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Christoph Hopp

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Semitic Linguistics between Cairo and Jerusalem

Israel Ben-Ze'ev's History of the Semitic Languages (1929)

Christoph Hopp

ON A SATURDAY IN late February 1932, King Fuad visited the Faculties of Arts and Law of the Egyptian University on the occasion of the recent opening of their new domiciles in the city of Giza. Eastward across the Nile, the minarets of Cairo's al-Azhar towered venerably. The event in which Fuad and the Minister of Education, Hilmi Isa, took part was specifically dedicated to the distribution of some academic degrees *honoris causa* to outstanding scholars, among them both Egyptians and foreigners. Immediately following the ceremony, Taha Hussein, the dean of the Faculty of Arts, was summoned to the Egyptian Ministry of Education. He admonished those responsible for the event for honoring only supporters of the current government, and, consequently, demanded they also decorate scholars belonging to the political opposition to ensure that politics did not meddle in academic affairs.¹

I would like to express my gratitude to the Ernst Ludwig Ehrlich Studienwerk (ELES) for the generous funding of my research.

1. *Oriente Moderno* 12.3 (1932): 166–67; Donald Malcolm Reid, *Cairo University and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Cambridge, 1990), 120–27. See also Abd al-Mun'im al-Dusuqi al-Jumay'i, *Al-jami'ah al-misriyah wa-l-mujtama'* 1908–1940 (Cairo, 1983), 73–74.

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Since 1925, the Egyptian University, established in 1908, was a state-run business that enjoyed royal support. Israel Ben-Ze'ev, or Wolfensohn, with whose monograph *Tarikh al-lughat al-samiyah* (History of the Semitic languages), written in Arabic and published in Cairo in 1929, this essay is concerned, may have been present at that 1932 event, for he was then working at the Egyptian University as a lecturer in Semitic languages. He was born in Jerusalem's Meah Shearim quarter in 1899, where he had a traditional upbringing, and moved to Cairo in 1922, the year that Egypt officially, though not factually, gained independence from British colonial rule and the British Mandate over Israel/Palestine was ratified. *History of the Semitic Languages* is of interest not only from the perspective of the history of science. Its publication coincided with the deadly wave of riots that inundated British Mandatory Palestine in 1929. In light of these circumstances, it is also documentation of Ben-Ze'ev's fragile position as a Jewish scholar who clung to the conviction that interreligious and interethnic dialogue is dependent on understanding each other's languages and the traditions they carry with them.

In methodological terms, the present essay is a sociopolitical reading of *History of the Semitic Languages* (henceforth *HSL*), a significant monograph for the intellectual and academic history both of post-World War I Egypt and Mandatory Palestine. In hindsight, as the fight over the Eastern Mediterranean turned dire, biographies like Ben-Ze'ev's appear peripheral. Yet it is worthwhile to sometimes loosen, if not to detach, the 1920s from their future. The political situation back then, though volatile, was still tranquil enough to allow for such paths as that taken by Ben-Ze'ev to Cairo and its university. Hopes for a stable and prosperous Middle East were not only nourished but received their justification by such paths. As political programs and national ideologies were still very much in the making, room was left for cooperation across ethnic and religious boundaries. Ben-Ze'ev was not alone in his endeavors, either on the Jewish or the Arab side. Some of his companions will appear in the pages that follow, such as Ali al-Inani, Ahmad Amin, and Murad Farag. With al-Inani, who was his teacher at the Egyptian University, Ben-Ze'ev shared the conviction that in order to progress, Arabic language scholarship must strive for collaboration with colleagues in the West. In a similar vein, Amin, the publisher of *HSL*, promoted the idea of the general good of the sciences. Farag was an Egyptian Karaite Jew whose major linguistic work, dedicated to the com-

parison of Hebrew and Arabic, was published in Cairo at about the same time as Ben-Ze'ev's.

The present essay contributes to two interrelated fields of research. On the one hand, as partly outlined in the previous paragraph, it explores the sociopolitical circumstances and the intellectual atmosphere that enabled Ben-Ze'ev to compose *HSL*. It thus contributes to the ongoing reconstruction of Jewish participation in the Nahda—the Arabic enlightenment and revival movement. As an Ashkenazic Middle Eastern Jew, Ben-Ze'ev belonged sociologically to a minority within a minority. He was, as other Jews who participated in the Nahda, also part of the Tehiya, its Hebrew equivalent.² Together with other Jewish scholars and intellectuals such as David Yellin, Yosef Yo'el Rivlin, and Joseph Horovitz, he envisioned a bilingual Arabic-Hebrew academic landscape. This vision and some of the difficulties that hampered its materialization are touched on in this essay.

On the other hand, the essay contributes to a field of research that is concerned with the transmission of knowledge among North America, Europe, and the Middle East. During the second half of the nineteenth century, not only did the concept of the “Semitic” enter the Middle East but also Semitic linguistics and philology as a discipline.³ A tradition of scholarship, in communication with but also independent of Western universities,

2. For an important programmatic sketch of comparative aspects regarding Haskalah and Nahda, see Lital Levy, “The Nahda and the Haskala: A Comparative Reading of ‘Revival’ and ‘Reform,’” *Middle Eastern Literatures* 16.3 (2013): 300–316. Levy conceptualizes the Hebrew revivalist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in a continuum with the primarily reformist Haskalah, with which I completely agree. This continuum's relation to Zionism is, as indicated by Levy, a much more intricate issue because of the conceptual adaptations, shifts, and distortions implied in the integration of an Enlightenment discourse with territorial nationalism. For an insightful introduction to the historical relationship between Nahda, Tehiya, and Zionism, see Moshe Behar and Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, “The Possibility of Modern Middle Eastern Jewish Thought,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 41.1 (2014): 43–61.

3. For an introduction to the Arabic-language reception of Semitic studies during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Orit Bashkin, “On Noble and Inherited Virtues: Discussions of the Semitic Race in the Levant and Egypt, 1876–1918,” *Humanities* 10.3 (2021): <https://doi.org/10.3390/h10030088>; Bashkin, “The Arab Revival, Archaeology, and Ancient Middle Eastern History,”

slowly came into its own. The history of Semitic studies generally, and of the concept “Semitic” in particular, poses intriguing questions as regards the production of knowledge and its ideological effects. We possess several valuable studies of the complex history of the concept and its related academic discipline in the Western hemisphere. I use the word “complex” for its dual sense: the history of the concept “Semitic” consists in both a valuable scientific tradition and a theopolitical ideology. It was, however, only recently that scholars began investigating the discourse as it operated within the Middle East, both in Arabic and Hebrew. They found a counternarrative of “Semitism,” meaning here a bond or alliance between the Semites, to be a possible means of resistance to Western colonialism.⁴ The contextualization and analysis of *HSL* is a missing piece in this picture.

Ben-Ze’ev’s thought—combining political motivation and scientific analysis—bore the full complexity of its time. The comparative study of Hebrew and Arabic within the common framework provided by Semitic linguistics appeared to him as the very foundation for Jewish-Arab rapprochement on other, nonlinguistic levels. *HSL* was never translated into Hebrew, yet students of linguistics reading Arabic may still chance upon it, for it remains an authoritative source in Arabic-language scholarship until today.⁵

The essay below is divided into four sections. The first two discuss Ben-Ze’ev’s early intellectual biography, focusing on his acquisition of the

in *Pioneers to the Past: American Archaeologists in the Middle East, 1919–1920*, ed. G. Emberling (Chicago, 2010), 91–100.

4. See, for instance, Jonathan Marc Gribetz, “‘Their Blood Is Eastern’: Shahin Makaryus and Fin de Siècle Arab Pride in the Jewish ‘Race,’” *Middle Eastern Studies* 49.2 (2013): 143–61; Jonathan Hirsch, “Egyptian Semitism and the Quest for Arab-Jewish Scholarship in Interwar Egypt,” in *Minor Perspectives on Modernity beyond Europe: An Encounter between Jewish Studies and Postcolonial Thought*, ed. Y. Attia, J. Hirsch, and K. Samson (Baden-Baden, 2023), 95–116. Hirsch deals in particular with Ben-Ze’ev’s involvement in the discourse on the relationship between the histories and traditions of Judaism and Islam. For the career of “Semitism” in the history of Zionist thought, see Hanan Harif, *For We Be Brethren: The Turn to the East in Zionist Thought* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2019).

