Menahem ben Saruq’s *Mahberet:*
The first Hebrew-Hebrew dictionary

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Menahem ben Jacob ben Saruq was born at the beginning of the tenth century in Tortosa, Spain, and moved in his youth to Córdoba, the capital of Andalusia and the center of the Umayyad rule and of Jewish learning in Spain in those days. He served for a time as the secretary of Isaac ben Shaprut, and then of his son, Hisday ibn Shaprut (915-970), the leader of the Jews of Andalusia, who served in the court of the Caliph ‘Abd al-Rahmān III (912-961). With Hisday’s encouragement, Menahem compiled the *Mahberet,* the first Hebrew-Hebrew dictionary, and perhaps the first systematic Hebrew dictionary of any kind. Close to the time when the *Mahberet* was being compiled, a comprehensive Hebrew-Arabic dictionary of biblical terms was written in Jerusalem by the Karaitic scholar David ben Abraham Alfasī, but it is not clear whether the two were acquainted with each other’s work. Despite a certain resemblance between these dictionaries, their compilers may not have copied from each other but instead drew from common sources — for example, both have similar definitions for the entries פלשתים * ([totafot]) phylacteries, יִדְיֵי ([gdi]) kid, in the context of דִּבְרֵי * ([dvi]) words, and others.*

Prior to the compilation of these dictionaries, works of a lexicographic nature had been compiled, usually bilingual glossaries for the Bible or parts of it or for particular tractsates of the Mishnah and the Talmud. Also compiled were *Aruch* by Zemah ben Paltzy Gaon in Pumbedita (Babylon), around 732 CE, but it was lost, and Rav Sa’adiah Gaon’s *Agron,* but it was limited in its scope, providing only a list of about 1,000 nouns recommended to poets.

*Mahberet Menahem* is, as noted above, the first systematic dictionary of Hebrew. It contains all of the vocabulary of the entire Bible, providing some 2,500 roots, arranged in approximately 8,000 lexemes, in alphabetical order by root, according to Menahem’s perception of the root. It is systematic in that the entries are arranged in alphabetical order with the root as a main entry and its derivatives as sub-entries. The alphabetization is usually preserved in relation to the first two letters of the root, but not always in relation to the third. For example, the root הָרַס [h-r-s] comes after the root הָרַס [h-r-t-s]. Roots comprising four letters or more appear among the regular roots (and are not assigned a separate section, as was done by Menahem’s successors, Rabbi Jonah ibn Janah and Rabbi David Qimhi, in their dictionaries). For example, הָרַס and הָרַס [h-r-s] appear immediately after the root הָרַס [h-r-t-s] (and not at the end of all of the entries for the letter ה). The root is presented with all of its derivatives below it, verbs and nouns alike, and this example was followed by lexicographers throughout the Middle Ages, until modern times, when nouns began to be listed according to their initial letter even if it is not radical. Eliezer Ben Yehuda seems to have been the first Hebrew lexicographer in modern times to separate nouns from verbs. For example, he listed the root התפלל [l-t-fl] in the kaph section, but placed the noun חֵלֶל (lkhelal) in the mem section, from the same root, in the mem section. In more recent years, other editing systems, such as that used in *Milon ha-Hoveh,* have developed.

The original name of *Mahberet Menahem* was, apparently, *Sefer Pitronim* (Book of Interpretations) and Menahem’s pupils referred to it by that name. But in the body of the book, Menahem lists the entries that begin with the letter אֶלֶף — *Mahberet Aleph,* the bet section — *Mahberet Bet,* and so on, for a total of 22 *mahbarot.* Thus the name of the entire dictionary became *Mahberet* very close to the time of its completion, and Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki 1040-1105) already refers to it by that name. The name *Mahberet* (from מַעְבֵּר [‘h-b-r] to unite, associate, link up) reflects contemporary trends in names of dictionaries; it is similar to *Agron* (from מַעְבֵּר [‘g-r] to compile, collect), the name of the dictionaries compiled by Rav Sa’adiah Gaon and Alfasī; the name used for Arabic dictionaries, *Jami,* literally, a collection of words; and the modern Hebrew expression הצורMilan, the counterpart of the Latin term *thesaurus.* In modern times, due to the tendency to prefer one word to a phrase, the word *milan* was devised, apparently by Eliezer Ben Yehuda (1880), on the basis of the word *milal* (word), as the equivalent for dictionary.

