.¹⁶

We must mention at this point the interesting case of the Jew Eleazar, formerly a Christian deacon at the court of the emperor Louis the Pious by the name of Bodo. After fleeing to Spain and adopting the Jewish faith, he apparently composed polemical tracts against Christianity in an attempt to persuade others to follow his example. His works are almost entirely lost, but we have some fragments of his letters and summaries of his arguments in the collection of letters of a Spanish Christian who corresponded with him and tried to refute him.¹⁷ From what survives it seems clear that Bodo-Eleazar learned some Hebrew: at any rate he can refer to the original Hebrew in citing

15 For references see Blumenkranz, *Auteurs*, p. 165.

16 Blumenkranz, *ibid.*, p. 193 and n. 11.

17 See B. Blumenkranz in *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses* 34 (1954) 401–413, and *Auteurs*, pp. 184–191.

certain biblical texts commonly exploited in polemical debate, such as Genesis 49.10 or Isaiah 7.14. On the other hand we should note that the words in question, particularly Isaiah's '*almah*', were well established in the Christian literature in their Hebrew form since the time of Origen and Jerome. Bodo-Eleazar's Christian correspondent even shows himself capable of basing an argument on the Hebrew text, arguing that the word *lo* in Isaiah 49.5 is written with an aleph, not a waw: it means 'no', not 'to him'. This argument, however, is borrowed from Jerome, and in general we must beware of mistaking arguments taken from Jerome, who knew some Hebrew from living in Israel, for evidence of a direct acquaintance with the Hebrew language.

This thought leads us directly to another important and intriguing text from this period, the *Hebrew Questions on the Books of Kings* falsely attributed to Jerome and actually composed in the early ninth century. This Latin commentary refers freely to the Hebrew text and makes use of Hebrew etymologies and Jewish traditions based on Hebrew words. It is presumably the work of a Jew converted to Christianity, and the latest editor of the text, Avrom Saltman, has argued that the same man is responsible for the marginal annotations in an important Latin Bible manuscript of the Carolingian period, the St Germain Bible.¹⁸ This Bible is one of a group of Bibles associated with the name of the great theologian and poet Theodulf, bishop of Orleans, which are notable for their scholarship and for the respect they pay to the Hebrew original. The annotations in the St Germain Bible are based on a Hebrew text of the Bible. The *Hebrew Questions* have also been identified as the source of the comments based on the Hebrew which are given by the great Christian scholar of the period Rabanus Maurus, abbot of Fulda and later archbishop of Mainz, and attributed by him to 'a modern Jew' (*hebraeus moderni temporis*).¹⁹ According to who

18 A. Saltman, ed., *Pseudo-Jerome, Quaestiones on the Book of Samuel (Kings)* (Studia Post-Biblica, 26), Leyden, 1975. See especially pp. 3–29.

19 See Blumenkranz, *Auteurs*, p. 174 f., Saltman, *ibid.* pp. 23–5.

has made a close study of all the available material, the author of the *Hebrew Questions* was a man brought up as a Jew, but not in one of the great centres of Jewish scholarship. (Saltman suggests he may have come from Narbonne.) 'Obviously he knew Hebrew and he had probably absorbed a fair amount of Rabbinic exegesis naturally current in the local Jewish community.'²⁰

Cautiously surveying these disparate items of evidence we can surely conclude that there is some confirmation from the Carolingian empire of the phenomenon directly attested in South Italy at this time, namely a use of Hebrew by Jews for scholarly purposes. We might add that it is also at this period that a biographer of St Amandus the Apostle of Flanders (d. c.675) attributes to him a knowledge of Hebrew. The claim itself rests on very flimsy foundations,²¹ but the biographer's interest in Hebrew reflects a preoccupation of the period in which he was writing. Looking further afield, we have an interesting Byzantine reference in the Life of Constantine, the apostle of the Slavs (better known by his later religious name, Cyril): it reports that in 860 he studied Hebrew at Cherson in the Crimea in preparation for his mission to the Jewish Khazars, and that he even debated in Hebrew with Jewish scholars in the presence of the Khazar ruler. Is this a mere literary conceit, or was Hebrew really, as is sometimes claimed, the official language of the Khazar court? At any rate, the reference to Hebrew fits chronologically into the pattern we have discerned in western Europe. It remains to be seen whether we can carry the story of Hebrew in Europe back any earlier than the ninth century, and whether we can discern any further details, whether by distinguishing different uses of the language or by drawing any geographical distinctions. For this we must turn now to the epigraphic evidence.