5. See Yahya Ababina and Amina al-Zu’bi, *Mu’jam al-mushtarak al-lughawi al-‘arabi al-sami: Mu’jam al-alfaz al-qadimah al-mushtarakah bayna l-‘arabiyah wa-majmu’at al-lughat al-samiyah* (Abu Dhabi, 2014), 11.

Arabic language, up until the first half of the 1930s. These sections, especially the second, also discuss the vision of a bilingual Arabic-Hebrew academic landscape. The third is concerned with the idea of the general good of the sciences, arguing that it was the impact of this idea among the educated elite of 1920s Cairo that allowed Ben-Ze'ev to compose his history of the Semitic languages. In the concluding fourth section, the analysis moves from the sociopolitical to the theoretical. It contextualizes one crucial issue of *HSL*—namely, the history of the Hebrew language. Against the general scientific trend following which Hebrew was a descendant of the Canaanite group of dialects, Ben-Ze'ev maintained that it originated from a split within the dialects of northern Arabia. The thesis of Hebrew's Canaanite origin can be interpreted as aiming at the refutation of an original connection between the Hebrew and Arabic languages. I argue that Ben-Ze'ev's case for their close kinship was motivated by his concern about the political implications of this thesis for the national consciousness of both Jews and Arabs.

ACQUIRING ARABIC

Israel Ben-Ze'ev (b. 1899) belonged to the fifth generation of a family whose ancestor Rabbi Abraham Wolfensohn migrated as a member of the so-called *prushim*, a group of followers of the Vilna Gaon, to Eretz Israel in 1809. He came from Shklov in what is today eastern Belarus. The *prushim*, out of which the ultra-Orthodox community developed during the 1920s, eventually settled in Jerusalem. Ben-Ze'ev's great-grandfather, Rabbi Ze'ev Wolfensohn, was among the founders of the Etz Chaim Talmud Torah and Yeshiva in Jerusalem's Old City. Here Ben-Ze'ev would later undergo religious education.⁶

6. The information is drawn from a recorded interview that Ben-Ze'ev gave in Hebrew in 1971; the interviewer was Yitzhak Oppenheim. It is preserved by the Oral History Division of the Avraham Harman Research Institute of Contemporary Jewry at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The recording is accessible online through the National Library of Israel where it is catalogued as "Egyptian Jewry and Zionism" (System number: 990044195830205171). Here, minutes 0–7. In the following, I will cite this interview as "Interview, [time]." For technical reasons, the time codes could be indicated only roughly. Additionally, see the entries "Dr

Ben-Ze'ev's mother tongue was Yiddish, but he learned German at the Laemel School, which was run in Jerusalem by the Relief Organization of German Jews (Hilfsverein der deutschen Juden). His father sent him there with the intention of opening his son's mind by learning a developed European language, which he thought would expose him to secular education, thus breaking (to the indignation of the grandmother) with his traditional upbringing.⁷ Ben-Ze'ev was to remain as a student at the Laemel School from 1905 to 1911 and subsequently entered the organization's teachers seminary, finishing his exam in 1916. During this period, he matured in Hebrew, the language of instruction. From 1918 to 1920 he taught at a Hebrew elementary school for boys in Jerusalem.⁸ He said of himself, moreover, that he was fluent in French and English.⁹ His acquisition of colloquial Arabic goes back to his early youth. In 1964, Ben-Ze'ev recalled that as "a native of Jerusalem, I found myself in an Arab environment from the dawn of my youth." "To speak Arabic," he continued, "was a routine for me since my childhood."¹⁰ In 1905, when Ben-Ze'ev was at the age of six, the German Jewish linguist Heinrich Loewe described the sociolinguistic situation of the urbanized Jews of Ottoman Palestine in similar terms:

yisra'el ben-ze'ev" and "Menaḥem wolfenzon" in the first volume of David Tidhar's *Entsiklopedya le-ḥalutse ha-yishuv u-vonav* (Tel Aviv, 1947), 378, 460.

7. Interview, 11–15. In this context Ben-Ze'ev mentioned that he was the first of his family who substituted the German surname Wolfensohn with its Hebrew equivalent Ben-Ze'ev.

8. These information are taken from the brief curriculum vitae (*Lebenslauf*) that Ben-Ze'ev had to append to his German dissertation, "Ka'b al-Ahbar und seine Stellung im Hadith und in der islamischen Legendenliteratur" (Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, 1933). I refer to this source in the following as *Lebenslauf*.

9. Interview, 25–26.

10. Abidan Mashiah, "Dr. yisra'el ben-ze'ev: Ḥiyuniyut ha-mizraḥ ve-tarbut ha-ma'arav," *Herut* 3779 (February 11, 1964). Quoted in Ido Harari, "Ashkenazim 'aravim? Kirvah ve-hitbadlut ba-'yishuv ha-yashan' bi-rushalayim," *Zmanim* 135 (2016): 30. These and, unless stated otherwise, all other translations in the present essay are my own.

It goes without saying that the Jewish urban population of the Arab Orient cannot completely forsake knowledge of the Arabic language. As much as one needs of it for talking, one acquires through social interaction, and virtually every child learns, merely by playing in the city's streets, enough of it to be later able to navigate through the traffic of the market.¹¹

From 1920 to 1922, Ben-Ze'ev studied at the Dar al-Mu'allimin (Arab Teachers Training College) in Jerusalem. During the time, Khalil Totah became its principal. Totah, a Christian Arab from Ramallah, would earn his doctoral degree at Columbia University in 1926 with a pioneering study on the contribution of the Arabs to education. He began to slowly raise the college's academic standards, extending the six-month training period to two years, a reform that benefitted Ben-Ze'ev.¹² Ben-Ze'ev entered the college because he wanted to perfect his knowledge of Arabic.¹³ In 1922, he went to Cairo to study Semitic languages, Islamic studies, philosophy, history, and English literature at the Egyptian University (today Cairo University).¹⁴ He earned a doctoral degree in 1927 with an Arabic monograph, the *History of the Jews of the Arab Lands in Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Times*. His supervisor was leading scholar Taha Hussein, who, owing to his critical approach to Islamic traditions, was one of the most controversial Egyptian intellectuals; in 1930, Hussein became dean of the Faculty of Arts.

In a 1971 interview, Ben-Ze'ev related that his decision to take up the study of Arabic was further motivated by the assault on Jerusalem's Jewish population in early April 1920, which lasted several days. It left six Jews dead and about two hundred injured, synagogues were set on fire,

11. Heinrich Loewe, "Die Stadtschule in Palaestina," *Altneuland* 2.3 (1905): 68. Concerning the pattern of life in Ottoman and British Mandatory Palestine, see especially Menachem Klein, *Lives in Common: A Local History* (Hebrew; Bnei Brak, 2015).

12. Mahmud Abidi, "The Arab College, Jerusalem," *Islamic Quarterly* 19.1–2 (1975): 22–24; Philip K. Hitti, "Contribution of the Arabs to Education, by Khalil A. Totah [. . .]" (review), *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 47 (1927): 282.

13. Ben-Ze'ev, *Lebenslauf*. According to Tidhar, Ben-Ze'ev was at the college from 1919 to 1921.

14. Ben-Ze'ev, *Lebenslauf*.

and women were raped.¹⁵ Only understanding the history of the Middle East, Ben-Ze'ev concluded, particularly in its interreligious and interethnic aspects, and cooperation between the peoples inhabiting Palestine / Eretz Israel could lead them out of the looming spiral of violence.¹⁶ Confronted with this reality, Ben-Ze'ev's affirmation of the Arabic language appears rather counterintuitive, yet he foresaw that if reciprocated, such learning might turn out to be the precondition of mutual understanding. About a decade later, in 1929, *HSL* was published. That year a wave of violence erupted in Jerusalem and other parts of Eretz Israel / Palestine. Most disturbingly, Jews began to be attacked as a collective, without distinction as regards mother tongue, religious practices, beliefs, or political agenda. Ben-Ze'ev continued to identify with Cairo's intellectual and academic milieu and the cause of Arabic-language scholarship. In 1932, he became lecturer at both the Egyptian University and the Dar al-Ulum.¹⁷ At the Dar al-Ulum, founded in Cairo in 1872, "students from top religious schools such as al-Azhar [were trained] to teach primary school subjects and Arabic within state-run civil schools."¹⁸

Ben-Ze'ev's particular relation to the Arabic language can also be grasped by taking a look at one exemplar of *HSL* that eventually found its way into the Columbia University Libraries.¹⁹ It bears the ex libris of Arthur Jeffery, who beginning in 1926 worked with Gotthelf Bergsträsser on the history of the qur'anic text at the American University of Cairo.²⁰ On the book's title page we find an Arabic inscription by Ben-Ze'ev, written in a rather elegant hand:

15. Gur Alroey, "Ha-gibor ha-ivri we-ha-korban ha-yehudi: Ha-pogromim be-ukrayna u-m'ora'ot 680–681," *Zion* 80.4 (2015): 557.

