

# Notes Concerning Two Nineteenth-Century Hebrew Textbooks

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## E. N. Carvalho's *Key to the Hebrew Tongue*

In his surveys of Hebrew in America,<sup>1</sup> Professor William Chomsky has always given special attention to the *Mafteah Leshon Ibrit, A Key to the Hebrew Tongue* published in 1815 at Philadelphia by Emanuel Nunes Carvalho, a Sephardi immigrant. Carvalho, whose *Mafteah* was the first chrestomathy and grammar of Hebrew written by an unconverted Jew and published in the United States, had been born in London in 1771 and died in Philadelphia in 1817. Besides his book's historical significance, of special interest is the fact that, "unlike similar textbooks in Hebrew published during this period and throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, this text did not restrict itself to biblical Hebrew but included also a goodly number of talmudic words, as well as some interesting original coinages, such as *se'adot* (pins), *tartzan* (respondent)".<sup>2</sup> The question immediately raises itself as to why Carvalho adopted such an unorthodox procedure in his work. Professor Chomsky suggests that perhaps this was "some type of protest

<sup>1</sup> William Chomsky, "Hebrew in America," Chapter 13 of his *Hebrew: The Eternal Language* (Philadelphia, 1957), pp. 245-69; "Hebrew Grammar and Textbook Writing in Early Nineteenth Century America," in *Essays in American Jewish History* (Cincinnati, 1958), pp. 123-45; "The Hebrew Language on American Soil" (Chapter 14) of his *The Hebrew Language in its Evolution* (Jerusalem, 1967), pp. 275-99 (in Hebrew).

<sup>2</sup> *Hebrew: Eternal Language*, p. 252.

against the prevalent custom in the [other Hebrew] textbooks" or that perhaps in this way Carvalho "wished to make clear the richness, flexibility and vitality of the Hebrew tongue."<sup>3</sup>

Upon further investigation, however, it appears that Carvalho's work was not original and that it was directly based on a much larger work which appeared in his native London in 1772, the mammoth *Kehilath Jahacob* dictionary and thesaurus of Jacob Rodrigues Moreira. The *Kehilath Jahacob* contained, among other things, more than four thousand Spanish words arranged in fifty-eight topical chapters with English and Hebrew equivalents. Virtually all of Carvalho's chrestomathy and even his lists of grammatical terms and particles are found in Moreira's work. Thus, for example, of the two "neologisms" cited above, the first is found on page 52 of Moreira, in the chapter dealing with "women's dress and their ornaments," while the second is found on page 57, in the chapter dealing with "the congregation and synagogue."

Thus, although Carvalho's book was the first of its kind in America, it did not represent the individual work of its author. The question of "unorthodox procedure" raised above still remains, however—why did Moreira include post-biblical and newly-coined material in his work? The answer is supplied by Professor Chaim Rabin, in an article<sup>4</sup> in which he concludes that Moreira based his work on a living tradition of spoken Hebrew, "on a tradition based on learned disputation, letters and oral communications"<sup>5</sup> common among eighteenth-century English Jewry. As Professor Rabin writes, "It is well known that, during the Middle Ages, the Jews of Western Europe sometimes needed to speak in Hebrew on certain occasions, for example, to conceal matters from non-Jews or to make contact with Jews speaking a foreign mother-tongue. Hebrew speech was also used . . . to spice a conversation with quotations and Rabbinic phrases, and as a sign of politeness and refinement. . . . Remnants of this custom were still in existence among the Jews of Germany and Holland until the

<sup>3</sup> *Hebrew Language in its Evolution*, pp. 286-87.

<sup>4</sup> "Spoken Hebrew 125 Years Ago," in *Leshonenu La-Am* 137 (1963), pp. 111-45 (in Hebrew).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

[Nazi] Holocaust.”<sup>6</sup> Evidently, then, Carvalho viewed his textbook as the first step in introducing such a custom to the Jews of the New World.

### Isaac Nordheimer's *Critical Grammar of the Hebrew Language*

The *Critical Grammar of the Hebrew Language*, published in two volumes at New York in 1838 and 1841 by Isaac Nordheimer, is considered by William Chomsky to be “the most thorough and most scientific Hebrew grammar published in America” during the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, in comparison with other grammars of the period with respect both to form and to content, Nordheimer's work is certainly superior. Nevertheless, I consider the actual intrinsic value of the *Critical Grammar* to have been overrated by Chomsky, and I seek to demonstrate this below. First, however, some remarks concerning the author of the work under discussion.

