

Ernest Renan, 20th century Thinker on Nationalism, and 19th century Orientalist

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Abstract

This paper presents a few snippets of Semitic scholarship in Western and Central Europe during the period from the late 18th to the mid-19th century, primarily from the work of Ernest Renan (1823-1892). The wider goal of my research is to trace the influence of this scholarship on the process and ideology of the Modern Hebrew revival, but here I concentrate specifically on the European intellectual background, while pointing out some possible echoes in a snippet from the early-21st-century Israeli discourse.

A great deal of research has already been done on the East European Jewish angle of the Hebrew revival. Much of this work has focused in particular on the role of the Lithuanian-born Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (1858-1922), who is commonly known in Israel as 'The Father of Modern Hebrew', due to his efforts to raise the first Hebrew-speaking family in nearly two thousand years. He also compiled the first dictionary of Modern Hebrew, introducing many neologisms, and published in Palestine the first daily newspaper in Hebrew. Besides Ron Kuzar's recent work there is Fellman (1973), which constituted an early attempt to deconstruct some of the myths which had built up around the figure of Ben Yehuda.

Set against this, very little research has been done up until now on the general European intellectual background of nineteenth century Europe as it may have related to Ben Yehuda and others involved in the Hebrew revival. This may be put down to a tendency to stress Jewish-internal causes in the process, which although clearly of central importance, cannot tell all the story. There can be no doubt that Zionist ideology was strongly influenced by the upsurge of nationalist movements in mid-nineteenth century Europe. The Hebrew linguistic revival did not immediately take a central role in political Zionism, certainly not at the time of Herzl, but within ten

years of Herzl's death Hebrew had effectively become the national (or perhaps we should say "pre-national") language of the Jewish communities in Palestine, and hence a central pillar of Zionism. So the question may legitimately be posed as to what influence, if any at all, may have been exercised on the revivalists by 19th century Semitic scholarship.

The main figure to be discussed here is Ernest Renan (1823-1892), who held the prestigious chair of Hebrew at the Collège de France in the 1860s and 1870s. Besides being the most renowned Semiticist of his time, Renan was also an important early thinker on modern nationalism. He is currently quite a fashionable writer to cite, having been given honorable mention in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, an important work on nationalism, as well as in two recent press articles that came to my attention – Duggan (2002) and Shlaim (2002). The particular article which these two both cite is *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?*, which was published in 1882 and which illustrates Renan's Romantic conception of nationhood as a collective soul ("âme" for him, and clearly similar to German "Geist"). It remains an enticing conceptualisation, but dangerous if not viewed with the requisite amount of scepticism and grim wisdom of historical hindsight. Another article, less often cited but more impressive in my opinion, is *La Guerre entre la France et l'Allemagne*. This was published in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* very shortly after Napoleon III's capture by the Germans at Sedan in 1870. Given the bitter humiliation that France was suffering at that moment, Renan keeps a remarkably cool head and shows great foresight in looking forward to a time when the three major powers France, Germany and Britain will coexist peacefully and lead a federal Europe of sovereign nation states.

His vision is vague, certainly, and in many ways Renan was an ambiguous character. He had initially trained for the priesthood, and was of course a star pupil, but the more he studied Hebrew, Arabic and the other Semitic languages the more he was forced to question the grounds of his catholic faith. Despite the agnosticism, he remained throughout his life an observer of the catholic ritual, if not the faith. Politically he was neither a strong republican nor a Bonapartist. If anything, there were nostalgic royalist leanings, coming perhaps from his mother's strong influence, but at the same time he was sensible enough to realise that for France there would be no road back to the Houses of Bourbon or Orléans. He thought that the only road forward was to seek to

reverse the damage which Bonapartism had wrought on France and Europe by moving towards greater European co-operation and eventual constitutional unity. And yet at the same time, in another article written in the aftermath of the 1870 Franco-Prussian war, entitled *La réforme intellectuelle et morale*, Renan also advocated renewed military spending and colonial expansion in order to counterbalance a resurgent Germany.