16. Interview, 15–18. Following Ben-Ze'ev, it was in 1919 that the first pogrom happened in Jerusalem. Since violence of this sort occurred only in 1920, this dating must be erroneous.

17. Interview, 29–31.

18. Hilary Kalmbach, *Islamic Knowledge and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Cambridge, 2020), 46.

19. Accessible online through the Arabic Collections Online project: <http://hdl.handle.net/2333.1/jh9w11xo>.

20. Arthur Jeffery, ed., *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'an: The Old Codices* (Leiden, 1937), vii.

As a present for the revered orientalist, the excellent scholar Arthur Jeffery /
From the author Israel Wolfensohn [Ben-Ze'ev] / 13. April 1930

A eulogy Ben-Ze'ev wrote in 1933 sheds additional light on his commitment. It was for the German Semitist Gotthelf Bergsträsser, who had died that year and whom Ben-Ze'ev held in great esteem. Bergsträsser had twice been a visiting professor at the Egyptian University, in 1929–30 and 1931–32, and Ben-Ze'ev recalls listening to his lectures.²¹ His recollections, however, do not focus on Bergsträsser's teachings but the Orientalist's (*al-mustashriq*) maturing in the Arabic language. Bergsträsser started, Ben-Ze'ev tells us, by reading from his scripts, which were riddled with grammatical corruptions. After a few weeks, he slowly gained command of the foreign tongue by improvising from his notebook. With his second stay in Cairo, "the Arabic language was gushing forth from his mouth as the waves from the sea, a pure and clear Arabic, understandable for the entire audience." Ben-Ze'ev presented himself here as a Cairene scholar, remembering Bergsträsser as a colleague from Europe who endeavored to fully participate in the local academic discourse.²²

THE VISION OF A BILINGUAL ARABIC-HEBREW ACADEMIC LANDSCAPE

The Seventeenth and Eighteenth International Congresses of Orientalists took place while Ben-Ze'ev was working on the history of the Semitic languages. The proceedings of neither the Oxford congress of 1928 (the first to convene after World War I) nor the Leiden congress of 1931 list his name. Had he been there he could have met several leading scholars from Europe, among them not only Bergsträsser but also Hans Bauer and Enno Littmann. When the Egyptian University's Faculty of Arts was opened in 1910, it included a chair for Semitic linguistics. Littmann, with whom Hussein was to study, was the first professor appointed.²³ He later advised

21. Claudio De Stefani, "Requiem per Gotthelf Bergsträsser," in *La Germania e l'Oriente: Filologia, filosofia, scienze storiche della cultura*, ed. E. Massimilla and G. Morrone (Naples, 2020), 216.

22. Israel Wolfensohn [Ben-Ze'ev], "Al-mustashriq birjstrisar," *Al-Risala* 1.19 (1933): 22.

23. Anne-Laure Dupont, *Çurğî Zaydan (1861–1914): Écrivain réformiste et témoin de la renaissance arabe* (Damas, 2006), 632; Enno Littmann, *Der deutsche*

Ben-Ze'ev in the preparation of *HSL*, who appended his comments to the book. Hussein attended both of those congresses; Ahmad Amin, the publisher of *HSL*, was in Leiden. Five days prior to the commencement of the congress in Leiden, on September 2, Ben-Ze'ev delivered a lecture in Tel Aviv in Hebrew about "Jews and Judaism in Egypt." He was advertised in the city as a professor from the Egyptian University of Cairo.²⁴

At about the same time, *HSL* crossed the Sinai. Adam Noah Braun, a philologue of Hebrew and Arabic with a penchant for the history of science, published a review in the quarterly *Qiryat sefer*, which, based at the National Library of Jerusalem, rapidly emerged as the preeminent Hebrew-language forum for bibliography and review of up-to-date scholarship. He comments:

The author, who is favorably known for his scientific books written in Hebrew and Arabic, which treat the stock of problems common to the histories of Arabs and Jews, has here put before the Arabic reading public a concise scientific summary of the Semitic languages and their development. This book summarizes the important research in this field, especially those contributions made by European scholars during the last century. It provides, accompanied by examples, a comprehensive description of the most characteristic features of each Semitic language. Still before such a book had been written in Hebrew for the Hebrew reading public, Dr. Ben-Ze'ev succeeded in presenting this pretty composition written in an Arabic language that is worthy of praise as regards both its clarity and manner of explication.²⁵

Braun concludes his critique by expressing the hope for a Hebrew equivalent of Ben-Ze'ev's handbook.

This understanding of the Middle Eastern academic landscape as Arabic-Hebrew bilingual was shared by other Jewish scholars, both native and nonnative to the Middle East. Commenting on the significance of the 1925 foundation of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, David Yellin

Beitrag zur Wissenschaft vom Vorderen Orient (Stuttgart, 1942), 10.

24. See the placard entitled "Ha-yehudim wa-yahadut be-mitsrayim—Yisra'el ben-ze'ev" in the online Ephemera Collection of the National Library of Israel (System number: 997002572260405171).

25. *Qiryat Sefer* 9.2 (1931/1932): 215–16.

points out that the Hebrew language was still insufficient to meet the needs of a university, particularly so regarding scientific terminology. He urged the promotion of the Hebrew Language Committee (*Va'ad ha-lashon*). According to him, one had to learn from the work done by linguists of Arabic abroad in Egypt. The modernization of the Hebrew language had to happen in communication with that of Arabic, for only thus could one prevent too-extensive borrowing from European languages and vocabularies.²⁶ Already in 1908, Abraham Galante had published a French article in Cairo entitled “On the Contribution of the Arabic Language to the Renaissance of the Hebrew Language.” He argues that “most difficulties arising in Arabic linguistics are solvable through Hebrew linguistics, and vice versa.”²⁷

The early 1930s witnessed the untimely death of the eminent Semitist Joseph Horovitz. In his eulogy for Bergsträsser, who also died young, Ben-Ze'ev pondered that with the latter's death as well as those of, among others, Ignaz Goldziher, Theodor Nöldeke, and Horovitz, German-language Oriental studies had lost many of its greatest minds. The rise of the National Socialists to power now threatened to undermine the whole discipline.²⁸ In his eulogy for Horovitz, Yosef Yo'el Rivlin recalled that the first president of the Hebrew University's School of Oriental Studies saw in the institution “a Semitic basis which will not only bring closer the Jew and the Arab, but will also create an understanding between them.”²⁹ As

26. David Yellin, “Mikhlalatenu u-leshonenu,” *Ha-Olam* 13.14–15 (April 3, 1925): 265. In 1928, the Anglo-Jewish orientalist and founding member of the School of Oriental Studies, Levi Billig, together with Joseph Horovitz, attempted to establish cooperative relations with Egyptian linguists. Amit Levy, *A New Orient: From German Orientalism to Israeli Mizrahanut* (Hebrew; Jerusalem 2024), 106–7.

27. Abraham Galante, “De la contribution de la langue arabe à la renaissance de la langue hébraïque,” *Bulletin de l'institut égyptien* 5.1 (1908): 171–80, 178.

