Moshe Bar-Asher, *Studies in the Language of the Sages*, Volume 4. Mossad Bialik, Jerusalem, 2024.

This is the fourth book in a series by one of the leading scholars of Rabbinic Hebrew in recent times, Prof. Moshe Bar-Asher. The nineteen articles in this collection join dozens of articles in previous volumes, bringing the total series to over seventy chapters for the benefit of scholars of Rabbinic Hebrew and those interested in the field.

Like in its predecessors in the series, most of the articles in this volume were previously published on various platforms. A number of articles appear for the first time in this volume. The book is divided into six sections: “Central Questions in the Study of the Language of the Sages,” “Various Grammar Issues,” “Noun Forms,” “Passive Participle Forms,” “Midrash and Language,” and “Evaluations of Transmission and Research.” As is evident from this division, most of the book’s chapters deal with grammatical issues, but a significant portion of the chapters deal with other matters. Particularly noteworthy is the section on Midrash and language, which, although only part of it deals with Rabbinic Hebrew, offers insights into a field that has not been extensively studied.

The first section contains two articles that address core issues in Mishnaic Hebrew. The first chapter discusses the question of the originality of the language features found in the early manuscripts of the Mishnah. “Original” in this context refers to the language as it was spoken in everyday life during the Tannaic period. According to Bar-Asher, parallel documentation of a linguistic feature in manuscripts on the one hand, and in epigraphy, early transcriptions, or the Samaritan tradition on the other hand – is evidence of originality. However, in his opinion, solid evidence from reliable manuscripts is enough to consider a documented feature as original, even without parallel documentation. There are borderline cases and cases where the language forms in the manuscripts are not original, and Bar-Asher provides examples of these.

The second chapter deals with the existence of literary elements in Mishnaic Hebrew that do not stem from the spoken language. The assumption underlying the study is that the regular language in the Mishnah is the spoken language of the Tannaitic period, and therefore, when it is possible to identify deviations in the language in the Mishnah for literary reasons, one should conclude that these are language elements that do not reflect the spoken language. Bar-Asher presents examples of this in cases of vocabulary borrowed from the Bible, in biblical grammatical forms, and in biblical insertions into the text. To these, he adds examples of passages whose vocabulary or structure is distinctly literary.

It should be noted that these two chapters incorporate concise reviews that are not directly related to the main topics. Still, the reader may find them highly beneficial: a review of the important manuscripts of Tannaitic literature (pp. 10-12), a review of the state of research on Rabbinic Hebrew (pp. 28-30), and a review of the work of the renowned Hebrew and Aramaic scholar, Professor Yechezkel Kutscher (pp. 32-34).

The second part, “Various Grammar Issues,” opens with an article documenting exceptional grammatical forms, the common denominator of which is that they all appear in the participle form in the Kaufmann Manuscript. There are specific forms that appear primarily in isolated instances, such as the vocalization of the middle letter of the root (עי” ן הפועל) with a *pataḥ* instead of a *tsere* before a guttural consonant (e.g., “מְגַלַּח”). There are also broader phenomena that appear both in the participle form and in other forms, such as the *yod* that serves as a mater lectionis after a *schwa* (see Y.N. Epstein, *Introduction to the Text of the Mishnah*, Jerusalem 1948, p. 1243).

The following chapter, although included in the “Various Grammar Issues” section, actually deals with two semantic issues: 1. Bar-Asher shows that the word “תחילה,” which usually serves as an adverb, in one place serves as an adjective according to some textual versions. 2. He discusses two terms in which ellipsis occurred: “תשמיש” instead of “תשמיש המיטה” and “מגילה” instead of “מגילת תענית.”

The next chapter, the fifth in the book, discusses two expressions that have contradictory meanings: one is the word “אפשר,” which can mean both “possible” or “impossible.” The author agrees with the view that this situation is a result of the haplology of the negation element and shows several variations in the vocalization of the form. The second expression is “מוּסָף על” which is a passive form, sometimes replaced by the expression “מוֹסִיף על” – an active form. In Bar-Asher’s opinion, the first form is the original, and he is uncertain when the second form began to be used.

The sixth chapter deals with the phenomenon of attraction (*hagrarah*) in pairs of words. This is a well-known phenomenon in languages in general and in Hebrew in particular, where the form of one word influences the form of another. Usually, the influence is unidirectional, but here, Bar-Asher argues for an innovation – a mutual influence between a pair of words, where each one affects its counterpart. The terms in question are two from the halakhot of the leper: “הֶסְגֵּר” and “הַחְלֵט.” The vowelization of the “ה” with a *pataḥ* in this form is unusual, and in the word “הַחְלֵט” it can be speculated that it is influenced by the guttural stop. In the word “הסגר” the “ה” is vowelized with a *segol*, except for two instances in the Kaufmann Manuscript of the Mishnah, where the “ה” appears with a *pataḥ*, likely influenced by the parallel term “הַחְלֵט.” Bar-Asher suggests that there was also influence in the opposite direction: in the inflected forms of “החלט,” we find that the initial “ה” was dropped as a result of haplology, rendering it “חֲלֵיטוֹ” instead of “החליטו” (Negaim 7,4). We did not find such a shift in the basic form “החלט,” and according to Bar-Asher, the original form was preserved thanks to its attraction to “הסגר.” There is no doubt that this is a bold hypothesis, yet the possibility that phonetic factors prevented the dropping of this “ה” cannot be completely ruled out. According to the data we currently have on the phonetics of Rabbinic Hebrew, it seems that a definitive negation of this possibility is not within reach.

