Medieval Judaism inherited the languages of earlier periods of Judaism, namely Hebrew and Aramaic, as languages of the Bible and rabbinic literature, while also having learned and adapted the languages of its neighbouring cultures, including Arabic, Persian, a diversity of romance languages, Greek koine, and Middle High German. Vernacular languages that were adopted into medieval Jewish cultures were written in the Hebrew alphabet, but their grammar and vocabulary generally remained unchanged. A concept like ‘purity of language’ seems out of place amid such linguistic plurality, even if we look at the transmission of ‘holy texts’, i.e. the Bible and the Talmud. While the Bible is predominantly written in Hebrew, it contains Aramaic passages. The later biblical texts clearly indicate an awareness that Aramaic was not only the official language of the Persian empire—which ruled over the province Yehud from the sixth to the late fourth centuries B.C.E.—but that it was also spreading as the lingua franca among Jewish communities throughout Persia. The Babylonian Talmud comprises two components: the Mishna, which was authored in a special idiom of post-biblical Hebrew, probably a linguistic style that is specific to this literature, in the rabbinic academies of Israel in the second to third centuries C.E.; and, the Gemara, which was composed in the rabbinic academies on the banks of the Euphrates during the third to (at least) the sixth centuries C.E., primarily in Aramaic but also in Hebrew, with constant references to both the Mishna and the Bible.

For most of Jewish history, purity of language was simply not in circulation as a concept. The only exception arose in a community that was outstanding for its investment in language: Jewish poets, most of whom were also grammarians and lexicographers, living under Muslim rule in Andalusia. This notion became a topic of discussion in the tenth to twelfth centuries, during the Umayyad caliphate and the taifa kingdoms, when Hebrew poetry enjoyed what Delitzsch has termed its “Golden Age”.1 This took place in an Arabic-speaking Muslim milieu which not only promoted the idea of ījāz al-qur’ān

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1 Delitzsch, Zur Geschichte der jüdischen Poesie, 44.
(the inimitability of the *Quran* as a divinely revealed text, including the superiority of its language), but also ‘*arabîyya* (the supremacy of Arabic language, culture and religion).

Although medieval Judaism considered the Hebrew Bible to be a revealed and, by definition, holy text, this view in no way contradicted the fact that subsequent Jewish literatures were composed in different dialects and languages. Few Jewish communities had yet developed a special admiration for biblical Hebrew, the notion that its language was divine, or the idea that purity of language should or would influence Jewish textual production.² Greek and Latin loan words were freely absorbed into rabbinic writings,³ Hebrew and Aramaic were regularly mixed in texts from the geonic period, and many medieval authors used the language of their surroundings to explain difficult passages in the Bible. This liberal use of contemporaneous vernacular languages is most notably documented in the Old French found in the writings by Salomon b. Isaac (best known by his name acronym, Rashi), the most prominent Northern French scholar of the eleventh century, who wrote commentaries on the Bible and Talmud.⁴ Bilingual glossaries, several of which have been transmitted in manuscripts, further attest to this linguistic reality.⁵ In her studies of Near Eastern Jewish communities, the late Rina Drory described a “basic diglossic pattern in the Jewish linguistic system” in which Hebrew formed a common foundation, beside which Aramaic and Arabic (respectively) existed as languages “acquired through many years of coexistence”.⁶ Each of these languages had its place in the Jewish literary world, and texts employed different registers of Hebrew and other languages according to content and convention.

The singular exception to ‘peaceful coexistence’ as a linguistic norm is represented by the decision of Hebrew poets in seventh-century Byzantine Palestine to adjust Greek loan words into Hebrew-sounding forms. The best studied example is the transformation of the Greek term *taksis* into the Hebrew word *tekes*; though other Greek vocabulary also entered Hebrew after similar treatment.⁷ This pattern may be attributed to the Hebrew poets’ thorough

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² In recent years work has been done on Karaite study of the Bible and its language and on Rabbanite culture in Muslim countries that indicates special regard for biblical language, but no texts have yet been identified that explicitly instruct Jews to model their own writing on the language of the Bible. Cf. Maman, “Karaite Hebrew”.


⁴ These were first analyzed by Arène Darmesteter: Darmesteter, *Les Glosses Françaises de Raschi*; id. and Blondheim, *Les Glosses Françaises dans les Commentaires Talmudiques*.

⁵ Cf. on this literature Banitt, “Une vue d’ensemble”.


⁷ Cf. van Bekkum, “Language and Theme in the Piyyut”.