At whose expense, though? For Edward Said it was at the expense of the rest of the world, and of the Arab world in particular. Said portrays Renan as one of the leading villains of 19th century Orientalism, one of the establishment scholars who provided the “intellectual backup” for France’s colonial adventures in North Africa, and the Levant. No doubt Renan’s characterisation of the “Orient” in general and the Semitic languages in particular is often crude and indeed racist as seen from our time, but it should be noted that for Said the Eurocentric conceit of 19th century scholarship goes far beyond Renan, as far indeed as Marx, who, for Said, despite the best intentions still addresses the needs of the “colonies” in a condescending paternalistic manner.

Although nineteenth century contemporaries may not have perceived it as such, from our perspective at least there is a clear tension between Renan the European visionary and Renan the would-be imitator of Prussian militarism, Renan the unabashed imperialist; also between Renan the great Semitic scholar and Renan the purveyor of stereotypes about those same Semitic peoples and their languages.

One of the leading influences, if not the predominant influence, on Renan’s Semitic scholarship, is the early German Romantic, Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803). Indeed, Renan’s scholarly approach to Hebrew and Semitic is quite neatly illustrated by the few quotes given here from Herder’s Platonic dialogue *Vom Geist der Ebräischen Poesie* – translated in 1833 by James Marsh, under the title *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*. Alciphron is the doubter, who characterises Hebrew as a nasty, brutish and unsubtle language, unsuitable for poetry, when placed up against the more flexible and elegant Greek. His interlocutor, Eutyphron, seeks not to subvert Alciphron’s position, agreeing rather with the basic premise that Hebrew is certainly unsuitable as a language of science and clear reason. Eutyphron attempts to portray these primitive qualities as being part of Hebrew’s strength as a language, saying that

it is precisely the “naturalness”, the “groundedness”, the “physicality” of the language which makes it all the more suitable as a means for the expression of the human passions, ie poetry:

“The further South, the more refined will be the imitation of nature.”

(The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry, p. 34)

Similarly, here (p. 37), Eutyphron implicitly agrees with Alciphron’s dismissive characterisation of what he sees as Hebrew’s primitive tense system:

Alciphron: “...the two tenses of the Hebrew are after all essentially aorists, that is, undefined tenses, that fluctuate between the past, the present, and the future, and thus it has in fact but one tense.”

Eutyphron: “Does poetry employ more. [sic] To this all is present time. It exhibits actions and events as present, whether they be past, or passing, or future.”

In Alciphron’s place substitute the hubristic linguistic Darwinism of some mid-to-late-nineteenth century Indo-European (or Indo-Germanic) scholars, and for Eutyphron read Ernest Renan, blowing the trumpet (or shofar) for the Semitic languages. The rhetorical device by which Eutyphron seeks to prove his points about the virtues of Hebrew poetry, and which is the device by which Renan “defends” the Semitic languages in general, actually undermines those languages from the beginning, by admitting their inferiority. They are not to be considered equals. When Alciphron says (p. 39):

“Add the systrum, the kettle-drums and the symbals, and your dance of savages will be complete.”

Eutyphron can only reply:

“Be it so. We are not frightened with names, while the thing itself is good.”

Surely, though, such a disparaging remark requires a more robust defence than “be it so”. Compare with this passage from Renan’s *Histoire générale et système comparé*

des langues sémitiques (pp. 145-6, author's translation), where Renan seeks to balance this perception of cultural inferiority, by pointing out the "saving grace" of the Semitic peoples, namely a strongly rooted sense of spiritual unity.

... I am the first to acknowledge that the Semitic race, compared to the Indo-European race, genuinely represents an inferior combination of human qualities. It does not have the same lofty spirituality that has only been witnessed in India and Germany, nor the feeling for the proportions of perfect human beauty which Greece has passed on to the Romance nations, nor the profound and delicate sensibility which is the dominant trait of the Celtic peoples. The Semitic consciousness is clear, but limited; it has a marvelous conception of unity, but cannot attain multiplicity. The word "MONOTHEISM" encapsulates and explains all its characteristics.