Isaac Nordheimer was born in 1809 at Memelsdorf, Bavaria. Receiving a traditional Hebraic education in his youth, he subsequently studied at the Rabbinical school in Pressburg, Hungary, then under the direction of the noted rabbi and talmudist Moses Sofer. Besides his extensive Jewish education, Nordheimer also received a good secular education, studying in the gymnasium and then in the University of Würzburg and finally completing his studies at the University of Munich, where in 1834 he received his Ph.D. in Oriental Languages. Due especially to the political turmoil engulfing Europe at the time, Nordheimer immigrated to America, arriving in New York in 1835, where he was almost immediately offered a teaching post as professor of Arabic, Syriac and other Oriental Languages and acting professor of Hebrew at the University of the City of New York. He began teaching there in 1836 and soon after also became attached to the Union Theological Seminary of New York, where he continued his teaching and

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 135-36. Interestingly, in this article Rabin cites two other dictionaries which, like Carvalho's, drew heavily on Moreira: Isaac Lyon's *Hebrew and English Spelling Book*, published at London in 1837, and Abigail Lindo's *A Hebrew and English and English and Hebrew Vocabulary*, also published at London in 1837.

<sup>7</sup> Chomsky, *Hebrew: Eternal Language*, p. 254.

publishing until his untimely death at the age of thirty-three in 1842.

To turn now to the work under consideration, let me note first that its very title *Critical Grammar* is misleading, being merely the English translation of the then common German *Kritische Grammatik*, a term implying, according to Nordheimer, that the grammarian "analytically investigate, and synthetically exhibit and explain, those laws which give rise to the phenomena of formation and inflection" in a language, ultimately reducing grammar to "a completely organized system"<sup>8</sup> Although Nordheimer does consider his analysis to have such scholarly merits, his work is still basically meant as a teaching aid for the student of Biblical Hebrew. As he himself writes, "While [my] labors may not prove void of interest to the scholar already conversant with the language, they will render its acquisition an agreeable intellectual exercise for the learner. . . . It has been one of the author's constant aims throughout the progress of his work, to promote the convenience of the student in mastering the details of the language."<sup>9</sup>

With respect, however, both to scholarly questions and to pedagogical considerations, the book falls short. So far as its scholarship is concerned, the book is basically a digest, a summary of the important Hebrew grammars of the period, in particular the *Ausführliches grammatisch-kritisches Lehrgebäude der hebräischen Sprache* of Friedrich Wilhelm Gesenius (Halle, 1817) and the *Kritische Grammatik der hebräischen Sprache* of Heinrich Ewald (Leipzig, 1827). As Nordheimer himself writes, his main "aim has been to preserve a course intermediate to those which they have pursued."<sup>10</sup> Thus Nordheimer himself does not really add anything of significance to what Gesenius and Ewald said before him, but rather he tries to balance the sometimes conflicting opinions of the two authors, generally in favor of Gesenius.

As to its pedagogical significance, it is quite clear that other grammars, less copious in scope, were much more successful in the

<sup>8</sup> Isaac Nordheimer, *Critical Grammar of the Hebrew Language* (New York, 1838), pp. iii-iv.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xxiii, 281.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxii.

classroom. Thus Chomsky mentions a *Hebrew Grammar* of one Moses Stuart, professor of Sacred Literature at Andover Theological Seminary (1821), which went through seven editions, in contrast to Nordheimer's which, with difficulty, went through two editions only.<sup>11</sup> At best, then, Nordheimer's grammar could be (and was) used as a *reference grammar* by the American student of biblical Hebrew.

But indeed herein, I feel, lies the real significance of the work, for Nordheimer's grammar gave the American student not conversant with the German language a convenient summary and interpretation of the works of the most important European Hebraists of the time written in that language. Indeed, it is just possible that Nordheimer actually realized this. As he writes, "The author presents his work to *the American public*, as a slight testimonial of the warm feelings of gratitude which he entertains for the kind reception he has experienced in this the land of his adoption."<sup>12</sup> (*Italics mine—J.F.*).

Nordheimer's grammar, then, is not of really significant value as a critical, scientific, original piece of work. Nor is it of great value as a pedagogical work. Its significance lies in the fact that it transferred to American soil and in English garb the first—and in some ways the finest—fruits of the rising European Hebraic tradition.

<sup>11</sup> Chomsky, "Hebrew Grammar and Textbook Writing," pp. 131 ff.

<sup>12</sup> Nordheimer, *op. cit.*, p. xxiv.