The book’s third section includes two chapters that present a detailed review of selected noun forms in Mishnaic Hebrew. Chapter 7 is taken from Bar-Asher’s comprehensive book on noun forms in the Mishnah, and it examines the מַפְעָל form. Chapter 8 examines three forms: פַעְלֹק, פַעְלוֹק and פַעְלוּק (the “ק” represents the fourth consonant in the root). The review is done in great detail, as is the author’s custom, and there is no name in the Mishnah that belongs to these forms that has not been recorded and, where necessary, discussed.

The first chapter in the fourth section (“Passive Participle Forms”), the ninth chapter in the book, also addresses noun forms but takes a different approach. The chapter deals with the participle form מְפֻעָל, which includes, out of over a hundred forms documented in the Mishnah, only six forms, each of which raises questions for clarification. For example, the form “מְרוּסָּס” (= broken into pieces) appears in that form in most versions of the text, but in some of them, the form “מרוצץ” appears in its place. Bar-Asher is uncertain whether the root רס”ס is a secondary variant of רצ”ץ or an independent root and that its replacement with רצ”ץ in some of the witnesses is the product of later interpretation. He favors the second option.

The following chapter discusses the participle form מְפַעָל, which is a variant of the standard passive participle form מְפֻעָל. These are forms that Hanoch Yelon has already described. Their existence can be inferred only from the defective spelling missing a “ו” in the middle vowel, such as “מְסַכָּן” (=מסוכן), “מְפָרָשׁ” (=מפורש), where the vowelization always indicates a u/o vowel in the first letter of the root (פ” א הפועל), contrary to the form documented in the consonantal text. Bar-Asher accepts the explanation that these forms follow the form of Aramaic, but unlike Yelon, who vocalizes the middle letter of the root (עי”ן הפועל) with a *pataḥ*, as in Aramaic, he prefers to vocalize it with a *kamatz*, as is customary in Hebrew. He describes in detail several forms of this type that are documented in the Mishnah and suggests that two forms that appear in the Mishnah only once – “מְנַפְנֶפֶת” (Ohalot 8:5) and “מְנַתְּזִים” (Baba Kama 2:1) – also belong to this pattern.

The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of when this form began to be used. Bar-Asher insists on the fact that the change in the vowel of the first letter of the verb (*pataḥ*/*kamatz* instead of *ḥolam/shuruk*) eliminates the distinction between active and passive in the feminine forms, which in any case come in the form of מְפַעֶלֶת, and in the forms of roots whose third letter is *yod* ((שורשי ל” י there is no distinction between active and passive in all inflections. According to Bar-Asher, it is unlikely that this occurred in the spoken language, and therefore, one should conclude that these forms came into use under the influence of Aramaic only after Hebrew ceased to be spoken. In this context, it should be noted that Aramaic was already a dominant, perhaps primary, language during the Tannaitic period, and it profoundly influenced Hebrew even when it was a spoken language. Therefore, assuming that Aramaic influence could not have occurred in the spoken language is unnecessary. Furthermore, a similar cancellation of the contrast between active and passive occurred in Biblical Hebrew, in the inflection of the verb forms פּוֹלֵל and פוֹלַל in roots whose middle letter is “ו” or “ע” (פועלי ע” ו וע” ע) which are identical in most of their forms (for example, the form “כּוֹנְנוּ” could be either active or passive, and only context determines which).

The eleventh chapter of the book deals with the change that occurred in the form מִטַּלְטְלִין – as it usually appears in the early manuscripts, that is, the passive form, which is morpho-semantically appropriate (a passive form of the נפע “ל stem – “things that can be moved”). However, in oral traditions and also in Modern Hebrew, it appears in the form “מְטַלְטְלִין” – an active form of the פיע”ל stem. Bar-Asher hypothesizes that this form arose by analogy to the Aramaic form “מְקַרְקְעֵי,” which is commonly paired with the form “מטלטלי,” the Aramaic equivalent of “מטלטלין,” in the Babylonian Talmud.

The next chapter, the last in this section, deals with the vowel pointing of the passive participle form מֻפְעָל in the Kaufmann Manuscript. Bar-Asher found that a relatively high percentage of the forms are vowelized with a *pataḥ* instead of the usual *kamatz* in the Tiberian tradition of vowelization, such as “מוּבְחַר,” “מוּחְלַט” and more. He hypothesizes that this was the tradition of the vocalizer for this form, while in most places he vocalized with a *kamatz* per the Tiberian tradition. Regarding the very existence of vocalization with a pataḥ, he explains that it resulted from an analogy to the past tense form (הֻפְעַל).