20 Saltman, *ibid.*, p. 19.

21 Blumenkranz, *Auteurs*, p. 183.

JEWISH INSCRIPTIONS

In surveying the inscriptions of the Jews of Europe in the period that interests us we are fortunate in having at our disposal the *Corpus* of Jean-Baptiste Frey, containing well over seven hundred inscriptions, ably brought up to date by Baruch Lifshitz.²² Some new discoveries have been made in the years since Lifshitz's Prolegomenon was published, but the *Corpus* provides us with an excellent basis for reviewing the epigraphical evidence.

Three fundamental points stand out clearly from even a superficial glance at the *Corpus*. One is the acute shortage of dated inscriptions. Another is the very limited amount of Hebrew: only a handful of the inscriptions are in Hebrew, and a number more include a stereotyped Hebrew word or phrase, such as *shalom* or *shalom 'al yisrael*. The vast majority of the inscriptions are in Greek or Latin. And thirdly a considerable majority – well over two-thirds – of the inscriptions are from Rome, and Europe outside Italy is very poorly represented indeed.

Bearing in mind this last point, we shall begin by looking at the evidence from Rome, which has been subjected to a careful analysis by Harry J. Leon.²³ Out of 534 inscriptions from Rome, Leon counted only three as being in Hebrew. Two of them, from the Monteverde catacomb, consist of the conventional formula *shalom* or *shalom 'al yisrael*, and Leon considers (p. 76 n.1) that they are 'probably in each case the concluding formulas of an inscription in Greek or Latin'. The third, from the Nomentana catacomb, is only two lines long; it is indistinctly scratched in stucco, but the second line is almost certainly

22 *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaicarum. Recueil des inscriptions juives qui vont du IIIe siècle avant Jesus-Christ au VIIe siècle de notre ère, vol. I. Europe*, Vatican City 1936, reprinted with a Prolegomenon by Baruch Lifshitz, New York 1975.

23 *The Jews of Ancient Rome*, Philadelphia 1960/5721, esp. pp. 75–92.

the common formula *shalom 'al yisrael.*' In respect of each of the catacombs concerned, these Hebrew inscriptions represent just over 1 per cent of all the inscriptions (Greek accounting for nearly eighty per cent of those in the Monteverde catacomb and well over ninety per cent of those in the Nomentana). In addition to these three inscriptions, Leon lists²⁴ five or six further inscriptions which are basically in Greek but conclude with a Hebrew formula, usually *shalom*, occasionally *shalom 'al yisrael* or simply *yisrael*. All these inscriptions originated in the Monteverde catacomb. Leon concludes (p. 78): 'we may infer that an acquaintance with Hebrew was kept alive, albeit in feeble fashion, among this group alone', and he argues elsewhere (p. 243) that the group in question is the most conservative of the Jewish communities of Rome, situated in a district with a high proportion of immigrants. There is no reason to disagree with Leon's arguments, but we should observe that in the absence of dated material all the inscriptions containing Hebrew words may belong to a very specific context, perhaps to the influence of one or two people. Moreover, inscriptions may copy from one another: it is not necessary to suppose that the authors of all these inscriptions knew some Hebrew. Leon also considers the question of the liturgical language(s) of the Roman Jews (p. 246): 'From the scarcity of Hebrew on the tomb inscriptions we may assume that little, if any, Hebrew was used even in the synagogue and that the service was conducted in Greek, the language of the community... The Torah readings also were probably in Greek, as we may infer from the fact that the very few biblical quotations found in the epitaphs appear in a Greek translation.' These conclusions are supported by Lifshitz,²⁵ although he adds (referring in general to the synagogues of Palestine and the Diaspora): 'But we cannot exclude the possibility of the use of Hebrew as a language of worship even in Hellenized Jewish communities.'

24 p. 76 n.2, p. 134 n.1, addendum.

