

# ENCYCLOPEDIA OF HEBREW LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS

Volume 1  
A–F

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names, or sentences that form the core of any esoteric formula employed for the fabrication of talismans show to this very day an easily detectable Hebrew patina, a very influential, and still reprinted manual for deciphering cryptographies or slang in use among delinquents or members of marginal groups, illustrates this point. The author and German police officer Friedrich Christian Benedikt Avé-Lallemant (1809–1892) published between 1858 and 1862 a groundbreaking book on the dialects of the underworld, under the title *Das deutsche Gaunerthum in seiner social-politischen, literarischen und linguistischen Ausbildung zu seinem heutigen Bestande* ‘The German underworld in its social, political, literary and linguistic formation to its contemporary existence’. The definition of a specific language of the *Gaunerthum* ‘criminal underworld’, coinciding in large parts with Yiddish (of which he provides a full-fledged grammatical description), is not a mere reflection of the situation of impoverished Jews ensuring their survival through illegal activities and of other delinquents finding it useful to communicate by means of this ‘strange’ language to escape the attention of the authorities (to no avail, so it appears), it is far more a late manifestation of the perceived connection between Judaism and ‘forbidden secrecy’, which celebrated its triumphs from the Renaissance onwards.

The particular nature of Hebrew alphabetic signs, always oscillating between normalcy and two extreme statuses—perfect language or perfect swindle—can be verified, even if, *a posteriori*, from a completely different field of knowledge, absolutely extraneous, at least apparently, to esoterism and magic. In his choice to name *’alef* and to use the corresponding letter of the Hebrew alphabet (א) to designate the transfinite, to give expression to the fact that some infinities are larger than others, to skim with the tools of quantity the unfathomable realm of quality, mathematician Georg Cantor anticipated, as it were, *avant la lettre*, the further history of *’alef* in literature, epitomized by Jorge Luis Borges’s short story by the same title (published in 1947), which gave new dimensions to the autonomous dynamics of polysemy in language and to the unique blend of secrecy and revelation that affects Hebrew, language and script, especially from an exogenous perspective.

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## Cultural Words: Biblical Hebrew

The ancient Hebrew lexicon contains a considerable number of *Kulturwörter* or *Wanderwörter*, that is, lexical items whose origins cannot be identified with certainty, but which are common to cultures throughout a particular region, as well as loanwords borrowed from various languages used over a wide area (from the Mediterranean to South Asia). No doubt Israel’s geographical location—as the land bridge between the two great cultural centers of Egypt and Mesopotamia, along with access to the Mediterranean Sea to the west and the Red Sea, and thence the Indian Ocean, to the south—was a major factor in the absorption of numerous foreign words.

Among the most commonly recognized *Kulturwörter* in Biblical Hebrew are בַּרְזֶל *barzel* ‘iron’ and תַּנּוּר *tannūr* ‘oven’, which rank among the most well-traveled words in recorded linguistic history. The former word occurs seventy-six times in the Bible. The irregular correspondence of the phonemes in Akkadian *parzillu* (Mari dialect *barzillu*), Ugaritic *brdl*, Hebrew *barzel*, Aramaic-Syriac *parzel*, Sabaean *frzn*, Arabic *firzil* (specifically ‘iron fetter’) indicates that this word is of non-Semitic origin (and underwent borrowing within Semitic from one language to another). Forms without suffixed *-l* include Ge’ez *barat*, Amharic-Tigrinya-Harari *brät*, with the same or similar forms in other Ethiopian languages, as well as forms in various Cushitic languages, e.g., Saho-Afar *birtä*, Khamir *birät*. Further afield, other perhaps related words for metal, without a dental or fricative consonant in third position, are Egyptian *bi3* ‘metal’

(most likely '[meteoric] iron' in the Pyramid Texts), Ugaritic *brr* 'tin', and Sumerian BAR (not attested as an independent lexeme, but see AN.BAR 'iron', ZABAR 'bronze', KUG.BABBAR 'silver', etc.). Berber *azzal* 'iron' is probably a loanword from Phoenician/Punic, in which the initial *b* was misinterpreted as a preposition and *-rz-* was assimilated to *-zz-*.