*(Histoire générale et système comparé
des langues sémitiques¹ pp.145-6)*

The complement may seem no more than luke-warm coming from someone whose own religious faith has lapsed, but beyond that, these passages imply an early admission of the Semites' massive cultural inferiority, and Renan's choice of words – "an inferior combination of human qualities" – couldn't be much less complementary.

Still, it would be unfair to give the impression that Renan does not distinguish more finely between the Semitic languages. He postulates (wrongly, although we don't really need to go into the detail of the later scholarship) that the Semitic languages originated in the northern Fertile Crescent. For him this accounts in some degree for the fact, as he states in the next quote, that Arabic, having its geographical origin at the furthest remove from Mesopotamia and Syria, is the most highly "evolved" of the Semitic languages, and Aramaic the least.² Let us bear in mind that the word "evolved" is a very emotive term, given the Darwinian influence on nineteenth century philology. Strangely perhaps, Renan sees the more complete evolution of

¹ Henceforth abbreviated simply as *Histoire générale*

² Note that Renan was working in the immediate period when the great archaeological discoveries were being made in Iraq and Syria, and in particular the revelations of the cuneiform tablets were enormously influential, to the extent that many scholars made the leap of faith in assuming that Akkadian must be the ancestor of all the Semitic languages.

Arabic as something of a weakness. He thinks that the language has become top-heavy, overloaded with superfluous expression. For him Hebrew represents the golden mean among the Semitic languages:

Aramaic, spoken in the north, is impoverished, without harmony, without multiple forms, heavy in its constructions, stripped of any aptitude for poetry...

Arabic, on the other hand, lying at the other extremity [of the Semitic world], is distinguished by an incredible richness, to the point that one is tempted to see an overabundance in the almost undefined extent of its vocabulary and the labyrinth of its grammatical inflections. Finally, Hebrew, lying geographically between these two extremes, also occupies the middle ground between their opposed qualities: it has that which is necessary, but nothing superfluous; it is limpid and accommodating, but without attaining the marvellous flexibility of Arabic.

(Histoire générale p. 512)

He points out that Arabic is rich in vowels, such that the basic form of the verb is trisyllabic, the Hebrew disyllabic and the Aramaic monosyllabic, also saying that Aramaic is impoverished in the number of its derived verbal forms, three as opposed to five in Hebrew and nine in Arabic. Importantly, this is presented by Renan as evidence for his claim that the Semitic languages have developed, or evolved, from the analytic form towards the synthetic form (in the opposite direction to the Indo-European languages), at which point they have “stagnated,” or in the words which we shall see in a minute, “they have no more history.” Hebrew’s “median” status in Renan’s categorisation is one which raises interesting questions in the context of Modern Hebrew. His distinction of Hebrew and Arabic somehow resonates with the way that the Israeli and Arab approaches to political dialogue are presented in the media. We often read or hear that the typical Israeli is gruff and straight-talking, never saying more than he or she needs to, while the Arab uses ten honeyed words where “one will do.” The Israeli presents arguments rationally, in the Western manner, and his word is his bond, while the Arab - the wily Oriental - never quite says what he means. A classic example of this comes from an interview for the Guardian in May

2002, between Ehud Barak, the former prime minister of Israel, and the Israeli historian Benny Morris.

Repeatedly during our prolonged interview [...] Barak shook his head— in bewilderment and sadness – at what he regards as Palestinian, and especially Arafat’s, mendacity: “They are products of a culture in which to tell a lie... creates no dissonance. They don’t suffer from the problem of telling lies that exists in Judeo-Christian culture. Truth is seen as an irrelevant category. There is only that which serves your purpose and that which doesn’t. They see themselves as emissaries of a national movement for whom everything is permissible. There is no such thing as ‘the truth’.”