25 Prolegomenon, p. 24.

Looking now beyond the confines of Rome, we find that the picture is essentially similar. Where Hebrew occurs, it is generally confined to a conventional formula. Interestingly, we have three dated inscriptions which help to provide a valuable chronological framework. They are all Latin epitaphs with a short Hebrew formula. The first, found in Catania in Sicily, records the acquisition of a tomb by Aurelius Samuel for himself and his wife, Lassia Irena.²⁶ The date of the wife's death is stated with great precision: Friday the twelfth day of the Kalends of November, the eighth day of the lunar month, in the consular year corresponding to 383 A.D. Above the Latin text is a roughly incised line of Hebrew: *shalom 'al yisrael amen amen shalom shemuel*. It is by no means certain that this line of Hebrew forms part of the original inscription: it could as well have been added at a later date. But even if it is original, it hardly testifies to an active knowledge or use of Hebrew. The second dated inscription comes from Venosa, ancient Venusia in south Italy. It is the epitaph of Augusta, the wife of Bonus, and it bears a consular date corresponding to 521.²⁷ After the formal Latin epitaph comes the Hebrew phrase 'Peace be upon Augusta's rest, Amen!' The third inscription comes from Narbonne, in Septimania, and is dated to the second year of the Visigothic king Egica, who came to the throne in November 687.²⁸ It records the death of three children of

26 Frey no. 650, and see Prolegomenon, p. 51.

27 See C. Colafemmina, 'Insediamenti e condizione degli ebrei nell' Italia meridionale e insulare', in *Gli Ebrei nell' Alto Medioevo* vol.1 (Settimani di Studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull' Alto Medioevo, 26) (Spoleto, 1980), pp. 197–227: text p. 206, photograph pl.3.

28 Frey no. 670. To the bibliography given by Frey, add Katz, *The Jews*, pp. 148–151; A.M. Rabello, 'Le iscrizioni ebraiche della Spagna romana e visigotica', in *Studi in Onore di Cesare Sanfilippo* vol. 6 (Milan 1985), pp. 666–670 (text, bibliography and discussion); and G. Nahon, *Inscriptions hébraïques et juives de France médiévale* (Paris, 1986), pp. 350–353, with further bibliography.

Paragorius son of Sapaudus, who all died in that year. (The cause of death is not given; the ages of the deceased range from nine to thirty years.) Just after the names of the children and before the date is carved the Hebrew formula *shalom 'al [yi]srael*. Taken together, these three dated inscriptions from very different localities testify to a trend which, while not common, is widespread both in place and in time. We may safely assume that many of the other similar inscriptions were carved during these three centuries; some are no doubt earlier or later. They are found mainly in various parts of Italy, and also in neighbouring regions.²⁹

The remaining Hebrew inscriptions reproduced by Frey are undated, and all attempts to date them even approximately must be regarded with the deepest suspicion, suspicion which is borne out by the fact that expert opinions often range over a century or more for the same inscription.³⁰ However, some of the inscriptions are bilingual, or even trilingual, and it is often argued³¹ that the presence of Latin or Greek on an inscription is a guarantee of a relatively early date (assuming we can be certain that the Hebrew was not added later). But how early? The problem is that we simply do not know when the use of Latin was abandoned. Frey's statement³² that there is no example of a Jewish inscription in Latin from southern Italy later than the seventh century must be regarded as purely subjective.

Let us now survey briefly the small minority of inscriptions in the *Corpus* that contain more than a conventional word or phrase of Hebrew. From a geographical point of view, the evidence is notably

29 In addition to those from Rome, cf. Frey nos 552 (Fondi), 558 (Naples), 635 (Oria), 644 (Milan), and 671 (Auch).

30 E.g. no. 666 (Vienne): 6th century or late 6th century (Blumenkranz, *Baron Jubilee Vol. I*, p. 231, puts it in the 10th century); no. 668 (Arles): 7th, 8th or early 9th century.

31 E.g. Frey p. 453.

32 *Ibid.*

concentrated in the west. A stone from Panticapaeum (Kertch in the Crimea) on which traces of three lines of Hebrew survive above a Greek epitaph³³ is an isolated oddity. The other Jewish inscriptions from this region are all in Greek.³⁴ The inscription is dated confidently by Frey to the 4th century.³⁵ Its uniqueness raises the possibility of exceptional circumstances, perhaps with some influence from Syria or Palestine; it is impossible to base any generalisation on it. The same must also be said of the Samaritan inscription from Thessalonica³⁶ which has been also dated to the fourth century.³⁷ Most of the inscription is in Greek, and it is in two parts. A Greek version of biblical pericope of the priestly blessing (Numbers 6.22–27) occupies 13 lines. It is framed with two lines of Hebrew in Samaritan characters. The line above reads 'Blessed be our God for ever', and that below 'Blessed be his name for ever'. These phrases may be taken as the liturgical equivalent of such epitaphic formulae as 'Peace be upon Israel' or 'The memory of the righteous is a blessing'; consequently they operate against rather than in favour of the current use of Hebrew as a liturgical language by the Samaritans of Thessalonica. Indeed the biblical text in Greek appears to be taken from a Greek translation of the Bible that was probably used for liturgical readings. The Samaritan letters are very roughly formed, and it has been suggested³⁸ that they may have been copied from older manuscripts, having fallen out of use locally. The remaining four lines of the inscription consist of a pious