Menahem devoted his dictionary solely to words in the Bible, whose language he considered exemplary, and though he did not compile a grammar book at the same
time, the dictionary also includes numerous discussions on grammar, in excursuses or in brief remarks in a few entries. Apart from these explicit remarks, the method used in editing the dictionary is instructive with regard to his grammatical approach, at least in the area of root theory. The theory underlying *Maḥberet Menahem* advocates an abstract root that can be composed of one consonant, or of two consonants or more, a theory that also governed the works of Alfasi, his contemporary, and Judah ben Quraysh, who belonged to the previous generation.13

For example, the main entry בּ (sh-b) includes roots that have been considered as roots in their own right ever since the time of Judah Hayyuj (Fez, Morocco - Córdoba, ca. 1000): בּ (n-sh-b), בּ (y-sh-b), בּ (sh-w-b), בּ (sh-b-y), בּ (sh-b-b). According to the method used by Menahem and his contemporaries, and the method used by some of their predecessors, every letter that is not used in every inflection of a word, such as yod, waw and nun in these roots, is not radical. After all, for the meaning יָשָׁב (yashav) sitting we say יָשָׁב (yashav) I sat in the past tense, but יָשָׁב (yeshav) I’ll sit in the future tense and יָשֶׁב (yeshet) sit in the infinitive, omitting the initial yod. For הבּ (shiva) returning, we say הבּ (ashav) I’ll return (’ashav I returned) in the past tense but הבּ (shavti) in the future tense but הבּ (shavti) I returned in the past tense, omitting the waw. And as for הבּ (shiva) captivity, the Bible contains the statement יִשְׂרָאֵל מָנַנְתָּב נָּשֶׁר (Yisrael manantab nasher), Num. 21:1, omitting the final yod. Menahem classified as radical only a letter that exists in every inflection. This approach may have been influenced by the concept of essence and accident in Aristotelian philosophy, according to which only an attribute that is a constant is an essence and attributes that are variable are merely accidents, which are not fundamental to the definition of the “nature” of the object in question.

But this is not to suggest that Menahem attributed the same meaning to הבּ, הבּ and הבּ (ineshiva) blowing. In the entry בּ (sh-b), he arranged them in “departments” (רַפָּל [mahlaqqot]), that is, sub-entries, with each sub-entry containing a different definition. He may have considered them homonymous roots, but it is possible that he was thinking mainly of the root as an organizing entity. And yet, there are some words in the dictionary that are treated as polysemic and deriving from one root, whereas according to his method they should be treated as homonymous.15

In any event, all of the roots that modern methodology considers ‘defective’ or geminate are, according to Menahem’s system, bilateral. For example, on the basis of יִשָּׁר (yishar) and יִשָּׁר (yishar), Exod. 9:22, he determined that the root of the verb was נָשָׁר alone, and not נָשָׁר or נָשָׁר as Hayyuj had determined, a generation after Menahem.

The monoliteral roots were not placed in their expected position in Menahem’s dictionary, at the beginning of the entries for each letter that serves as the initial letter of a monoliteral root according to his system, but in a concentrated discussion, apparently because they are very few. This discussion is located in the first opportune place – at the beginning of the entries for the letter bet, the first letter in the alphabet that serves as the initial letter of a monoliteral root.16 And since he is already explaining this particular type of root, he launches into a discussion of root theory in general.

*Maḥberet Menahem* is a compact dictionary, and most of its entries are very short. Usually the entry is structured as follows: it comprises a main entry, and if this main entry has a few definitions, they are presented as “departments”. Each department includes the relevant words, a few examples from the Bible and brief definitions, usually by means of a synonym in a general mode. When summing up the meaning of several entries that he views as belonging to the same semantic family, Menahem uses the following formula: יִשָּׁר (Yisrah) X (they are from the meaning of X). For example, all of the citations presented in the entry הַבּ (b-kh), department 1, were defined as יִשָּׁר (Yisrah) X – i.e., “they are from the meaning of movement”.