Moving to Europe, we note that Latin *\*bbersom* (or *\*fersom*—either proto-form is possible) > *ferrum* is also related. The ancient ironworks discovered at Fursill, in the Italian Dolomites, indicate that this toponym derives from our word as well. *Barsel* 'iron' also appears in Rotwelsch (borrowed from Hebrew). In English, *brazil* denotes coal with an abnormally high admixture of iron pyrites. Other connected words include Anglo-Saxon *braes* (> Modern English 'brass'), Old Friesian *bress* 'copper', and Middle Dutch *bras* 'metal'.

The word תַּנּוּר *tannūr* 'oven' occurs fifteen times in the Bible, including in early texts such as Gen. 15.7 and Exod. 7.28. It is attested in Late Egyptian as *trr*, later Coptic *trir*, and in the following Semitic languages: Akkadian *tinūru* (attested first at Alalakh in the Middle Babylonian period), Aramaic-Syriac *tannūrā*, Arabic *tannūr*, and Mehri *tənnawr*. Despite the similarity, this word has no connection to the Semitic root *n-w-r* 'light', but is a regional *Kulturwort*. Beyond Egypto-Semitic, the word entered Middle Persian and hence Modern Persian *tanūr*, Turkish *tandır*, Azeri *təndir*, Armenian *t'onir* and, still further to the east, Urdu-Hindi *tandūr* (those familiar with Indian cuisine will recognize the word *tandoori* used to describe food cooked in a clay oven), and Nepali *tanūr*.

Other *Kulturwörter* in Biblical Hebrew include:

(a) Hebrew כְּתָנֶת *kaṭōneṭ* 'tunic': Ugaritic *ktn*, Aramaic כְּתָן *ktn*, Greek χιτών *chitōn*, Latin *tunica*; cf. also Sumerian GADA, Akkadian *kitū* 'flax, linen'; and eventually English 'cotton'.

(b) Hebrew שַׁק *śaq* 'sack, sackcloth': Akkadian *saqqu*, Aramaic שַׁק *śq*, Egyptian *śg*, Coptic *sok*, Greek σάκκος *sakkos*, Latin *saccus*.

(c) Hebrew יַיִן *yayin* 'wine': Ugaritic *yn*, Phoenician פַּן *yn*, Ge'ez *wayn*, Cushitic (e.g., Beja) *wayni*, Hittite *wiyana*, Greek οἶνος *oinos*, Latin *vinum*; cf. also Arabic *wayn* 'grapes'.

(d) Hebrew כֹּבַע *kōbā'* / קֹבַע *qōbā'* 'helmet' (note that the word occurs with two different velars, evidence of a non-native lexeme): Hittite *kupahi* 'helmet', Greek κύμβαχος *kumbachos* 'crest of helmet'; cf. Aramaic קֹבַע *qwb'*, Syriac *qubbā'*, Arabic *qubbā'a*, Ge'ez *qob'*, Cushitic (e.g., Oromo) *qobi*, all denoting various types of head covering (e.g., the Ge'ez term means 'monk's hood').

(e) Hebrew כִּנּוֹר *kinnōr* 'lyre': Akkadian *kin-nārum*, Ugaritic *knr*, Aramaic כִּנּוֹר *knr*, Arabic *kannārat*, Sanskrit *kinara*, Hittite *kinirri*, Greek κινύρα *kinnura*.

(f) Hebrew פִּילְגֶשֶׁת *pīlēgeš* 'concubine': Greek παλλακίς *pallakis*, Latin *paelex*; the Hebrew word clearly is borrowed from an Indo-European language, though the source cannot be either the Greek or Latin forms cited.

The origins of some *Kulturwörter* are known, but since they were borrowed into Hebrew already at the earliest stages of the language they also deserve to be noted here. These include three loanwords from Greek attested in early biblical texts, viz., (a) מַכְרֶה *mākēṛā* (Gen. 49.5) < μάχαιρα *makhaira* 'sword'; (b) לַפְּיֵד *lappīd* (Gen. 15.7; Exod. 20.18; five times in Judges, etc.) < λαμπάς *lampas* 'torch, lightning'; and (c) לִשְׁכָּה *liškā* (1 Sam. 9.22; otherwise late, in 2 Kgs 23.11; Jeremiah; Ezekiel; Ezra-Neemiah; Chronicles) < λέσχη *leschē* '(wine-)hall'.