33 Frey no. 688.

34 See the paper in this volume by Irina Levinskaya and Sergei Tokhtas'yev *Jews and Jewish names in the Bosporan Kingdom*.

35 But see Lifshitz, *Prolegomenon*, p. 66.

36 No. 693a in the *Corpus*, pp. 70–75 of the *Prolegomenon*.

37 More recently it has been situated more cautiously by J.D. Purvis in the 4th to 6th century: see R. Pummer in A.D. Crown, ed., *The Samaritans* (Tübingen 1989), p. 149.

38 *Ibid.*

dedication in Greek.

As has been remarked already, however, most of the Hebrew material comes from the West, and more specifically from north-eastern Spain, southern France and southern Italy.

From Spain we have in fact two intriguing trilingual inscriptions in Greek, Latin and Hebrew. One is an epitaph from Tortosa, in memory of Meliosa daughter of Judah and Maria or Miriam.³⁹ The content of the three inscriptions is essentially the same, and all the languages are used with equal fluency. The only clue to the spoken language of the author is that the mother is referred to with the Greek title *Kyra*, a usage which, according to Katz, 'seems to show that this woman was originally from a country where Greek was commonly spoken, and where such a surname would usually be attached to the name'. He suggests she may have come from Sicily or Constantinople, 'or more likely, from the cosmopolitan Marseilles' (p. 144). The inscription has been generally dated in the late 6th century, although it has been placed by some as early as the first or second.⁴⁰ The other trilingual inscription is on a hollowed out block of marble found in Tarragona, which may have served as an ablution basin.⁴¹ The Hebrew inscription, which is the longest, reads *shalom 'al Yisrael/ ve'aleinu ve'al baneinu amen* (Peace be upon Israel and upon us and upon our children, amen); the Latin reads simply PAX FIDES (Peace, faith); while the Greek consists of a series of letters of unknown meaning. This inscription, too, has generally been dated in the sixth century.

From Arles we have two of the very rare epitaphs in the *Corpus* that

39 Frey no. 661, cf. Prolegomenon p. 57. Add to the bibliography Katz, *The Jews*, pp. 141–144, Rabello, 'Iscrizoni ebraiche', pp. 656–659.

40 See Rabello, *ibid.*, p. 659. Rabello himself gives some weight to H. Beinart's view that this inscription is to be dated to the late fourth or early fifth century.

41 *Corpus*, no. 660c, Prolegomenon pp. 55 f.; Rabello, *ibid.*, pp. 651–653.

are entirely in Hebrew.⁴² Both commence with the formula 'This is the tomb of...'. The same opening formula is reported on three more Hebrew epitaphs from Arles, now lost.⁴³ Frey mentions various datings in the late 7th, 8th or early 9th century for one of the inscriptions. In truth there is no evidence that any of these inscriptions is older than the ninth century.

The richest area for early Hebrew inscriptions is southern Italy. This is a significant region because, as we have already emphasised, it is the home of the earliest European Hebrew literature, in the 9th and 10th centuries. Frey publishes (No. 634) an interesting bilingual inscription from Oria, comprising a brief and functional epitaph in Latin, and a *rhyming* epitaph in Hebrew. Now, we have a number of all-Hebrew inscriptions from various sites in southern Italy, and some of them are in verse (*piyyut*) form; many of them are dated, and they belong clearly to the early ninth century,⁴⁴ which is the period when the earliest surviving European Hebrew poems were written.⁴⁵ Frey, however, insists that this bilingual inscription must be dated earlier than the 8th century, because of the presence of Latin. In the present state of our evidence such a sweeping generalisation, based on an unprovable negative proposition, must seem somewhat reckless.

