We can divide the linguistic innovations in Ben Sira into two groups: (1) those that are common to Ben Sira and the later books of the Bible and/or the Dead Sea Scrolls and/or the Mishnaic literature and/or Aramaic; (2) those that are unique to Ben Sira. Some of the latter may be ascribed to the author’s uncommon linguistic gifts and to the literary genre of his work—wisdom literature—which makes use of poetic features, including parallelism, meter, rhyme, and alliteration. It seems to be only a matter of chance that none of his other unique coinages are found only in Ben Sira.

In the present lecture, I wish to focus exclusively on the linguistic innovations common to Ben Sira and Amoraic literature. Let me stress from the outset that these innovations appear in the latter quite independently and not as part of citations from, or within paraphrases of Ben Sira.

The language of the Amoraim, unlike that of the Tannaim, has not been widely studied. Breuer, for example, emphasizes that “The Hebrew of the Amoraim, which strongly influenced the development of the Hebrew language, has not been sufficiently studied; this is especially true of Amoraic Hebrew as preserved in the Babylonian Talmud.”

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The pioneers in the study of this dialect—notably Kutscher and Sokoloff—reached the conclusion that it was a dead literary language that did not experience the changes and developments typical of a living idiom. According to these scholars, Amoraic Hebrew continued the literary traditions of the dialects that preceded it, chiefly biblical and Tannaitic Hebrew. They also emphasized the prominent influence of Aramaic, the spoken vernacular of the Amoraim, on their Hebrew.2

A watershed in research about the nature of Amoraic Hebrew are the two studies by Breuer.3 Breuer presents evidence of linguistic innovations that reflect natural internal development of the language. Some of these innovations occur occasionally in the language of the Tannaim, while others make their first appearance in Amoraic Hebrew. With regard to the former, Breuer asks whether they really were first used by the Tannaim and then became widespread in the Amoraic age, or whether they penetrated the language of the tannaim only in a later stage of the redaction.4

Amoraic Hebrew innovations that have no parallel in Tannaitic Hebrew and that cannot be explained as the result of Aramaic influence (in some cases even when there is a parallel in Aramaic they are not necessarily influenced by that language) indicate, as stated above, internal development of the sort typical of living rather than dead languages. On the basis of these findings, Breuer offers two possibilities: (1) Amoraic Hebrew was a spoken language, to some unknown extent; (2) in some circumstances, the natural internal developments that are characteristic of a living idiom may take place in a dead language as well.

In my lecture today, as I have already noted, I want to discuss especially those innovations that are common only to Ben Sira and Amoraic Hebrew (and, in one case, to Dead Sea Scrolls Hebrew as well). It is particularly important to note that these innovations do not occur in later Aramaic (Western, Eastern, or other dialects) or in late biblical Hebrew.

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4 Consider for example the word יָפְרַשׁ. It occurs only once in Tannaitic literature (according to the evidence of the texts), but is very common in the Babylonian Talmud. In Tannaitic literature and the Jerusalem Talmud, we find יָפָרַשׁ instead. Breuer (“The Hebrew of the Amoraim,” 129–132) asks whether this unique occurrence in Tannaitic literature is an authentic feature of this dialect or whether it was interpolated at a later stage of textual transmission.