28. Ben-Ze'ev, “Al-mustashriq birjstrisar,” 20.

29. Yosef Yo'el Rivlin, “Profesor yosef horovits,” *Moznaim* 2.49–50 (1931): 17. Translation taken from Hanan Harif, “The Orient between Arab and Jewish National Revivals: Josef Horovitz, Shelomo Dov Goitein and Oriental Studies in Jerusalem,” in *Modern Jewish Scholarship on Islam in Context*, ed. O. Fraisse (Berlin, 2018), 324.

we will see, Horovitz supported an ethnolinguistic theory that speaks to this political-cum-cultural conviction.³⁰

There are interesting parallels and coincidences in Ben-Ze'ev's and Rivlin's biographies. They both grew up in the Ashkenazic-Jerusalemite Old Yishuv. Like Ben-Ze'ev, Rivlin was one of the few Jewish students at a Palestinian Arab school, in his case, the Rawdat al-Ma'arif school, which combined the teaching of the Arabic language with Islamic and secular subjects.³¹ In 1922, both left Jerusalem for their higher education. While Ben-Ze'ev opted for Cairo, Rivlin traveled to Frankfurt am Main to study with Horovitz. In 1927, the year that Ben-Ze'ev published his Arabic-language dissertation and was setting out to further build up his academic career in Cairo, Rivlin returned to Jerusalem, freshly equipped with a German doctorate in Arabic and Islamic studies, and became a research assistant at the School of Oriental Studies. Rivlin later advanced to a professorship in Arabic. While Rivlin wrote his major scholarly works in Hebrew, Ben-Ze'ev chose Arabic for *HSL*. He did not hew exclusively to Arabic, however. From 1930 to 1932, Ben-Ze'ev himself went to Germany to obtain a second doctorate. He studied Semitic languages, Islamic studies, modern history, and philosophy in Frankfurt am Main and Berlin. He defended his second dissertation, written in German, at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität in January 1933—it was supervised by Gotthold Weil and Martin Me'ir Pleßner.³² As did his first dissertation, Ben-Ze'ev's second thesis searched for convergences between the histories of Islam and Judaism.

In 1931, Ben-Ze'ev published a reworked Hebrew edition of his first dissertation on the pre-Islamic and early Islamic Jewish history of the Arabian Peninsula. In the introduction he admonished his readership that

30. Also Harif notes the connection between Horovitz's scientific writing and Rivlin's characterization of him, stressing that the theory of a close kinship between Jews and Arabs cannot be isolated from the contemporary political context (Harif, "The Orient," 324–25.) In the last section, I discuss some important details from the history of linguistics that shed light on the interdependency between Semitics and Middle Eastern politics.

31. Ruth Roded, "A Voice in the Wilderness? Rivlin's 1932 Hebrew *Life of Muhammad*," *Middle East Critique* 18.1 (2009): 40.

32. Ben-Ze'ev, *Lebenslauf*.

“the people of Israel must attain a deep understanding of the past life of Muslims and Arabs.” Because the fate of the Jewish nation became bound up with “the Arab nations,” the future also depends on conclusions drawn from the past. Only upon this basis would cooperative work have a chance to succeed.³³ This was the common denominator of non-Eurocentric Zionism. Irrespective of the particulars concerning political, economic, and societal organization, Ben-Ze’ev and Rivlin were kindred spirits as regards the necessity of mutual knowledge and cooperation, but practical compromises were much harder to achieve.

Rivlin was the only Jew born in Palestine who became a member of staff at the School of Oriental Studies; almost the entire staff was educated at German universities. Ben-Ze’ev’s daughter remembered that Rivlin was among the opponents of her father’s appointment to the school, which he frequently discussed at home.³⁴ Although this issue remains unsettled, the story is likely to be true, for we know that Rivlin condescended to Yellin, his former teacher and another native of Jerusalem, doubting his academic credentials for a chair at the Hebrew University.³⁵ Rivlin’s behavior smacks of the striver’s urge to pull up the ladder with which he had just reached his position. Horovitz also had an ambivalent attitude toward Middle Eastern scholarship. He was convinced of the idea of *Wissenschaft*, which is premised on the belief that truth results from rigorous methods and analytical exactitude.³⁶ One may argue that it was in the reasonable interest of an academic to make the hiring to the School of Oriental Studies conditional

33. Israel Ben-Ze’ev, *Ha-yehudim ba-‘arav* (Tel-Aviv, 1931), 6. Following the signature of the introduction, the latter was written in Cairo in early 1931. This indicates that Ben-Ze’ev traveled back from Germany at least once. His eulogy for Bergsträsser, in which he described in detail the lectures the latter gave at the Egyptian University during the early 1930s, points into the same direction. We know, moreover, that he lectured in Tel Aviv in September 1931.

34. Aviv Derri, “The Construction of ‘Native’ Jews in Late Mandate Palestine: An Ongoing Nahda as a Political Project,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 53.2 (2021): 261, n. 33.

35. Hanan Harif, “Islam in Zion? Yosef Yo’el Rivlin’s Translation of the *Qur’an* and Its Place within the New Hebrew Culture,” *Naharaim* 10.1 (2016): 44–45.

36. Menahem Milson, “The Beginnings of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem,” *Judaism* 45.2 (1996): 172.

on the adoption of this kind of mindset, as Horovitz demanded. However, if Horovitz was earnestly interested in understanding the Middle East and its epistemological potentials, it would have been imperative for him to partly forsake the Western concept of scholarship.³⁷ In the 1920s, Arabic and Hebrew scholarship entered one of their most formative periods. The idea of the general good of the sciences had yet to find its modern Middle Eastern embodiment. As will be argued in the following section, it was this specific situation that allowed Ben-Ze'ev to compose *HSL*.

THE GENERAL GOOD OF THE SCIENCES

Among his teachers Ben-Ze'ev also counted Ali al-Inani, who had studied Semitics in Berlin and, in 1921, became a leading member of the Egyptian Socialist Party, whose founders were Joseph Rosenthal, an Italian Jew, and Salama Musa, an Egyptian Copt. The party was, however, soon to split over disagreements concerning Bolshevism.³⁸ In 1922, when Ben-Ze'ev arrived in Cairo, al-Inani was teaching comparative literature and Semitic languages at the Egyptian University.³⁹ He is mentioned here for two reasons: First, al-Inani was apparently not only highly interested in history and grammar of the Semitic languages generally but the Hebrew language in particular. In cooperation with two other authors, he published an introduction bearing the title "Fundamentals of the Semitic Peoples and Their Languages, the Grammar of Hebrew as well as Its Literature" in Cairo in

37. Amit Levy has gathered a great deal of archival and nonarchival evidence that makes a convincing case for the efforts at Jewish-Arab rapprochement and cooperation undertaken by the early members and proponents of the School of Oriental Studies. He highlights their personal and intellectual affiliation with the circle of Brit Shalom. However, as Levy argues, these efforts led to a mostly unofficial network connecting Damascus, Jerusalem, and Cairo. The stabilization of this network was impeded both by the exacerbating conflict over the territory of Eretz Israel / Palestine and professional reservations about Middle Eastern scholarship. Levy, *A New Orient*, 95–143.

38. Ben-Ze'ev, *Lebenslauf*; Reid, *Cairo University*, 246, n. 83; Joel Beinin, "Formation of the Egyptian Working Class," *Middle East Report* 94 (January/February 1981). <https://merip.org/1981/01/formation-of-the-egyptian-working-class/>.

39. Ahmad Abd al-Fattah Budayr, *Amir ahmad fu'ad wa-nash'at al-jami'ah al-misriyah* (Cairo, 1950), 179.

1935.⁴⁰ He dedicated it to the fellows of Dar al-Ulum, where, as mentioned, Ben-Ze'ev worked as a teacher from 1932.

Second, al-Inani may have motivated Ben-Ze'ev to write a second dissertation in Germany in order to enhance his academic credentials. In 1932, al-Inani published a short article in the influential Cairene periodical *Al-Hilal*, discussing the importance of Western scholarship on the Orient for the latter's native scholars and intellectuals. He placed particular emphasis on the Semitic languages and the cultures associated with them. As against those coming from England, France, the Netherlands, Italy, Austria, Hungary, and Russia, he foregrounded the role of German scholars in this field. His attitude was benevolent to the utmost degree:

As soon as knowledge is ingathered and distributed, it becomes a general property of all nations. The most advanced nation in this respect should make the foundations of its knowledge available to the other progressive nations who endeavor to bring the sciences forward. The development of the human mind is defined for us, therefore, by the following of the nations that began fostering their intellectual potentials in the footsteps of those that preceded them.⁴¹

For this reason, he further states, aspiring Arab intellectuals and scholars ought to learn European languages, especially German. The question of whether the knowledge produced by nonnative scholars might be intrinsically compromised by their national partisanship apparently did not bother al-Inani very much. The ideal of objectivity implied by scientific research outweighed for him the equally abstract concept of a necessary convergence between scholars' interests and those of the state of which they are citizens. Al-Inani, therefore, instructs the "oriental reader" (*al-qari al-sharqi*) to distinguish between works that serve extrascientific purposes and those that are free of them, dedicated solely to the good of the sciences.