From Taranto Frey gives no fewer than seven all-Hebrew

42 Nos 668, 669. Cf. Nahon, *Inscriptions hébraïques* nos 305, 306.

43 See Nahon, *ibid*, pp. 370–375 (nos 307–313) for the lost inscriptions.

44 See the documentation given in S. Simonsohn, 'The Hebrew revival among early medieval European Jews', in *Salo Wittmayer Baron Jubilee Volume*, English Section, Vol. II (Jerusalem 1974), p. 853. See also Colafemmina, 'Insedimenti', *passim*, and especially p. 220, an epitaph from Brindisi bearing a contemporary dirge by the poet Amittai of Oria.

45 See for example the poems of Zevadiah of Oria in J. Schirmann, *New Poems from the Genizah* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem 5727 A.M.), pp. 421–424; Iona David, 'Iozer lehatan, inno di R. Zevadia', *Michael* 1 (1972) 214–222.

inscriptions, and two bilingual ones.⁴⁶ We have no means of dating the all-Hebrew ones; it is interesting that in the one case that any biographical detail is given, there is a mention of an immigrant from Melos (No. 621). Of the two bilingual inscriptions, one is basically a Latin epitaph, with some pious biblical quotations in Hebrew together with the name of the deceased, Anatoli. In the other case the Latin and Hebrew texts are identical: 'Here lies in good memory Samuel son of Silano with Ezekiel his father's brother, who lived 42 years. Peace be upon their rest. Amen.' Frey mentions an opinion that this inscription is to be dated no earlier than the 11th or 12th century, but dismisses it for the reason already mentioned in the case of the Oria inscription.

Venosa⁴⁷ offers us important remains of underground Jewish burials, which are less extensive than those at Rome, but still very valuable. In particular, the inscriptions betray a far more extensive use of Hebrew than we found in the catacombs of Rome. Our search must, however, begin in a cemetery at ground level, which has given us all

46 Nos. 620–626; 629 and 630. See also C. Colafemmina, 'Gli ebrei a Taranto nella documentazione epigrafica', in C.D. Fonseca, ed., *La Chiesa di Taranto*, vol. 1 (Galatina 1977) 109–127, and the brief summary in his 'Insediamenti', pp. 198–202. Colafemmina dates the Hebrew inscriptions to the 6th to 10th centuries.

47 Frey pp. 420–443. Much has been published subsequently about the Jewish inscriptions of Venosa. See, for example, Harry J. Leon, 'The Jews of Venusia', *JQR* NS 44 (1953–54) 267–284; Gian Piero Bognetti, 'Les Inscriptions juives de Venosa et le problème des rapports entre les Lombards et l'orient', *Comptes Rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions* 1954, pp. 193–203, and note the corrections by B. Lifshitz, 'Les Juifs à Venosa' in *Rivista di Filologia e di Istruzione Classica* NS 40 (1962) 367–371; Colafemmina, 'Insediamenti', pp. 202–216 and his other articles quoted there.

bar one of our dated inscriptions from Venosa.⁴⁸ They are all in Hebrew, and testify to a sound knowledge of the language, and the dates all fall within the first half the ninth century (more precisely between 808 and 848). This important series of inscriptions provides valuable epigraphic confirmation of the phenomenon we have already seen attested in the literary sources, both in southern Italy and in other places: an established use of Hebrew among Jews from the ninth century.

The catacomb inscriptions, by contrast, are undated (with one exception, already mentioned), and they are written in a variety of languages: Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and various combinations thereof. Theodor Mommsen, who visited Venosa, was of the opinion that these inscriptions were from the sixth century; in fact it would seem that some of the Venosa inscriptions are much earlier, perhaps from the late fourth century, while others have been dated to the seventh or eighth century.⁴⁹

The Hebrew component in the Venosa inscriptions ranges from a simple formula, most commonly *shalom*, to an epitaph exclusively in Hebrew (Frey no. 569):
 משכבו / שלביטה / בן / פווסטינה / נוח / נפש / נשמתו / לחי(י) / עולם
 (Resting place of Vita son of Faustina. May the repose of his spirit-soul be for everlasting life). This inscription is a particularly interesting one, as (leaving aside the Latin names of the deceased and his mother or father) it seems to suggest a fully Hebraised background. And yet the immediately adjoining epitaph (no. 570), which appears to be that of

48 See U. Cassuto, 'Nuove iscrizioni ebraiche a Venosa', *Archivio Storico per la Calabria e la Lucania* 4 (1934) 1–9, 5 (1935) 179–184; 'Hebrew inscriptions of the ninth century in Venosa' [Hebrew], *Qedem* 2 (1944) 99–120; cf. C. Colafemmina, 'Un' iscrizione venosina inedita dell' 822' *Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 43 (1977) 261–263, and Giancarlo Laceranza, 'L'Epitaffio di Abigail de Venosa', *Henoah* 11 (1989) 319–325.