The fifth section is “Midrash and Language.” Its first chapter, chapter 13 of the book, presents a study of one homily from Esther Rabbah (*siman* 10). This study focuses on the homily’s content, while a minor part deals with its language or, more precisely, its style. Bar-Asher argues (sections 37, 41) that most of the midrash is in Biblical Hebrew, but it seems better to say, in the spirit of what he wrote at the end of the article (sections 58, 60), that most of the midrash is constructed from paraphrases of the Bible. Besides the characteristics of the Rabbinic Hebrew found in the text of the homily that Bar-Asher points out (paragraphs 47-49), it is worth adding the repetitive structure “ראש ל” + [collective noun] in the sense of “the important one in the group, the leader.” This is very familiar from the Mishnah in Tractate Avot (“ראש לשועלים” [leader of foxes] – Avot 4:15) and is not found in the Bible.

The fourteenth chapter deals with the homiletical technique in three sermons where the preacher seizes on a deficient spelling lacking a “yod” to propose an alternative reading of the biblical word, adding an additional dimension to the biblical text. For example, regarding the word “הַפִּלַּגְשִׁים” [the concubines] (Genesis 25:6), referring to Abraham’s wives, Genesis Rabbah (61:4) suggests that the deficient spelling – “הַפִּלַּגְשִׁם” implies that he had only one concubine.

Interpretive reading of this kind does not usually match the tradition of vocalization. Bar-Asher nevertheless believes that such interpretations were created both before and after the establishment of vocalization, and even interpreters familiar with the written vocalization tradition referred at times only to the consonantal text in their homilies.

Rashi’s commentary cites the three homilies discussed, and Bar-Asher quotes Rashi and compares his version of the text to the version in the Midrashim. In this context, it is worth noting that the only source Bar-Asher cites for one of the homilies is Numbers Rabbah, which, according to Bar-Asher, was compiled between the years 1100-1500 (this is true for the first part, Parashot 1-14) which is after Rashi’s death (1105). Therefore, Numbers Rabbah is not the source for Rashi’s commentary, but rather some earlier source – perhaps Rabbi Moshe Hadarshan – was the source for both versions (see Ch. Mack, “*Zemano, mekomo u-tefutsato shel midrash be-midbar rabbah*,” in M.B. Lerner et al. [eds.], *Te’udah 11: meḥkarim be-midrashei ha-agadah – sefer zikaron le-Tsvi Me‘ir Rabinovits*, Tel Aviv, 1996, pp. 93-94).

The following chapter discusses the peculiar vocalization found in the Kaufmann Manuscript of the Mishnah: in eight of the occurrences of “עגלה” (a female calf), the vocalization is “עֲגָלָה.” In most of these, the word has a definite article. Bar-Asher offers a brilliant explanation: In Genesis Rabbah (94:3), there is a homily that claims that the wagons Joseph sent to Jacob were an allusion to the topic of *‘eglah ‘arufah* (the beheaded heifer). Bar-Asher suggests that this homiletical interpretation possibly inspired the connection of the two words, influencing the vocalization tradition of the Kaufmann Manuscript.

The sixteenth chapter examines three homiletical interpretations, each of which is based on a substantial linguistic point. One of them is the interpretation found in the prayer book: “Do not read ‘הליכות,’ but ‘הלכות’” – meaning, the word “*halikhot*” (which is a plural form of the noun “*halikha*” [walking]) in the verse under discussion should be interpreted as if it were written “halakhot” (= religious laws). Bar-Asher notes that the form “halakhot” is also an action noun from the same root, and we find that there are words in the Mishnah that come in both forms – פְּעִילָה and פְעָלָה – without any difference in meaning between them. Therefore, reading “halakhot” instead of “halikhot” does not entirely detach the term “halikhot” from its original meaning.

The seventeenth chapter, the last chapter in this section, deals with the homiletical interpretation of names. The first part of the chapter presents the various approaches in Rabbinic literature to the meaning of names. Bar-Asher then discusses the homiletical interpretations of the names in the lists of names in the Book of Chronicles. In the final and main part of the chapter, he discusses the names in the Book of Ruth, their etymology, and their literary significance.

The sixth and final part of the book includes two chapters whose common theme is evaluations of transmission and research. The first chapter addresses the nature of the corrections added by a scribe who added comments in the margins of the Kaufmann Manuscript, who did so later than the original scribe and the scribe who vocalized the text. According to Bar-Asher, his corrections distort original versions of the test, and “his contribution as an annotator of the Kaufmann Manuscript is marginal and unimportant, and to a large extent superfluous.”

The second chapter in this section and the last in the book reviews the work of Prof. Shimon Sharvit in the study of Rabbinic Hebrew. Most of the review focuses on the book *A Phonology of Mishnaic Hebrew (Analyzed Materials)* (Jerusalem, 2016). Bar-Asher also presents his own innovations on several matters, such as the word “רֵיקָם,” about which Bar-Asher concludes from its declensions that there is a [m] > [n] transformation at the ends of words.

In conclusion, the book is outstanding, full of innovative research on various topics in Rabbinic Hebrew and related fields, and it joins the author’s previous books in making significant contributions to our knowledge of the history of the Hebrew language. We hope that the author will continue to enrich the study of the Hebrew language with his insights and innovations for many more years.