40. Ali al-Inani, Muhammad Atiya al-Ibrashi, and Leon Mehrez, *Kitab al-asas fi l-umam al-samiyah wa-lughatiha wa-qawa'id al-lughah al-'ibriyah wa-adabiha / Sefer ha-yesod la-'amim ha-shemiyim u-leshonoteyhem we-dikduk ha-safa ha-'ivrit we-sifrutah* (Cairo, 1935).

41. Ali al-Inani, "Al-mustashriqun wa-l-adab al-'arabiyah," *Al-Hilal* 40.15 (August 1, 1932): 1393.

Yet eventually one has, al-Inani stresses, to approach each and every book with caution, carefully assessing its content and messages. But this also means that one may separate out and learn something useful even from scholars that otherwise are biased.⁴²

Ben-Ze'ev took a similar position. In the preface to *HSL*, he explains that the book would serve enlightened (*al-mustanirun*) intellectuals and scholars as well as secondary and tertiary students, not only in Egypt but in all Arab countries, as a guide to Western scholarship. With the establishment of the Egyptian University in 1908, European Orientalists there brought the current state of the art in Semitic linguistics to North Africa and the Middle East. But without a key, the doors to their scholarship, written mostly in German, French, English, and Italian, would largely remain locked, for only a few were able to overcome the double barrier of methodological novelty and linguistic foreignness. Ben-Ze'ev explicitly conceptualized *HSL* as this key. Yet its ultimate purpose was, as he explained in the very first sentence of the book, to instigate the peoples of the East to research their own history and produce their own scholarship.⁴³

In 1933, a year after al-Inani published his article, the first volume of the *Encyclopedia of Islam* was translated into Arabic (*Da'irat al-ma'arif al-islamiyah*), published in Cairo, and dedicated to King Fuad.⁴⁴ It was edited and expanded by a group of graduates of the Egyptian University and a cadre of outstanding intellectuals from Egypt and the wider Arab world. On the occasion of this event, the Cairene periodical *Al-Risala* reproduced the cover of the volume accompanied by a few comments, of which three are notable.⁴⁵ The first is from Mustafa Abd al-Raziq, who taught at the

42. Al-Inani, "Al-mustashriqun wa-l-adab al-'arabiyah," 1394.

43. *HSL* = Israel Ben-Ze'ev, *Tarikh al-lughat al-samiyah* (Cairo, 1929), v–vi. See also A. Zeki Validi, "Considérations sur la collaboration scientifique entre l'Orient islamique et l'Europe," *Revue des études islamiques* 9.1 (1935): 249–71. One of Validi's conclusions was that "the collaboration between Eastern and Western scholars, as well as between Eastern scholars of different nationalities themselves, would be facilitated by adopting an international terminology and system of transcription" (270–71).

44. Publication of the *Encyclopedia of Islam* began in 1911, with the initial volume completed by 1913.

45. "Da'irat al-ma'arif al-islamiyah," *Al-Risala* 1.17 (September 15, 1933): 34.

Egyptian University and whom Ben-Ze'ev counted as one of his teachers.⁴⁶ Al-Raziq calls the *Encyclopedia* a “great monument” whose Arabic edition is worthy of praise because it makes numerous sources accessible by introducing them in a methodologically precise manner, thereby contributing to the Egyptian enlightenment. Second, Abd al-Majid al-Labban from the al-Azhar points out that this was the opportunity to show Western scholars the faculties Muslims possess. Muslim scholars should not stubbornly refuse to accept the knowledge produced by Western scholars but equally have the duty to expose all the mistakes made by their non-Muslim colleagues. The purpose of this critique was, however, not to polemicize and embarrass. It was to lead those who have gone astray back to the truth. Admittedly, little is said about the meaning of this “truth.” The third comment was penned by Muhammad Kurd Ali, the first president of the Damascene Arabic Language Academy (founded in 1919). He simply declares that the worth of the *Encyclopedia* was that it discusses subjects and uncovers sources that did not as yet appear in Arabic writings.

The belief in the beneficent nature of human reason was shared by the publisher of *HSL*. In his interview of 1971, Ben-Ze'ev underscored the importance the publisher's endorsement of his work had for his standing in academia as well as among Egyptian intellectuals.⁴⁷ The publisher was none other than the Committee for Literature, Translation, and Publishing (Lajnat al-ta'lif wa-l-tarjamah wa-l-nashr). The term *ta'lif* means the production of literature generally, including both belles lettres and scientific writings. Ben-Ze'ev's introduction to the Semitic languages suited the committee's project to provide the Arabic reading public with books covering all fields of knowledge at the most recent stages of their development.⁴⁸ The committee's primary concern was to modernize Egyptian

46. Interview, 18–19.

47. Interview, 28–29.

48. *Lajnat al-ta'lif wa-l-tarjamah wa-l-nashr fi 'ashrin 'am: Min sanah 1913 ila sanah 1934*, 2–3. Accessible online through the Modern Arab Renaissance Collection (Kotobarabia) main page provided by East View Information Services (<https://www.eastview.com/resources/books-and-e-books/kotobarabia-modern-arab-renaissance/>). This forty-four-page brochure about the formation and activities of the Committee for Literature, Translation, and Publishing was originally published in 1934 by the committee itself. Umberto Rizzitano, “L'attività editoriale del 'Comitato

society by nurturing it with critical editions of classical texts, translations of European literature, and recent innovative works, all in or translated into Arabic. Throughout its existence—1914 to 1954—it was presided over by Ahmad Amin, who was reelected annually. In the preface to *HSL*, Ben-Ze'ev expresses his sincere gratitude toward the committee and especially Amin.⁴⁹ The somewhat odd designation “committee” stems from the original plan of its founding members, all of whom were graduates of one of Egypt’s institutions of higher secular education, to build up various committees to be entrusted with the supervision and guidance of a pivotal segment of the state and society. The Committee for Literature, Translation, and Publishing was the only one that succeeded.⁵⁰

In the interview, Ben-Ze'ev joyfully declares that he would willingly deliver a talk on his academic activities in Cairo.⁵¹ In it he might have told us something about how the *HSL* was received by the committee, but such a talk does not seem to have taken place. In 1934, Amin described the committee’s policy in the following way:

Public acknowledgment of the committee’s diligent editorial work heightened the prestige of its books. No book leaves the press before it has passed professional and precise proofreading assessing its quality and, if necessary, suggesting corrections, even if they may be detrimental to its distribution, for it should, first and foremost, serve the sciences and teach truth.⁵²

For Amin, the committee’s success consisted in its ability to limit itself to its essential task of disseminating knowledge, both indigenous and foreign, to Egyptian society. This discipline, he further points out, must mean, and has heretofore meant, that the committee refrain from open

di composizione, traduzione ed edizione’ del Cairo (1914–1939),” *Oriente moderno* 20.1 (1940): 33, n. 1.

49. *HSL*, vii.

50. Emmanuelle Perrin, “Le creuset et l’orfèvre: Le parcours d’Ahmad Amin (1886–1954),” *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 95–98 (2002): paragraphs 26–30. <https://doi.org/10.4000/remmm.238>.