49 See Bognetti, *op. cit.*, pp. 193–194.

this same Vita's daughter, is in both Hebrew and Latin, and the daughter bears the Latin name of Pretiosa. Further along the same side-gallery of the catacomb we find the epitaphs of Vita's son, Faustinus, and granddaughter, Faustina (nos 613, 611). Both epitaphs are in Latin, with a conventional appendage in Hebrew. Another Faustinus has a short inscription entirely in Latin (no. 612). Clearly, then, we cannot speak of a linear progression from one language to another, even within successive generations of a single family.

The family in question is evidently a leading one. Both the Faustini bear the title Pater, and the epitaph of the young Faustina (she was fourteen when she died) describes her grandparents and perhaps also her great-grandfather Faustinus as *MAIVRES CIBITATIS*, 'elders of the city'. We are told that the whole city wept at her death. Also present at her burial were two emissaries (*APOSTVLI*) and two rabbis (*REBBITES*), who recited dirges (*TRHNVS*) in her memory. This may have been regarded as a signal honour: at any rate no similar detail is found on the epitaphs of any of the other grandees buried in the catacomb. It is interesting to note the use of the Greek word *threnos*, 'dirge', an indication probably that Greek is still the liturgical language of the Jews of Venosa. The date of the inscription cannot be fixed definitely: opinions have ranges from the 4th to the 8th century.⁵⁰

One more inscription from the Venosa catacombs deserves particular mention (Frey no. 595). It was found in a small side-gallery on its own, and it is in a mixture of Hebrew and Greek. The Hebrew is a conventional formula (שְׁלוֹם עַל מִי / שְׁכַהֲבוּ), 'Peace be upon his resting place'). The Greek text has been read, not entirely convincingly, as *taphos sekoundinou presbyterou kai materina(s) eton ogdoenta*, 'Tomb of Secundinus the Presbyter and of Materina, (aged) eighty years'. What is remarkable about this Greek inscription is that it is written in Hebrew characters. In fact it is the only European inscription

50 See Bognetti, *ibid.*, pp. 198f. Cf. Colafemmina, 'Insedimenti', pp. 211–214. An early 6th century date seems most likely.

of this kind. Generally speaking, the use of a particular alphabet points to educational practice: Jews in the Middle Ages used the Hebrew alphabet for writing Greek and other languages because their education was based on Hebrew grammar and the study of the Hebrew Bible. (Similarly seventeen of the Roman inscriptions are in Latin written in Greek characters; conversely there are also three Greek inscriptions in Latin characters, testifying presumably to a shift in educational goals. In one Greek epitaph from Venosa (no. 575) the concluding formula *shalom* is written in Greek.) This stray inscription from Venosa may well be the clearest indication we have of the early stages of Hebrew-based education in Europe. It is impossible, however to rule out an alternative explanation: that the use of the Hebrew alphabet by Greek-speaking Jews is due to a desire to exhibit some Hebrew knowledge for reasons of national or religious sentiment. This would tie in well with the presence of odd Hebrew phrases on this and so many other inscriptions, a phenomenon which requires explanation.

Interestingly enough, a recently-published document from Egypt also uses the Hebrew alphabet to write Greek: it is a marriage deed written in Antinoopolis in November 417 according to the Greek consular date.⁵¹ Now, Bognetti has argued (p. 195) for an Egyptian origin of some of the Venosa Jews, on the basis of an opening formula (*taphos* plus a name in the genitive) which is found both at Venosa and in Egypt, and also on account of some Greek personal names which are found in both places. The use of Hebrew letters to write Greek may support his view, although it is by no means conclusive proof.