The *Maḥberet* contains some embryonic entries that offer only an example from the Bible and no definition, on the assumption that the educated reader will draw the meaning from the example. There are also entries with an alternative definition in the form of יִשָּׁר לְמַעֲשֶׂה יִשָּׁר (Yisrah lemaaseh Yisrah), “in its literal meaning” or “as is known”, but without a concrete definition. Hence, the dictionary was not written for laymen but rather for the learned who already had a good basic knowledge of the Bible.

The overwhelming majority of entries contain no grammatical, etymological or semantic discussions (for example, no antonyms are listed); no clues to the declension of the word, neither of the verbs deriving from it nor of the nouns; and, no comments on syntax. The *Maḥberet* is mainly a dictionary for the *peshat* (literal meaning) philological significance of the word.18

The entries are in most cases spelled as they appear in the Bible; the plene is plene and the deficient is deficient,
and the entries and the citations are presented without vocalization. As was the custom of language scholars of the time, no references are provided for the biblical citations, on the assumption that the context of the citation is a sufficient indication of its location in the Bible (and in a few cases also in the Mishnah). However, modern editors (see below) added references as needed.

The *Mahberet* is a dictionary devoted to the entire Bible, including the Aramaic words in the biblical text. Menahem does not assign a special section to the Aramaic words, as was done by Rabbi David Qimhi (Provence, thirteenth century) in his *Sefer ha-Shorashim* (*Book of the Roots*) and as is customary in modern biblical dictionaries. Instead, he integrated them among the Hebrew entries, as if it were all one language. For example, the Hebrew citation יִתְנַחֵל (‘ivyamalkeh...’) Neh. 5:7 and the Aramaic citation יִתְנַחֵל (‘milki...’) Dan. 4:24 appear in one entry in the second department of the root יִתְנַחֵל [m-h].

It was not that Menahem did not distinguish between the two languages, but his approach to the dictionary was more philological than linguistic, and since the dictionary concerns a particular book – the Bible, in its entirety – he did not separate the two languages used in it. In this sense, separation would be merely a technical matter.

Even though the *Mahberet* includes all of the words in the Bible, it does not include names, neither of people nor of places. (Such names were usually dealt with in concordances, encyclopedias and lexicons for the Bible, but not in dictionaries.)

Menahem was a methodical scholar who was consistent to an extreme in his opinions, and had a critical, scientific way of looking at things. Since root theory was a focus of great interest in this period when the philological interpretation of the Bible was coming into its own, Menahem and the other members of his generation considered the status of each letter in a word – that is, whether it was radical or servile. In one of the early excursuses in the *Mahberet*, in the entry יָסָר [m-h], Menahem leveled critical criticism at Judah ben Quraysh. Ibn Quraysh explained the unique occurrence of this root in the phrase יָסָר נַחֲלֵיהֶם (‘ivat herav’ Ezek. 21:20; *slaughter, massacre of the sword*) as if it were deriving from the cognate יָסָר נַחֲלֵיהֶם (‘iv’at herav’), that is, from יָסָר (‘be’ata) trouble, fear; the word יָסָר (‘iv’at’ is, of course, an invention of Ibn Quraysh). Menahem contended that Ibn Quraysh had thereby committed several grammatical transgressions. First, he had replaced the letter het with aiyn. Menahem vehemently objected to letter changes and considered such an act to be arbitrary, irregular, unpredictable and ungrammatical, because if we replace one letter with another, the order of the language will be destroyed. The second transgression was that Ibn Quraysh omitted the letter aleph in יָסָר, because if the root is יָסָר נַחֲלֵיהֶם [m-h], the aleph of יָסָר is unnecessary, while Menahem considers it radical. The third was that he had radicalized the tav in יָסָר, whereas, according to Menahem’s system, it is only the feminine morpheme.