51. Interview, 31.

52. *Lajnat al-ta’lif*, 4–5.

intervention in religious and political disputes. Instead, the committee draws its strength from the belief that education fostering the faculties of the individual is one of the chief means of achieving progress and reforming a people's traditions.⁵³ That the idea of science stands partially outside of politics is exemplified by the fact that Ben-Ze'ev's Zionist activities proved no obstacle to the publication of *HSL* with the Committee for Literature, Translation, and Publishing.⁵⁴

HEBREW'S NORTH ARABIAN ORIGIN

History of the Semitic Languages was published in 1929, the year that Palestine / Eretz Israel saw the bloodiest anti-Jewish violence in almost a decade. Its author was an Ashkenazic Jerusalemite Jew who combined traditional upbringing and religious learning with secular education and the belief in the general good of the sciences, and who was consumed by his efforts to bring the Arab and Jewish paths of modernization closer together. In its chapter treating the Hebrew language, Ben-Ze'ev presents and defends the then-disputed theory according to which Hebrew derives from Arabic and was not a language native to Canaan. Also in 1929, Avraham Elmaleh, a Jerusalem-born Sephardic intellectual, scholar, and politician of Moroccan descent, published a concise Hebrew-Arabic dictionary. In its introduction he claims that "two thirds of Hebrew roots are to be found in Arabic, with the same letters [*otiyot*] and meaning."⁵⁵ Shortly before, in 1927 and 1928, Shmuel Ben-Shabbat, who, being born in Morocco, became an important

53. *Lajnat al-ta'lif*, 6.

54. Concerning Ben-Ze'ev's Zionist activities, both political and cultural, see Ruth Qimhi, "Pe'ilut ha-tnu'a ha-tsiyonit be-mitsrayim we-hitpathut yahase ha-gomlin beynah le-veyn ha-yishuv be-erets-yisra'el 1918–1948" (Ph.D. diss., University of Haifa, 2005), 41–43, 153–57. Ben-Ze'ev claims that during the 1920s and 1930s, the Arab society in Egypt was almost completely consumed by internal affairs and less attentive to what was happening in the world, including concerning neighboring Palestine. As regards the latter, it was characterized by almost complete disinterestedness (*adishut raba*). He stresses, furthermore, that he personally was never mistreated during his stay in Cairo, either by Muslims or Copts. Interview, 24–25.

55. Avraham Elmaleh, *Milon 'ivri-'aravi: Kolel ha-milim ha-'ivriyot ha-yoter nehutsot* (Tel-Aviv, 1929), 7.

figure in the Sephardic community of Haifa and the city's educated milieu, wrote a series of articles titled "Sfat ever wa-'arav" (The Hebrew and the Arabic languages). Hebrew and Arabic had once been so close to each other that mutual understanding came about easily, "with no need for an interpreter."⁵⁶ These claims of Elmaleh and Ben-Shabbat reflected the deepening rift between Jews and Arabs, and the forces making them appear as representatives of opposing parties, and sometimes even cultures. They offer a counternarrative derived from the insistence that Hebrew and Arabic actually were one, or almost, one and the same language.

Ben-Ze'ev shared his extraordinary interest in Arabic not only with Elmaleh and Ben-Shabbat but also Murad Farag, an Egyptian Karaite Jew, lawyer, and prolific writer of scholarly and pedagogical treatises as well as poetry.⁵⁷ Born in 1867, he was a generation older than Ben-Ze'ev and was an autodidact.⁵⁸ In 1936, Farag became a member of the Egyptian Academy for the Arabic Language.⁵⁹ Both men promoted Arabic's autonomy,

56. *Haarets* 2544 (December 25, 1927): 3.

57. Lital Levy provides a concise description of how Farag adapted the Nahda discourse to his particular communal needs as a Karaite Jew, pointing out his situation at the fringes of the Arabic enlightenment/revivalist movement. His weekly newspaper *Al-Tahdhib* (Edification), which appeared between 1901 and 1903, was a one-man project. Levy, "Edification between Sect and Nation: Murad Farag and *Al-Tahdhib*, 1901–1903," in *Intellectuals and Civil Society in the Middle East: Liberalism, Modernity and Political Discourse*, ed. M. A. Bamyeh (London, 2012), 57–78.

58. Farag also studied law on his own; he later became a successful lawyer in the service of Khedive Abbas Hilmi II. In 1922, King Fuad assigned him to the committee in charge of drafting the Egyptian constitution. Nahem Ilan, "Murad Farag ke-'navi tsiyoni' al pi sifro al-kudsiyat/hekdeshiyot," in *Tsiyonut datit: Historya, ra'yon, hevra*, vol. 3, ed. D. Schwartz (Ramat-Gan, 2019), 7–8.

59. Ammiel Alcalay, "Intellectual Life," in *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times*, ed. R. Spector Simon, M. M. Laskier, and S. Reguer (New York, 2003), 104. Another Jewish member of the academy, even a founding member, was Haim Nahum, the chief rabbi of Cairo. He had studied at France's École Nationale des Langues Orientales and of the Semitic languages knew not only Arabic and Hebrew but also those of the Ethiopian branch. It is not unlikely that political reasons played into his appointment, as King Fuad had a significant role in the selection of the academy's first committee. However, as Rached

and both were equally concerned about its relationship to Hebrew. Farag expresses this concern with utmost clarity: “Comparative thinking is necessary to ascertain original meanings.”⁶⁰ This methodological consciousness was a product of the Nahda. Since the 1880s, the comparative study of Arabic became the standard in Arabic-language linguistics.⁶¹ In 1929, Muhammad Sharaf argued on the pages of the Cairene periodical *Al-Muqtataf* that the development of the Arabic language was dependent on extensive borrowings from Persian and Greek as well as Ge’ez (Ethiopian Semitic), Hebrew, Aramaic, Sanskrit, and Latin.⁶² Sharaf was a physician and well-known intellectual at the time. In 1934, he was appointed as an expert to the biology and medicine commission at the Egyptian Academy for the Arabic Language.⁶³

In the following, I first present a concise interpretation of Farag’s approach to the comparative study of Hebrew and Arabic. Afterward, I explain Ben-Ze’ev’s theory, or rather the theory he sided with, in more detail. Through different means they tried to reach the same goal: to prove that Hebrew and Arabic are characterized by a relationship that is not only particular but original. In more political terms, they tried to (re)construct a common heritage of Jews and Arabs, a common history that had been disrupted. Seen from the perspective of the history of ideas and the history of science, it is here that the interesting question is to be found: How is a political motive translated into a methodology or theory that concretizes and conceals the motive at the same time? The previous sections have

Hamzaoui stressed, his erudition spoke for itself and completely justified his appointment. Hamzaoui, *L’académie de la langue arabe du Caire: Histoire et œuvre* (Tunis, 1975), 79–82.

60. Murad Farag, *Multaqa al-lughatayn al-‘ibriyah wa-l-‘arabiyah*, vol. 1 (Cairo, 1930), 15.

61. Carl Brockelmann claims that Jabr Dhūmīt “was the first to try and explain the development of the Arabic language on the basis of Hebrew and Syriac”—namely, in his 1886 study *Al-khawātir fi l-lughah* (Reflections on language), which was published in Beirut. Brockelmann, *History of the Arabic Written Tradition*, Supplement vol. 3.1, trans. J. Lameer (Leiden, 2018), 343.

62. Muhammad Sharaf, “Al-lughah al-‘arabiyah wa-l-mustalahat al-‘ilmiyah,” *Al-Muqtataf* 74.2 (1929): 125–26.

63. Hamzaoui, *L’académie de la langue arabe du Caire*, 133.

carved out the sociopolitical circumstances on which, I argue, this translation was contingent: Ben-Ze'ev's affirmation of the Arabic language, notwithstanding the looming Arab-Jewish conflict, and the relatively supportive academic and intellectual atmosphere of Cairo in the 1920s. This last section will situate Ben-Ze'ev's approach to the question of the origin of the Hebrew language in its scientific context.

The tremendous amount of energy Farag invested in the reconstruction of Hebrew and Arabic's shared semantics and grammar found expression in a comparative etymological dictionary titled *Multaqa al-lughatayn al-'ibriyah wa-l-'arabiyah* (Meeting point of the Hebrew and Arabic language), of which he was able to complete three volumes encompassing the first seventeen out of twenty-eight letters of the Arabic alphabet. The first volume was published in Cairo in 1930, a year after Ben-Ze'ev had published *HSL*; the second and third volumes were published in Alexandria in 1936 and 1937, respectively.⁶⁴ Farag had been pondering the project for quite a while. In a 1912 collection of his essays, we find the idea for such a dictionary announced. It would be the result of the insight that "the science of the Arabic language improves through knowledge of the latter's Hebrew sources."⁶⁵

Yet another of Farag's contributions to the comparative analysis of Hebrew and Arabic offers a clue to the peculiar title he chose for his dictionary. In 1928, he published a first volume of a translation of the Torah from Hebrew into Arabic, accompanied by a commentary. In the introduction he explains that he attempted to realize a permanent equilibrium between meaning and form in his translation.⁶⁶ He thus translates, for example, the Hebrew word *ḥoshekh* (darkness) with the Arabic word *ghasaq*, which is more or less equivalent in meaning (Gen 1.2)—though distant, the sound and form of the words resonate. Still, this was a rather unusual choice. In his translation of the Pentateuch, Saadia Gaon (882–942) uses *zalam*, while we find *zulma* in the so-called Smith–Van Dyck or Beirut translation of the

64. Ilan, "Murad Farag," 8–9, n. 6. Ilan informs us about the existence of a manuscript of the fourth volume regarding which it is dubitable that it had ever been published; the fifth volume apparently remained unwritten.