A LEGAL TEXT

One more piece of evidence must detain us before we proceed to a final discussion. It is the celebrated Novella 146 'On the Jews' of Justinian,

51 See C. Sirat et al., *La Ketouba de Cologne: un contrat de mariage juif à Antinoopolis*, Opladen, 1986.

dated 8 February 553.⁵² The emperor writes to Areobindos, Praetorian Prefect of the East, as follows:

Whereas the Hebrews, in hearing the sacred books, ought not to cling to the bare letters but have regard to the prophecies contained in them... they give themselves up to senseless interpretations and stray to this day from the true belief. Nevertheless, when we learned that their own opinions were divided, we could not endure to abandon them to unresolved confusion. We learned from the very petitions that were addressed to us that, whereas some cling to the Hebrew language alone and want to use it for the reading of the sacred books, others deem it right to allow Greek as well (*kai ten hellenida*). They have been divided among themselves over this now for a long time. We, having learned about this, judged in favour of those who wish to allow the Greek language for the reading of the sacred books, or indeed whatever language the locality renders more appropriate and more familiar to the hearers...

There is a good deal more to the Novella than this section, which is only a preamble. But it contains the essence of what concerns the use of Hebrew, and in particular it records, what we do not know from any other source, a long-drawn-out and acrimonious dispute about the language of scriptural readings. Where did this dispute take place? Presumably Constantinople, although the text does not specify. The

52 The most important recent discussions of this document and its implications are: V. Colorni, 'L'uso del greco nella liturgia del giudaismo ellenistico e la Novella 146 di Giustiniano', *Annali di Storia del Diritto* 8 (1964) 19–80; A.M. Rabello, *Giustiniano, Ebrei e Samaritani alla luce delle fonti storico-letterarie, ecclesiastiche e giuridiche* vol. 2 (Milan 1988), pp. 814–828; A. Linder, *The Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation* (Detroit/Jerusalem 1987), pp. 402–411.

wording of the Greek suggests that one side in the dispute wanted to use Hebrew alone for the reading, while the other side wanted to insert a reading in Greek *as well*. Historically, however, this is highly implausible: as we have seen, there is no evidence whatever to support the idea of scriptural readings in Hebrew in Constantinople or any other European centre at this time, and even in Israel, where it is natural to suppose that there was most support for Hebrew, there is little evidence of its use in synagogues at this date. Moreover, in everything that follows, the text of the Novella speaks of Greek and other languages, without mentioning a reading in Hebrew. Consequently, it seems best to take *kai* as strengthening *ten hellenida* (meaning something like 'indeed'), rather than as meaning 'also'. One side, then, wanted the reading to be in Hebrew (alone), while the other side wanted it to be in Greek.

It is also clear from the other evidence we have considered that, whether such was his intention or not, the emperor came down on the side of tradition. The partisans of Hebrew in attempting to supplant the Greek reading (based on Aquila or some other version) were endeavouring to overturn ancient custom. Eventually, as we know, they succeeded. The controversy recorded in the Novella can be seen as a step on the road leading towards the replacement of Greek by Hebrew in the synagogues. In 553 Justinian says the dispute has been going on for a long time. Months? Years? We do not know. But at least the Novella gives us firm evidence about a deliberate attempt to introduce Hebrew at a relatively early date.

CONCLUSIONS

What emerges from this survey? Surely the first and most important point is how very little solid information we have about the use of Hebrew before the ninth century. Then, quite suddenly, from around 800 we have the first evidence of a real familiarity with the Hebrew language and Hebrew literature in certain places. But even then caution requires that we stress how very limited that evidence is, both in its

scope and in its location.

So far as spoken Hebrew is concerned, the evidence supports the claim (which has never, in any case, been seriously contested) that Hebrew was neither a mother tongue nor a regular medium of speech in Europe during the period in question.

What of written Hebrew? There is no evidence before 800 either of composition of literary or other work in Hebrew or of familiarity with imported Hebrew writings. From the ninth century, and more widely from the tenth century, we do have evidence of both.

This phenomenon is to be distinguished from the interest in Hebrew attested on some Jewish tombstones from as early as the late fourth century in Sicily, and manifested in the addition of a pious exclamation, such as 'Peace!' or 'Peace be upon Israel!', to epitaphs in other languages. This practice seems to be unrelated to the use of Hebrew as a main written language. It is tempting to see it as spreading northwards through Italy from Sicily to arrive in southern Gaul and Spain in the late seventh century, although it should be pointed out that Frey's minute study of the stamps on bricks and tiles found in the Monteverde catacomb in Rome, where a few such inscriptions have been recorded, revealed none later than the time of Diocletian (late 3rd/early 4th century). The practice may be due, conceivably, to immigration from lands where Hebrew was more widely used; but it is also possible that, in some cases at least, these mottos were employed by people with no real knowledge of Hebrew, who copied the Hebrew formulae from written talismans or from other tombstones.