Menahem, too, interprets the word יָסָר as יָסָר (‘eina) great fear) but although there is no difference between the two philologists concerning the semantics of the word, they differ in how this conclusion was reached and in their grammatical approaches. Menahem’s criticism implies that if there is no convincing proof for determining the root, it must be put in its proper perspective: since most taws at the end of words were meant to indicate the feminine gender, this can also be assumed with regard to יָסָר, especially since it is part of a construct phrase. Therefore, he determined that its root was יָסָר [m-h]. And since this word is unique in the Bible (*hapax legomenon*) and there is nothing with which to compare it, we have no choice but to determine its meaning on the basis of the context alone.

As soon as the *Mahberet* was published, it met with strong reactions, first in Spain and subsequently in France and the East as well. The poet and philologist Dunash ben Labrat, Menahem’s contemporary and fellow Córdoban, wrote a book in which he presented 180 remarks (or, as Dunash put it, *responses, objections* [tsi’uvot]) challenging many of Menahem’s decisions, both in general and with regard to individual points. For example, he claimed that there was no need to seek a root for a particle such as יָסָר (‘ma) what) and ruled that only a word that had a grammatical declension could have a root. Dunash also rejected Menahem’s determination that יָסָר נַחֲלֵיהֶם (‘yekharsenna’ Ps. 80:14) is an acronym of יָסָר נַחֲלֵיהֶם (‘yekhares mena) itself derived from יָסָר נַחֲלֵיהֶם (‘ymalale*kreso mimmenenna*); He = the swine, which symbolizes the enemies of the Jewish people) would fill its belly from it (= from the vine, which symbolizes the Jewish people). He claimed that it was only a quadrilateral verb equal to יָסָר נַחֲלֵיהֶם ...יהָויָמָל נָמֶל (‘yadah...[she]qirsemu have nemalim) a field nibbled by ants; Mishnah, Pea 2:
Menahem ben Saruq
Mahberet
edición crítica e introducción de Ángel Sáenz-Badillos
Universidad de Granada e Universidad de Salamanca
Granada 1986

?], with a replacement of the qof with the kaph. But Menahem could not agree with the idea of letter changes, even though Rav Sa’adiah Gaon and other language scholars who preceded Menahem ruled that letters could be assumed to have been changed in certain cases. In general, it can be said that we are touching upon a major question here: Can we assume that phonetics sometimes gnawed away at etymology and morphology? Menahem utterly opposed the system of letters’ substitution, because he maintained that it was necessary to leave each letter as it was and interpret it as it was, and not destroy the foundations of the language by means of replacements. He did not even agree to changes that were apparently already common before his time (apart from changing the vowel letters ֖ה-י [‘h-w-y]). For example, he believed that although the roots ֚ל-י [‘l-s], ֖ו-י [‘l-z] and ֖ו-י [‘l-s] all mean joy, they are three separate roots and not three appearances of one root in which one consonant was varied by means of a change in the position of the articulation or the way in which it was articulated.

The question of קירסמ קירסמ [ kirsem/ qirsam] is not confined to the matter of letter substitution. It raises another fundamental question: Should the language of the Bible be compared with the language of the sages? Is the language of the sages equal in status to the language of the Bible? This is not a question of having faith in the sages or accepting their rulings. The question that troubled Menahem ben Saruq as a poet was the purity of language. What is the nature of the language of God, which certainly is more exalted than the language created by humans? What is the language that should serve as a model for poetry?

For example, is the creation of denominative verbs from nouns permissible and considered pure language? Menahem ben Saruq objected to this practice, not only in the poetic language of his contemporaries and the language of liturgy in the centuries just prior to his time, but even in the language of the Mishnah. One thing is clear: more than dealing with the question of what was possible from the standpoint of language, he was dealing with the question of the limits of extrapolating from linguistic forms and phenomena that are documented in the Bible, and with the question of the boundaries of good taste in Hebrew morphology.

Menahem therefore related to a very sensitive point – the boundary of good linguistic taste. He did not consent to making small compromises – he viewed the phenomenon as completely inadmissible. If a practice was not appropriate in ten cases, then it was not appropriate in a single case, and not only in poetry – we have seen that he took his campaign into the field of prose as well, and even dealt retrospectively with ancient literature, the Mishnah! His interest was the language usage in his time and afterward, and defining the concept of purity of the language.