Names of spices, as one might expect, travel with the products themselves, and thus Hebrew is awash with such terms, e.g., מֹר *mōr*, Ugaritic *mr*, Arabic *murr*, Greek μύρρα *murra*, Latin *murra* 'myrrh'; קָצִיעָה *qaṣī'ā*, Greek κασία *kasia*, Latin *casia* 'cassia'; כַּרְכֹּם *karkōm*, Sanskrit *kurkuma*, Akkadian *kurkanū*, Greek κρόκος *krokos*, Latin *crocus*, originally 'turmeric' apparently, and then also 'saffron, crocus'; אֶהְלִים *'āhālīm* / אֶהְלוֹת *'āhālōt* (both plural forms are attested), Tamil (also Prakrit) *aghil*, Greek ἀγάλοχον *agalochon*, ἄλοη *aloē*, Latin *aloe* 'aloes'; etc.

In addition, there are numerous loanwords from Sumerian, Egyptian, Akkadian, Persian, Indic, Hellenistic Greek, Latin, etc., all of which are treated in individual entries elsewhere herein.

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## Culture and Nature

The question whether the rules of grammar are objective natural entities or a cultural and historical creation can also take the form of a philosophical problem. Thus it can be related to the metaphysical question whether man possesses an essence or a nature or whether human qualities are a cultural product and therefore dependent on time and place. These issues were at the center of a famous debate which took place in 1971 on Dutch television between Michel Foucault and Noam Chomsky. It was later published under the title "Human Nature: Justice versus Power" (Foucault and Chomsky 1997) and it is considered a fundamental text in matters of political philosophy as well.

In this debate, Chomsky presents the notion of human nature underlying his theory of generative grammar. This nature or essence is primarily evident in the human capacity to create original sentences (108–109) free from the control of stimuli (Chomsky 2006:11). In fact, "much of what a person says in his normal intercourse with others is novel, much of what you hear is new" (Foucault and Chomsky 1997:108). This free creation in language is, however, subject to rules, an idea formulated, according to Chomsky, by Wilhelm von Humboldt in the 1830s (113). This means that "the speaker makes infinite use of finite means" (Chomsky 2006:15). Furthermore, all languages that have been studied in depth reveal the same set of rules, even though differ-

ent speakers of the same language or speakers of different languages are exposed to very different kinds of experiences. Chomsky argues that this "remarkable phenomenon" (Foucault and Chomsky 1997:108) can have only one explanation—that the system of grammatical rules or "schematism" is innate. These innate principles also account for the gap between the scarce, "scattered and degenerate" data available to children and "the very highly articulated, highly systematic, profoundly organized resulting knowledge" that they manage to derive from these data (108–109). According to Chomsky, when speaking of the notion of human nature, he is referring to those principles that guide "our social and intellectual and individual behavior" (109).

As for Foucault, he "mistrust[s] the notion of human nature a little". While he accepts the idea that human creativity is possible only within a system of rules, he does not think, as Chomsky does, that it is necessary to assume a nature of man or of consciousness as the condition of existence of such rules or regularities. According to Foucault, before one adopts this view, one should consider the possibility that the rules, which are the condition of the possibility of human creation, originate in social practices, such as economics, technology, politics, and sociology. Thus he "would like to know whether one cannot discover the system of regularity, of constraint, which makes science possible, somewhere else, even outside the human mind, in social forms, in the relations of production, in the class struggles, etc." (123).

Since the source of regularities studied by science—at least those sciences that deal with man and society—is society along with its history, it follows that there is not one fixed schematism, but different kinds of schematisms, each constituting, according to Foucault, "a new *grille*, with its choices and exclusions; a new play with its own rules, decisions and limitations, with its own inner logic, its parameters and its blind alleys, all of which lead to the modification of the point of origin. And it is in this functioning that the understanding itself exists" (117). These *grilles*, which are the condition of possibility of knowledge, change over time in revolutionary leaps; thus they logically serve as an "epistemological indicator" (110) or a "historical *a priori*," which Foucault also terms *épistémè* (1972:191; 1991:xxii).