Introduction
Paradigms We Live By

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In his linguistic debut *Sefer Moznayim (The Book of Scales)*, written in Rome in the year 1140, the travelling polymath Abraham ibn ‘Ezra (1089–1164) began his exposé on the Hebrew language by briefly outlining its history.¹ All biblical protagonists, he reminded his readers, from the patriarchs to the enigmatic Men of the Great Assembly, had been fluent in Hebrew. In the centuries following the destruction of the Second Temple, the rabbis of the Mishna and Talmud had faithfully tried to uphold the biblical legacy. More recent times had witnessed the rise of two radically new approaches: that of the Masoretes, whose writings had secured the textual foundations of Scripture, and that of the grammarians, who had joined in the ‘battle of Tora’ by carefully dissecting its language and constantly refining the results of that analysis. In tandem, these two branches of scholarship had succeeded in keeping the Hebrew Bible alive for future generations, thus earning their exponents a favourable mention in Ibn ‘Ezra’s subsequent long-list of ‘Elders of the Holy Tongue’.

By thus concluding his introduction with an exhaustive *bibliographie raisonnée* of his predecessors, Ibn ‘Ezra not only erected a lasting monument to the Hebrew scholars whose books he carried in his memory (rather than in his luggage) when leaving the Iberian peninsula in the 1130s. He simultaneously formulated a canon of early Hebrew linguistics that went largely unchallenged until our days. From the leaders of the tenth-century Babylonian academies, via the giants of Andalusian grammar, to minor celebrities like Levi ibn al-Tabbān—they all appear in Ibn ‘Ezra’s survey of recommended reading. Thus they were safeguarded, like the Bible they had served, for posterity.

Imagine a sixteenth-century Ashkenazi reader, being a novice to the art of grammar, coming across the *Moznayim* in Elijah Levita’s *Diqduqim ([Four] Grammars) of 1546.*² The introduction will have transported him to an hitherto unknown world where scholars had explored issues that transcended the Ashkenazi imagination. Where a man nicknamed Ḥayyūj received unparalleled praise for revealing the secret life of consonants. Where someone had

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¹ Ibn ‘Ezra (1770: 1b–2b).
² The edition included Ibn ‘Ezra’s *Sefer Moznayim* and *Sefer Şahot*, as well as Moses Qimḥi’s *Mahalak Ševile ha-Da’at* (a highly popular text in pre-modern Ashkenazi linguistics) and the anonymous *Petaḥ Devaray*. 
introduced the study of congruence, and a certain Samuel ibn Naghrella was credited for having written an—otherwise unspecified—book that had surpassed all others. To such a reader, the introduction will have opened up new intellectual horizons, somewhat obscured perhaps by the mysterious cities (Tahort, Fez, Saragossa) where the books had been written, by their Arabic titles and the curious genres (dictionaries, to name but one example) that carried their message. To the editor Elijah Levita (1469–1549), it represented hard cultural capital, offering a canonical ‘Sephardic’ point of departure from where to spread his own linguistic ideas among new, Ashkenazi as well as Christian, audiences.

For a man of Ibn ‘Ezra’s critical taste and temperament, the Moznayim’s list of grammarians and their works had turned out remarkably inclusive. By linking Masora and grammar to biblical fluency and its continuation in the Babylonian academies, it firmly embedded them in the rabbinic šalšelet ha-qabbala (chain of tradition). By listing acknowledged geniuses alongside minor classics, it aimed at comprehensiveness rather than judgement. And by sticking to chronology rather than hierarchy, it refused to culminate in a tale of progress and scientific revolution.

By contrast, in Safa Berura (Pure Speech), written shortly after the Moznayim for a new readership in a different city, Ibn ‘Ezra did acknowledge that in some areas irreversible progress had been made. While the early authorities had foolishly ignored the fundamental tri-literality of the Hebrew root, he wrote, God had “opened the eyes of Judah Ḥayyūj to recognize the weak consonants, their (dis)appearance and permutations”.3 The by then dominant use of analogy, this summary suggests, was a major breakthrough rather than one methodological choice out of many. All previous efforts at determining form and meaning were hereby dismissed as old school—and since then have been considered obsolete by the majority of scholars, medieval as well as modern.

Medieval surveys often contented themselves with listing only Judah Ḥayyūj (end of the tenth century) and his successor Abū al-Walīd ibn Janāḥ (first half of the eleventh century), who between them had formulated and refined the doctrine of tri-literality.4 What with their emphasis on this ‘groundbreaking discovery’, such accounts show little patience with later linguistic interests, including those of Abraham ibn ‘Ezra himself. When making his appearance in Profiat Duran’s 1403 overview of Jewish linguists, Ibn ‘Ezra was introduced as the author of “several agreeable books, which contain, however, but

3 Lippmann (1839: 25b).
4 An early example is Ibn Daud’s Sefer ha-Kabbala (Cohen 1967: 73 [Hebrew], 101f. [English]), written 1160–61.