One of Dunash’s strongest complaints against Menahem’s work was his fundamental ideological objection to the practice of comparing biblical words with Arabic. Menahem compared Hebrew with Aramaic, which he also viewed as being a holy tongue, but even here he did so only when absolutely necessary, and in any event, he did not compare Hebrew with Arabic, which he viewed as a secular language. In order to prove his point, Dunash presented some 160 examples of comparisons with Arabic.

What increased the resonance of the Mahberet was the continuation of the polemic over etymological, semantic and grammatical issues that arose in it and Dunash’s responses to the dictionary. Three of Menahem’s pupils, Isaac ben Gikatilla, Isaac ben Kaprun, and Judah ben David, joined forces to formulate answers to Dunash’s responses, and in turn, a pupil of Dunash, Yehudi ben Sheshet, composed answers to their answers. The amazing fact is that even after Judah ben David Hayyuj began to become prominent when he published his theory on the universality of the triliterality of the root with regard to the Hebrew verb, the dispute and the mention of Mahberet Menahem did not abate. The sages of France, who could not read the writings of Hayyuj, which were written originally in Arabic, continued to use Mahberet Menahem for many generations. The person who did the most to spread Mahberet Menahem’s fame was the great French commentator Rashi, who quoted it overtly and covertly hundreds of times in his commentary on the Bible and the Talmud. And since Rashi’s commentaries became popular throughout the Jewish world, and continue to be so today, Menahem’s outdated theory of grammar and the philological interpretation arising from it that took root in Rashi’s commentaries are still widely known. At the end of the twelfth century, Rashi’s grandson, Rabbenu Tam, who was one of the foremost sages of the Tosafot, wrote a book meant to settle the disagreements between Menahem and Dunash. Several decades later, Rabbi Joseph Kimhi, the first of the philologists of the Kimhi family, wrote Sefer ha-Galuy
(Book of the Overt) in his own effort to settle the disputes, this time in light of Hayyuj’s theory.

The Mahberet came down to us in many copies in manuscript form and in 1854 it was published for the first time by Zvi Filipowski,24 but his edition got very unfavorable reviews. A new critical edition was published by Prof. Angel Säenz-Badillos,25 one of the greatest modern scholars in the field of Hebrew philology of medieval Spain, based on the best manuscripts and the fragments from the Cairo Geniza.26

Many other aspects of the perception and interpretation of the Bible, the status of the rulings of the sages of the Masorah27 in the new philological commentary, and Menahem’s method of interpretation in general are reflected in the Mahberet, but space does not permit a discussion of these aspects in this article.28

The fact that Menahem’s root theory became outdated within the span of a generation does not negate its originality and achievements. He can also be credited with achievements in the formulation of Hebrew grammatical terminology, notwithstanding the fact that some of it evidenced signs of groping in the dark. For example, the root is called both רֵאֶשׁ ([yosdel] element, foundation, base) and רֵאֶשׁ ([iqgar] essence, principle) as well as רֵאֶשׁ ([shores] root). The act of attributing a particular letter to a root is called שלוחות ([lehashirish] to strike/take root).

One thousand years later, there is no doubt that Menahem was right with regard to many aspects, but was wrong with others. For the latter he was subjected to incisive criticism from his adversary, Dunash ben Labrat. Although these disputes were difficult and unpleasant on the personal level, on the scientific level they were extremely fruitful and there is no doubt that they greatly advanced and benefited Hebrew language research. Moreover, thanks to Menahem it is possible to understand the enormous changes that took place in the generations that followed.