65. Murad Farag, "Al-'arabiyah wa-l-'ibriyah," in *Maqalat murad* (Cairo, 1912), 255.

66. Murad Farag, *Tafsir al-tawrah / Perush ha-torah* (Cairo, 1928), 3.

Bible (*Al-kitab al-muqadas*, The holy book), which was published in 1865 and went through several new editions. One of the aims of the Beirut translation was a simple and pure Arabic, understandable by the general public and free of unnecessary Hebraisms. To achieve this aim, excerpts were sent regularly into several parts of Syria-Lebanon to be checked by natives.⁶⁷ Seen from this angle, Farag's choice appears to be a Hebraism, that is, more literal. He, however, saw in it a meeting point. The methodology Farag elaborated for translating the Torah is reflected in the title of his etymological dictionary: *multaqa*, "meeting point," means the convergence of meaning and form he strove for in his comparisons of Hebrew and Arabic.⁶⁸

In turning to the theory Ben-Ze'ev supported, that is, of Hebrew's historical origin in Arabic, geography and archaeology of the Middle East gain in importance; etymology also still plays a role, albeit a subordinate one. The concept of the Semitic languages was long bound up with the notion of the Arabian Peninsula as a continuous geopolitical entity stretching from Canaan in the west to its southern tip, plus the Sinai. From the Arabian Peninsula the Semitic languages spread out in waves caused by migration, military expansion, or trade. The purest representatives of the Semitic type of language were accordingly assumed to be the Arabic dialects of the Bedouin tribes.⁶⁹ The unity and originality of the Semitic languages

67. Eli Smith and Cornelius Van Dyck were two Protestant missionaries from the United States who moved to Syria-Lebanon in 1827 and 1839, respectively; Van Dyck was among the founders of the Syrian Protestant College (later American University of Beirut). They received advice on their translation from Butrus al-Bustani (who was a Maronite convert to Protestantism), Nasif al-Yaziji (a Melkite Catholic), and Yusuf al-Asir (a Sunni Muslim). Peter Kawerau, *Amerika und die orientalischen Kirchen: Ursprung und Anfang der amerikanischen Mission unter den Nationalkirchen Westasiens* (Berlin, 1958), 381–88.

68. I have not started cross-checking, because it would not affect the present argument whether Farag's choice occurs in any of the Karaite Arabic Bible translations/commentaries, which are, according to Meira Polliack, generally distinguished by their literalism. Polliack, "Major Trends in Karaite Biblical Exegesis in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries," in *Karaite Judaism: A Guide to Its History and Literary Sources*, ed. M. Polliack (Leiden, 2003), 364.

69. For an attempt to prove the purity of these dialects, see Sabatino Moscati, "The Semites: A Linguistic, Ethnic, and Racial Problem," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 19.4 (1957): 421–34.

was repeatedly challenged by different theories. To mention one of them, in 1923, Arthur Ungnad—warning that such prehistoric theories had to be handled with caution—hypothesized that the Jewish people are (like the Assyrian people) of both Semitic and Subarean ancestry. The Subareans are ethnically and linguistically non-Semitic and non-Indo-European, though their precise racial and linguistic classification remains unclear. It may be that a group descending from these Subareans, the Hurrians, constituted the indigenous population of western Syria and Palestine, which was assimilated by immigrating Semites sometime during the fifth millennium B.C.E. From the second millennium onward, Indo-European peoples, coming from both the east and the northwest, swept through the Middle East, further complicating the racial and linguistic patterns of this region.⁷⁰

The ancient history of the Hebrew language, as far as it is documented, mainly took place in Canaan, where, in comparison to the heartland of the Arabian Peninsula, the presence of non-Semitic influences was thought to have been particularly strong. As part of the region connecting the African and Asian continents, Canaan was lying within, among others, the Egyptian, Hittite, Assyro-Babylonian, and Persian spheres of influence; it likely was one of the major linguistic and ethnic crossroads. Since the 1840s, scholars disputed the relationship between the ancient Egyptian and the Semitic languages. Yet in time research was undertaken into a possible connection between the Egyptians and the Celts, an Indo-European people. The prehistory of Egypt and its languages thus became an especially thorny issue for Middle Eastern thinkers, which may have prompted Ben-Ze'ev to exclude the ancient Egyptian languages from the Semitic family tree, noting however that he does not rule out that later research may render him wrong.⁷¹

That Hebrew was a “direct descendant of the language spoken by the most ancient layer of Canaan’s Semitic inhabitants” was by the 1920s becoming the dominant opinion among Semitists.⁷² Upon their conquest

70. Arthur Ungnad, *Die ältesten Völkerwanderungen Vorderasiens: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte und Kultur der Semiten, Arier, Hethiter und Subaräer* (Breslau, 1923), 5–16.

71. *HSL*, 11, 17–19.

72. Hans Bauer and Pontus Leander, *Historische Grammatik der hebräischen Sprache des Alten Testaments*, vol. 1 (Halle, 1922), 15. See also P[aul] Dhorme,

of Canaan, the immigrant Hebrews, most probably a nomadic tribe of Aramaeans, adopted a regional dialect. Accordingly, Hans Bauer and Pontus Leander argue that Hebrew was a Canaanite-Aramaic mixed language.⁷³ This thesis, which stripped the Hebrew language of its original character, provoked an intense public debate between Bauer and Bergsträsser; it was arguably one of the major academic events among Semitists in interwar Europe.⁷⁴

According to Ben-Ze'ev, however, the Hebrew language developed out of Arabic dialects of the northern Hejaz and was not originally part of the Canaanite group of languages, to which it assimilated only later. It was the divergence between ethnic and linguistic belonging implied in the thesis of Hebrew's evolution in Canaan that irked Ben-Ze'ev. This thesis, he declared, "is blatantly wrong, baseless indeed," for the Israelite tribes "brought their language from their original homestead and did not adopt it from the Canaanites." This "original homestead" (*al-mawtin al-asli*) of the Hebrew-speaking people was the northern Hejaz.⁷⁵ Although the evidence was rather scarce, inscriptional evidence nevertheless seemed to buttress the thesis of Hebrew's origin from Arabic. A feature of these inscriptions was enough to attract scholarly attention. The otherwise apparently Arabic dialects documented in them showed a variant definite article, not the known Arabic *al* but *ha* or *han*. Since the Hebrew definite article is likewise *ha*, scholars speculated that there may be a close historical relationship between Hebrew and those Arabic dialects of the northern Hejaz.⁷⁶

"La langue de Canaan," *Revue biblique* 10.3 (1913): 369–70; Zellig S. Harris, *Development of the Canaanite Dialects: An Investigation in Linguistic History* (New Haven, Conn., 1939).

73. Bauer and Leander, *Historische Grammatik der hebräischen Sprache*, 12–36. Carl Brockelmann had basically argued the same. Brockelmann, *Semitische Sprachwissenschaft* (Berlin, 1916), 24.

74. Gotthelf Bergsträsser, "Mitteilungen zur hebräischen Grammatik: I. Ist das Hebräische eine Mischsprache?," *Orientalistische Literaturzeitung* 26.6 (1923): 253–57; Hans Bauer, *Zur Frage der Sprachmischung im Hebräischen: Eine Erwiderung* (Halle, 1924).

75. *HSL*, 78–80, 103–5, 111–13, quote on 79.