*Speaking of Arab society, Barak recalls: “the deputy director of the US Federal Bureau of Investigation once told me that there are societies in which the lie detector tests don’t work, societies in which lies do not create cognitive dissonance [on which the tests are based].”*³

Leaving readers to their own reflections on the significance of these comments in the current context, I now present a few quotes from Renan’s *Histoire*, taken mostly from one introductory section in the first book, in which Renan makes some very general remarks about the Semitic languages. Beginning with phonology and moving out through morphology to syntax and “stylistics”, these quotes illustrate more clearly his conception of the Semitic peoples as being somehow more limited in their cultural possibilities (or capabilities) than the Indo-Europeans, due to the fact that their languages lack the same lofty animating spirit that the Indo-Europeans have. Of course this is a typically nineteenth-century equation of linguistic and racial characteristics and it does, and should, make us feel uncomfortable. This lofty spirit of Indo-European is contrasted with Semitic’s earthy concreteness, a quality which Renan presents as the Semitic languages’ strength but also as their great weakness, since it leaves them so limited and unwieldy as a vehicle of thought.

One important theme to notice in these quotations is the idea of stagnation, which in turn is linked to the idea of concreteness. An excessive attachment to material

³ For one Israeli’s direct response to this interview, see Yo’av Peled, whose article appeared in the Guardian the following day.

concerns drags the “animating spirit” down and so stifles development, eventually leading to a situation of complete paralysis, as perceived by Renan. This theme is familiar from Said’s critique of Orientalism. Said’s claim is that the Orientalists presented the culture of the Near East as one whose greatest days were a long way behind it, and more importantly, could never be retrieved. Western Europe was now destined to act as the “museum keeper” – a disinterested yet decidedly proprietorial and interventionist role. A second theme to be aware of is the paradoxical way that Renan presents Semitic as remaining on the one hand in a very primitive state, while at the same time he sees it, at least in the case of Arabic, as having overdeveloped.

Starting with phonology the following is a fairly typical Renan remark:

Guttural and sibilant consonants abound [in the Semitic languages], as in all languages which have conserved to a great extent their primitive character.
(*Histoire générale* p.158)

Leaving aside the “primitive” epithet, this is true enough. Semitic languages are indeed laden with such consonants, to the extent that Arabic does in fact have pharyngealised sibilants. As for Indo-European, it could hardly be said that guttural and sibilant consonants are not common in at least the modern languages (just take Russian, Farsi or Castilian as three of many possible examples). Therefore we may assume that Renan is referring to the classical languages and to Proto-Indo-European, and claiming that the lack of such consonants makes the Indo-European languages easier on the ear and more cultured. On morphology he says,

The [Semitic] noun has only a few inflexions, and, although literary Arabic does display a system of declension, it must be said that this mechanism is not essential to the Semitic languages, and only exists in the more ancient languages in a rudimentary form: a few parasitical monosyllables, which agglutinate to the beginning of words, take the place of final inflexions.
(*Histoire générale* p.158)

This comment motivates Renan’s claim that the Semitic languages have evolved from an ancient analytic form into a contemporary synthetic form, in precisely the opposite

direction to that suggested for Indo-European, which is assumed to be the “natural” direction. This will be advanced as part of Renan’s argument that Semitic is somehow “weird” and deformed, and as explanation of its stagnation. He was wrong about the ancient Semitic languages. Ugaritic does in fact appear to have had a case system. If he had known about Ugaritic he would not have been able to take this argument very far. Note also, here, how important and influential are Humboldt’s comments on Sanskrit. Humboldt thought that a highly inflected language was the ideal vehicle for the expression of thought.

A language like Sanscrit, which employs ... original, independent, meaningful syllables for inflection, shows by that very fact the confidence it reposes in its animating spirit.