Notes
1. See E. Ashtor, Korot ha-yehudim bi-sfarad ha-muslemim, Jerusalem, Qiryat Sefer 1960, Chapter 5, p.103 ff.
2. Menahem is usually referred to by his first name and not by his appellation because his name became attached to the name of his dictionary, Mahberet, which is usually called Mahberet Menahem.
3. See Y. Blau’s introductory article on MENAHEM BEN JACOB IBN SARUQ in Encyclopaedia Judaica, vol. 11, p.1305 (Jerusalem 1971) and the bibliography there.
7. The Mishnah is the collection of oral law compiled by Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi at the beginning of the third century CE; also, a single paragraph of this.
8. The Talmud is a compilation of the Mishnah and its Amoraic commentary (Gemara); there are the Jerusalem (or Palestinian) Talmud (beginning of the fifth century) and the more authoritative Babylonian Talmud (end of the fifth century).
10. Eliazer Ben Yehuda (1858-1922) is considered to be the renovator of the Hebrew language. His Complete Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Hebrew, in 16 volumes, was published from 1908 to 1959.
12. For example, in rashi’s commentary to Leviticus 19:19, entry דָּבָר חָכָם, to Isaiah 19:7, entry הָבָשׁ, and to Jeremiah 4:12, entry הָבָשׁ.
13. Rav Sa’adiah Gaon had a different approach to the root, according to which the root is the actual morphological basis in the noun form (an approach that resembles the concept of the root in Latinate and Anglo-Saxon languages).
14. See Mahberet, the entry מש, Badillos edition, pp.359*-360*.
17. For the meaning of the term הכספת, the meaning attributed to it by Dunash ben Labrat, Menahem’s contemporaneous, and the disagreements about it in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Maman A., Comparative Semitic Philology in the Middle Ages from Saadia Gaon to Ibn Barri (10th-12th cent.), Leiden, Brill 2004, pp.276-283.


19. Sometimes the man’s surname begins in the form of “ben” (i.e. son) and sometimes it begins with its Arabic counterpart, “ibn”, but in most cases a fixed form is used, either Hebrew or Arabic.

20. David Alfasi was also of this opinion.

21. Hayyuj, who lived following Menahem’s generation and worked in the same field as his, is regarded as the greatest Hebrew grammarian in the Middle Ages. He discovered the nature of trilitrality of the Hebrew verb even for “weak” roots and composed two large books to prove his theory. Among other innovations, he also suggested a theoretical notion of sakín layyin, a soft unvocalized morpho-phonemic entity, in order to solve all kinds of morpho-phonological Hebrew problems. Hayyuj’s views are accepted up to date.

22. Tosaftot (Addenda) refers to the comments made on Rashi’s commentary to the Babylonian Talmud, by his nephews, Rabbenu Y’aqov Tam and the Rashbam (twelfth century), followed by other French and Ashkenazi scholars up to the fourteenth century. In the famous Vilna edition of the Talmud, the Tosafot are printed in the external margins of the Talmudic text, opposite Rashi’s commentary, which is printed in the internal margins.


26. Geniza material refers to 250,000 fragments from ragged Hebrew books and documents which were piled for centuries in a special room in the Cairo Ezra synagogue and are now preserved in several libraries around the world.

27. Masorah is the philological apparatus and literature meant to keep the text of the Bible untouched. It is assumed that this kind of literature emerged soon after the canonization of each book of the Bible.

28. And see in Säenz-Badillos’s article and the essays noted above.

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Review of B. Katz-Biletzky, Wörterbuch Deutsch-Hebräisch
Philologische, wissenschaftliche und technische Termini

When I first started studying at university, an amusing adage in common usage was: “the most important Semitic language is German”. Scholars of Hebrew and Semitic languages, Biblical and Judaic studies, and indeed any of the scientific disciplines recognized that German had been the principal language of research from the nineteenth century onward. It is hardly surprising that when the Haifa Technion, the most prominent technological institute in Israel, was founded in 1914 on the initiative of the Ezra Organization from Germany, it was decided that teaching should be conducted in German. It was only a consequence of public opposition that prompted the institute to adopt Hebrew as its official language of tuition.

Katz-Biletzky’s dictionary is composed of an abundance of Hebrew equivalents for some 25,000 German terms, many of which have been in existence and dispersed throughout the extensive canon of Hebrew philosophical and scientific literature since the Middle Ages. The target audiences for this book are scientists and translators. The dictionary itself has 720 pages. Following an introduction given in both Hebrew and German is a list of publications used in the compilation of the dictionary. This includes 113 Hebrew sources, books and articles, and 61 mainly German books and dictionaries. The final part of the dictionary includes a list of terms that the author himself has used his considerable scholarship to innovate.