Abstract

The Mishneh Torah, authored by Maimonides (Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon, Cordoba, Spain, 4898-1136 – Fustat, Egypt, 4964-1204), is the most important Halakhic work composed since the Talmud. Although Maimonides lived in an Arabic-speaking environment, the one thousands chapters of his treatise are written in a fine Hebrew, employing the Talmudic language. This study seeks to clarify Maimonides’ linguistic perception; describe the development of his language; and offer a systematic analysis of two key linguistic aspects: vocabulary and syntax.

The study is based on the thirteenth book in the Mishneh Torah, Sefer Mishpatim (Book of Civil Laws), which comprises five sections and 75 chapters. The book is remarkable for its particularly well-crafted form. Some 20 pages of drafts in Maimonides’ own hand survive from this book. The draft is useful in clarifying the quality of the other manuscripts, while its comparison to the final version exposes the method and linguistic considerations Maimonides applied in formulating his text. In addition to the draft, we are also in possession of faithful testaments to the final version of the treatise, most importantly the Escorial manuscript, which was produced from the original version. The findings from the limited corpus of Sefer Mishpatim were compared to the broader corpus of the entire Mishneh Torah.

The first chapter offers an introduction to the study, beginning with a discussion of the need for new research into Maimonides’ language to add to the existing studies. This followed by an examination of the format of the new editions of the Mishneh Torah, which are based on manuscripts rather than later printed editions. The conclusion is that in order to provide a comprehensive clarification of linguistic aspects, it is necessary to base the research on a direct review of the manuscripts. Examining the wording of the formal testaments on which this study is based reveals three stages in the writing of the treatise: a draft (autograph); a first edition (the Yemenite manuscripts); and a second edition (the Oriental manuscripts). The relationship between the manuscripts is elaborated on the basis of religious laws in which changes of content occurred, and through a discussion of the linguistic difficulties created by incomplete corrections of content.

The second chapter presents Maimonides’ own views and practice in linguistic matters. Maimonides attached importance to using a fine and clear language as a value in its own right that exists in any language per se, and not solely as a derivative of the sacred status of the Hebrew language. He argued that the characteristics of elegant language include a uniform language, rather than one constituting an admixture of two of more languages; faithfulness to grammatical rules; clear and concise language; and a style that is pleasant to read. In light of this linguistic perception, we examine the linguistic changes Maimonides made to the Mishneh Torah in the three above-mentioned stages of writing. The review of Maimonides’ linguistic corrections highlights his perception of concise and clear writing as a key value, alongside attention to the beauty of language and a diverse and rich style.

The third chapter discusses vocabulary. Talmudic Hebrew is the default choice in the treatise, as Maimonides himself declared in his introduction to Sefer HaMitzvot (the Book of Commandments). The discussion focuses on words not in use in Talmudic Hebrew, examining the scope of influence of the Biblical language, Aramaic, and Arabic on the vocabulary. Lexical and semantic changes are examined alongside changes in the use of prepositions and verbal agreement, as well as instances of extreme change in frequency. The chapter ends with some examples of deliberate diversity in vocabulary, reflecting Maimonides’ careful attention to this field and the importance he attached to achieving a fine style.

An overall evaluation suggests that around 95 percent of the words and forms used in Sefer Mishpatim are of Talmudic origin. Accordingly, the language of the Mishneh Torah is consistent with the author’s intention of writing his treatise in this language. Nevertheless, contact languages have left a clear impression. Biblical Hebrew contributed to the lexicon of the Mishneh Torah, particularly in terms of lexical entries. Arabic did not leave direct lexical values in the Mishneh Torah, and its main influence can be seen in the meanings attached to words and in the field of prepositions and verbal agreement. Arabic influence also led in some instances to the choice of words from Biblical Hebrew or use of rare terms in the Talmudic language that have close parallels in Arabic. The Aramaic contribution focused mainly on lexical entries (including legalistic terms presented in their Aramaic form), as well as in a number of new meanings.

The fourth chapter examines in depth 10 syntactical subjects from the fields of formal syntax, nominal phrases, verbal sentences, clauses, and sentence structure. The chapter ends with several examples of syntactical diversity reflecting Maimonides’ awareness of this field. Taken as a whole, the findings reveal regularity in syntactical structures. Maimonides was strongly aware of the syntax of Talmudic Hebrew, and generally sought to maintain the structural forms of this language (an exception is the use of numerical pronouns), while adopting a flexible approach to the meanings and functions of these forms. In more than one instance, a new meaning was attributed to a syntactical form under the influence of Arabic. In some structures, the new use is measured and restricted in order to meet Maimonides’ expressive needs.

Two appendixes are attached to the study. The first presents the draft fragments from Sefer Mishpatim that have already been published, alongside the final version. All these sections were reread from the facsimile manuscripts. The second appendix presents two new pages from the draft version of the Mishneh Torah published in this study for the first time. These appendices form the basis for the discussion of Maimonides’ use of Hebrew in the second chapter of this article.

The linguistic explorations in this study underscore the importance of comparing Maimonides’ Hebrew with the Talmudic language, Aramaic, and Arabic in order to describe it properly. They expand on the findings of previous studies in light of comprehensive data and expose innovations in the fields of vocabulary and syntax that have not previously been discussed.

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