(On Language, p.106)

Renan writes rather pejoratively of Semitic noun morphology. Ancient Semitic displays agglutinative “parasitical monosyllables”, and this characteristic looks bad in the light of Humboldt’s dictum that “clear” morphology is based on suffixation. Prefixes, he says, get “lost”, are too easily assimilated to the root. Semitic languages are not entirely without suffixed morphology, but prefixes are used in equal measure.

The 20th century distinction between formal syntax and literary style is not strictly applied in the 19th century, and there seems to be very little distinction in Renan between what we would call H language and L language. This H/L distinction may be implicit in Renan’s representation of the “stagnant” Semitic languages, as opposed to the lively Indo-European – ossified H-only Semitic as against lively H-and-L Indo-European. Most of his “syntactic” comments are made with reference to literary texts (note that he talks about the biblical or Koranic verse as being the typical sentential unit in Semitic).

No necessity determines the length [of the Semitic verse]; the verse corresponds to the pauses which breathing imposes, even when the meaning does not require them. The author stops, not because of the feeling for a natural pause in the discourse, but out of the simple need to stop.

(Histoire générale p.160)

There is a sense of clumsiness, that the Semite makes no real distinction between the physical pauses in ordinary speech and the “mental” pauses of a text. The only thing that can cause the author to stop is simple inertia (again suggesting excessive concreteness, attachment to physical reality). The Indo-European languages are presented by contrast as having a liberating capacity:

One can say that the Aryan languages,⁴ compared to the Semitic languages, are the languages of abstraction and of metaphysics, compared to those of realism and sensuality.

(Histoire générale p.160)

whereas in the case of Semitic, the languages of realism and sensuality:

Conjugation, which is endowed with a marvellous flexibility in the depiction of the exterior relations of ideas, is totally incapable of expressing their metaphysical relations, for lack of well delineated tenses and moods.

(Histoire générale p.158)

One of my lecturers in Cambridge, when talking about biblical Hebrew, used constantly to tell us that we needed to understand it as “body language”. As we have already seen, it is this physicality of the languages which for Renan explains Semitic’s perceived stagnation as compared to Indo-European.

The Indo-European languages live on in our time, on every point on the globe, as in the past.

(Histoire générale p.511)

The poor sad Semitic languages, on the other hand:

...have completed their entire life-cycle. One can say that from the 14th century onwards, since the disappearance of Syriac and Ge’ez, and the last of

⁴ It is not entirely clear whether Renan distinguishes the terms “Aryan” and “Indo-European”, and if so, what subgroup of Indo-European is intended by the term Aryan.

the Arab conquests in the Orient, the Semitic languages no longer have a history.

(Histoire générale p.511)

This characterisation presents Arabic as something of a monolith, discounting the possibility (or rather the fact as seen from our own time) that “Arabic” actually connotes a plurality of regional and/or national dialects, some or even most of them of them mutually unintelligible, living side by side with (and not necessarily always in complete harmony with) the “unifying” forces of Koranic and Modern Standard Arabic. Also, the knowledgeable reader may have been wondering where the Ethiopic languages fit into Renan’s general picture of Semitic. Renan seems to consider this branch of Semitic to have ended with the disappearance of Ge’ez, and for him Amharic and the other modern dialects of Ethiopia are not properly Semitic languages as they have been altered too much by contact with Cushitic and other African languages. An alternative take – does Renan exclude the Ethiopic languages for the reason that they do not fit conveniently enough into the general Semitic scheme which he wishes to present?

For me the central question surrounding Renan is the way in which we should interpret his presentation of the Semitic languages and peoples vis-à-vis the “dominant” Indo-European discourse of his time. Is he trapped within this discourse, to the extent that we should praise him for at least fighting to get some air-time for the Semitic cultures? Or is he damned by complicity in the 19th century’s haughty dismissal of the Oriental cultures, an arrogant viewpoint within which we see sown the seeds of 20th century scientific racism and which still perhaps resonates today in the shrill voices heard over the sound of the tanks, the bulldozers, the helicopter gunships, the katyushas and the suicide bombings?

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