76. Eduard Glaser, "Ursprung des arabischen Artikels *al*," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 51 (1897): 166–67. Although he first had

Ben-Ze'ev, consequently, opposed the opinion that Abraham came from the Mesopotamian city of Ur and received the epithet "Hebrew," *'ivri* (Gen 14.13), because he crossed (the Hebrew/Arabic root for "to cross" is *'-v-r/'-b-r* > *'ivri/'ibri*) the Euphrates and the Jordan rivers on his journey westward. Instead, he claims that the name *'ivri* has no connection to the story of Abraham and denies the historicity of his person or that a wandering from Mesopotamia to Canaan ever occurred. The ancestors of the Israelites were Bedouins from the Arabian desert; the epithet *'ivri* or *'ibri* simply derives from their nomadic way of life, which requires permanent crossing of diverse natural borders.

The word *'ibri* does in fact not derive from a specific person or event but the original homestead of the Israelites. Originally, they were a Bedouin people. Bedouins do not stay for long in any place but, in search for water and pasture, they wander with their camels and cattle from one area to the other. The word *'ibri*, accordingly, is a derivation from the trilateral verb *'-b-r* which means the covering of a certain distance or the crossing of a valley or a river from one side to the other.⁷⁷

mused whether we may have here "a link connecting Arabic and Hebrew," Theodor Nöldeke eventually turned much more doubtful, concluding that the definite article does not bear witness to the historical relationship between the Semitic languages but rather developed independently in each of them. (Nöldeke, *Die semitischen Sprachen: Eine Skizze* [Leipzig, 1899], 50.) This issue, among others, would lead Robert Hetzron in the 1970s to considerably revise the family tree of the Semitic languages. (Discussed in Kees Versteegh, *The Arabic Language* [Edinburgh, 2014], 10–24.) Following Hetzron, an Arabo-Canaanite and an Aramaic group together constitute the Central Semitic languages as against those East Semitic (Akkadian and its derivatives) and South Semitic (the Semitic languages of South Arabia and historical Abyssinia). The Arabo-Canaanite group later split into the different Canaanite and Arabic variants, Hebrew belonging to the former. For the state of the art as regards the linguistic situation of ancient North Arabia, see Ahmad Al-Jallad, "What Is Ancient North Arabian?," in *Re-engaging Comparative Semitic and Arabic Studies*, ed. D. Birnstiel and N. Pat-El (Wiesbaden, 2018), 1–43.

77. HSL, 77–78. Assuming a close relationship between Hebrews and Arabs, Julius Wellhausen likewise judged the story of the Israelite's Mesopotamian ancestry to be mythological. Wellhausen, *Israelitische und jüdische Geschichte* (Berlin, 1901), 6–10. In earlier editions of this work, he was more cautious.

But why was it so important for Ben-Ze'ev to refute Hebrew's Canaanite provenance as well as its original kinship with the Aramaic language, which was supposed to have been, following religious and scholarly tradition, Abraham's mother tongue? As against the national crossroads of Canaan, the Hejaz promised Ben-Ze'ev something like Semitic purity. Even if the Hebrew language later integrated into Canaan's linguistic landscape, originally it was an Arabic dialect. Arguing for a closer genetic connection to Aramaic would have been troublesome for Ben-Ze'ev because Mesopotamia, where the Aramaeans first emerged onto the historical scene, is an expansive frontier. As the northeastern rim of the Arabian Peninsula, it borders on Indo-Iranian territory, and it was hypothesized by some that the indigenous population of southern Mesopotamia may have been neither Semitic nor Indo-European.⁷⁸

Related to the latter question was the so-called Sumerian problem, which, since the last third of the nineteenth century, was causing heated scholarly dispute. The Sumerian language, testimony to the oldest layer of Middle Eastern civilization known, resists classification even today.⁷⁹ The region of Chaldea, where the city of Ur was located, was part of the southern frontier of Mesopotamia, inhabited by Semites, Indo-Iranians, and Sumerians. This linguistic and ethnic hodgepodge was the reason, I would argue, that Ben-Ze'ev felt compelled to deny the tradition of Abraham's wandering from Ur to Canaan. Horovitz, one of Ben-Ze'ev's revered teachers, did not go so far. In 1929, the year *HSL* appeared in print, Horovitz published an article in which he likewise stressed the connection between the Hebrew-speaking people and "the nomad population of the north of Arabia." Being fully conscious that the tradition of Abraham's origin from Ur was not easily reconcilable with this theory, he was not prepared to abandon it altogether. For even of Ur "it can be said that it lay on the very edge" of Arabia.⁸⁰

From the perspective of the 1920s, the position articulated by Ben-Ze'ev stood against the general scientific trend that considered Hebrew to

78. See, for instance, Gaston Maspero, *Histoire ancienne des peuples de l'Orient classique*, vol. 2: *Les premières mêlées des peuples* (Paris, 1897), 32–33.

79. Dietz O. Edzard, *Sumerian Grammar* (Leiden, 2003), 2–3.

80. Joseph Horovitz, "Judæo-Arabic Relations in Pre-Islamic Times," *Islamic Studies* 52.3–4 (2013 [1929]): 357–58.

have evolved out of the Canaanite group of dialects. But Ben-Ze'ev was not falling behind the science; indeed, I am arguing that he is best explained by recognizing the interdependence of science and politics. Read against the sociopolitical backdrop of its time, the defense of a close historical relationship between the Hebrew and Arabic languages—the search for their “meeting point,” as Farag expresses it—can be interpreted as a scientific response to, even a refutation of, the intensifying perception that Jews and Palestinian Arabs had nothing more in common than their claim to the same strip of land. From the perspective of the history of science, it is important to note that this defense was not completely ideological but a possible approach within the scientific discourse. Though the Canaanite paradigm was becoming dominant at the time, the question of whence the Hebrew language originated was not yet settled.

CONCLUSION

As the conflict over the territory of Palestine / Eretz Israel intensified during the Mandate period, Hebrew and Arabic began entering into a state of linguistic enmity. Two Semitic languages—as close to each other as, say, French and Italian or German and English—became mutually estranged. The eventual outcome of this ill-boding process was, however, not foreseeable in the years of relative tranquility between 1921 and 1929. By embedding the *History of the Semitic Languages*, written in Arabic and published in Cairo in 1929, in its sociopolitical and scientific contexts, the present essay attempted to explain how its author, Israel Ben-Ze'ev, an Ashkenazic Jerusalemite Jew, translated his political vision of Jewish-Arab cooperation into linguistic theory. This translation was made possible (1) by his rather counterintuitive affirmation of the Arabic language and (2) the particular academic and intellectual situation of 1920s Cairo, which allowed a reform-minded minority to nurture the idea of the general good of the sciences.

Concerning the theoretical result of this translation, for the sake of drawing the histories of Jews and Arabs closer to each other, Ben-Ze'ev was not only willing to challenge the general scientific trend of his time but also, declaring Abraham's journey from Mesopotamia to Canaan a myth, to confront a tenet of his own religious and national tradition. It did not seem sufficient to him, as it did to Joseph Horovitz, to conceptualize southern Mesopotamia as the eastern edge of Arabia. Moreover, the story

of Abraham's journey was, as could be seen in Hans Bauer's theory of Hebrew as an originally Canaanite-Aramaic mixed language, reconcilable with the contemporaneous developments in linguistics. Yet both ancient Canaan and southern Mesopotamia were linguistically and ethnically too ambiguous to lend support to Ben-Ze'ev's extrascientific goal of Jewish-Arab rapprochement. The Hejaz stood for the Semitic language type in its nonalienated state. The theory of Hebrew's north Arabian origin thus appears as the ideological foundation of the project of a bilingual Arabic-Hebrew academic landscape. However, the theory itself was not purely ideological; it only went against the general scientific trend that favored the Canaanite paradigm. This is what makes Ben-Ze'ev's position interesting: The scientific theory he adopted could serve his political vision by conceptualizing and concealing it at the same time. His purpose in composing *HSL* can, therefore, be formulated as follows: On the one hand, it was meant to help propel academic research in Arabic. On the other hand, it was intended as a road sign that, carefully considered in its erection, was to direct his colleagues working in Cairo and Jerusalem, both native and foreign, toward the building site of a bilingual Middle Eastern academic landscape.

Christoph Hopp is a Ph.D. candidate in Jewish studies at the University of Potsdam and the University of Haifa.

