QUMRAN HEBREW:
SOME TYPOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS

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Our aim in this article is to present some observations concerning the place of the language of the Qumran texts in the history of Hebrew. With their abundance of new data these texts furnish new criteria for re-evaluating numerous points. First and foremost, we are now in a better position to deal with the linguistic typology of the literature of the Qumran period, roughly from the beginning of the first century B.C.E. to the end of the first century C.E. Of particular interest is the relationship of Qumran Hebrew (=QH) to Biblical Hebrew (=BH) on the one hand and to Mishnaic Hebrew (=MH) on the other. These questions are, needless to say, of major importance.

Several opinions have been expressed on the position of QH with regard to BH. Some scholars consider QH a continuation of Late Biblical Hebrew (=LBH)\(^1\); others view it as an artificial entity, a product of an attempt to revive BH, namely as a literary continuation of Classical BH.\(^2\) Another view regards QH as consisting of LBH features and lines of archaization.\(^3\) There is room to ask whether these definitions do indeed apply to QH.

At the beginning of our discussion let us say a few words with regard to the linguistic diversity of the Qumran texts. Generally

\(^1\) A. Hurvitz ("h\textit{l}\textit{s}w\, h\textit{h}\textit{b}r\textit{y}t\, btkwp\, h\textit{h}\textit{ys}\textit{y}" ["The Hebrew Language in the Persian Period"], The World History of the Jewish People V: H. Tadmor [ed.], The Restoration—The Persian Period [Jerusalem, 1984], pp. 211-23), p. 222 (QH is "a direct continuation of LBH"); Qimron, \textit{HDSS}, p. 116, also defines QH as a continuation of BH although he points out (p. 117) the ancient nature of some of its features.


\(^3\) Polzin, p. 6. Note Polzin’s conclusion that QH "is closer in many respects to the language of the Torah than to the language of Chronicles".
speaking, these texts can be linguistically classified into three main categories.

The first category, which includes most of the texts, can be defined by the occurrence of several distinctly salient features, such as the long forms for the pronouns of the third person masculine and feminine (hw$y, hy$y) or the yqwtlhu pattern for the imperfect with the pronominal suffix for the third person. These features, with a number of which we shall deal later on in some detail, are to be regarded, for the majority of the texts, as grammatical markers.

The second category is represented by the Copper Scroll (3Q15) and is characterized by the exclusive use of š, not šr, for the relative pronoun, and by the in plural morpheme of the noun (e.g. k$yn “vessels”). The third category consists of those texts which show an affinity to classical MH.

To make reference to these categories easier, we shall call the first, that is, the one evidenced in most texts, General Qumran Hebrew (=GQH); the second, Copper Scroll Hebrew (=CSH) and the third Qumran Mishnaic (=QM). We shall primarily be concerned here with GQH. This class possesses some distinct biblical features, sharing at the same time some traits with MH. It does possess, however, certain well defined traits of its own. In the main, as we shall see, it is neither Biblical nor Mishnaic, but rather an independent entity.

In order to get closer to defining the nature of GQH, we have chosen to deal here in some detail with several features of its struc-

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4 For an extensive treatment of the language of the Copper Scroll see J. T. Milik, DJD III, pp. 221 ff. The -yn ending is occasionally found also in other scrolls (Qimron, “LTS”, pp. 93-4), but only as a secondary morphological feature. š also occurs in other scrolls, but rarely (see n. 52, below). CSH also uses the possessive pronoun šl (Milik, p. 226).

5 For the texts that fall into this category see Milik, DJD III, pp. 221-5; E. Qimron and J. Strugnell, “An Unpublished Halakhic Letter from Qumran”, Biblical Archaeology Today (Jerusalem, 1985), pp. 400-7. A full linguistic description of this important letter, tentatively called mgš t m$y huwrh will evidently be included in the edition that is being prepared by Strugnell and Qimron. For the time being, we should note their statement (ibid; p. 405) that “the similarity [of the language of the letter] to MH is restricted to vocabulary and to the use of the particle š, whereas in areas of grammar (spelling, phonology, morphology, and syntax) there is a very great similarity to the Hebrew of the other Dead Sea Scrolls”. The authors believe that the language of the letter is closer to the spoken Hebrew of Qumran more than that of any other Qumranic text. This has, of course, to be proven.