Regarding the use of Hebrew for the synagogue liturgy and for Bible readings, it must be said that the datable evidence is very sparse indeed until the ninth century. The only firm contrary indication is in the Novella of Justinian, which records an unsuccessful attempt to introduce Hebrew into the synagogues as the language of Bible reading (there is no mention of Hebrew worship) around the middle of the sixth century. The firm imperial decision in favour of the vernacular must have effectively nipped this movement in the bud, because we hear no

more about it for centuries.

If only we could date the bilingual inscriptions of southern Italy more closely we would be able to tell a good deal more about the arrival of Hebrew in that corner of Europe. The assumption that the catacomb of Venosa was abandoned some time before the cemetery with its dated inscriptions in Hebrew came into use at the beginning of the ninth century seems plausible but has not been proved. It is also reasonable to suppose that this was one of the first parts of Europe where Hebrew was established, probably by immigration from Egypt or elsewhere. Bognetti has advanced the interesting and important argument that Jewish immigration to Venosa in particular was due, in part at least, to the anti-catholic and anti-Byzantine stance of the Arian Lombard rulers in the early seventh century.⁵³ This is around the time, we should remember, that the Byzantine emperor Heraclius decreed the forced baptism of the Jews of the empire. Some emigration of Jews at that time is to be expected. That Heraclius asked the Visigothic and Frankish kings in the west to implement the same policy may be an indication, as Bognetti suggests, that Byzantine Jews were emigrating there, although there may be a quite different explanation.

The use of Hebrew is well attested in some non-European Jewish communities which were under Byzantine rule at that time, but Bognetti further argues that it was the exilarch in Babylon who exploited anti-Byzantine sentiment to establish and extend his influence in this corner of Europe. And here we are at the crux of the question of possible sources of pro-Hebrew pressure in Europe: did it emanate from the Jewish authorities in the Land of Israel or in Babylonia? Either scenario is inherently possible, and indeed the one does not really exclude the other. We have evidence in the *Chronicle of Ahimaatz* of close contacts between south Italy and Israel.⁵⁴ The rabbis and *apostuli*

53 Colafemmina, 'Insedimenti', pp. 211, expresses disagreement with Bognetti's argument.

54 B. Klar, ed., *Megillat Ahimaatz* (Jerusalem 5734 A.M.), pp. 16f.

mentioned on the epitaph of the young Faustina from Venosa could easily have come from Israel rather than from Babylon, as Bognetti supposes.⁵⁵

Once the Hebrew liturgy is introduced into Europe, it is the Palestinian, not the Babylonian rite that prevails in Byzantium and Italy, and indeed in western Europe with exception of Spain, which was by that time under Arab rule. The rabbinic legal practices, too, seem to follow Palestinian rather than Babylonian models. It is instructive in this respect to observe the similarities between the Egyptian marriage deed dated 417, mentioned above, and a Byzantine marriage deed dated 1022 from Maustaura in Asia Minor.⁵⁶ All this, however, belongs to a much later date, and some Babylonian influence in the early days cannot be ruled out, even if there is little evidence to support it. The few indications we have support the idea of deliberate religious interference from Israel coupled with some immigration from Egypt.

55 On the institution of the Palestinian apostolate see the classic work of Avraham Yaari, *Shiluhei Eretz Yisrael* (Jerusalem 5711 A.M.); although it is very sketchy on the ancient period, the book does establish the early origins of the institution. Simhah Assaf, *Tequfat hageonim vesifrutah* (Jerusalem 5715/1955) pp. 102–110, suggests that the Babylonian and Palestinian leadership had an agreement to divide the world between themselves, with Egypt, Byzantium and Italy being under Palestinian influence. But Assaf does point out the growing Babylonian influence on Palestine itself. Assaf's account is very sweeping, is not well documented, and is suspect at several points.

56 J. Mann, *Jews in Egypt and Palestine* vol. 2 (Oxford 1922) p. 93f.; see N. de Lange, *Greek Jewish Texts from the Cairo Genizah* (Tübingen, forthcoming).