

Joseph Halévy and the “Sumerian
Problem”: A Case of Essentialist
Approach towards Race, Language
and Culture in 19th Century Science



Introduction

During the 19th century, the western civilization showed increasing interest in the civilizations of the Ancient Near East. As an outcome of Napoleon's campaign to Egypt in 1799-1800, it was, at first, the ancient Egyptian kingdoms that were in the focal point of attention of the oriental academic research. By 1824, the enterprise of deciphering the language and ancient scripts used in ancient Egypt was completed. Both scripts of the Egyptian language, the demotic and the hieratic, were deciphered at that point and it allowed western scholars to study the ancient Pharaonic documents. It was considered to be an enormous scientific breakthrough at the time, since for the first time in western history, a language and script lost and unknown for thousands of years was made accessible to modern scholars.

This breakthrough went on, as in the middle of the 19th century an opening to another civilization of the Ancient Near East was cracked. As the excavations in the Assyrians tells started revealing its impressive findings, and as the Behistun inscription was deciphered, a door to the ancient civilization of Mesopotamia was now wide open. Both civilizations intrigued very much the western scholars as well as the wide public. However, the two civilizations did not produce a similar reaction in the West. The Mesopotamian civilization generated great polemics and disputes, when as for the ancient civilization of the Nile, it was more its esthetics and its visual images that were in the center of western interest.¹ Thus, already in a very early stage of western contemplation

¹ This difference of acceptance is a main subject of the following article:

וסרמן נ., מדוע לא נסע טין-טין לבבל? אשורולוגיה, פוליטיקה ותרבות במאה ה-19 ובמהלך המאה ה-20, ב: אמיר א., קשת החדשה 13, תל-אביב, סתיו 2005, עמ' 149-163.

(Wasserman N., *Why Didn't Tintin Travel to Babylon? Assyriology, Politics and Culture in the 19th Century and during the 20th Century*, in: Amir A., Keshet Hahadsaha 13, Tel Aviv, autumn 2005, pp. 149-163.)

of these cultures some inner factors of the western civilization had a important impact on the description of the older civilizations that were discovered.

Much has been said and written about the fact that factors of the present have great influence on the description of the past. I will just say here in summary, that it is quite accepted among scholars interested in historiography to assume that a researcher who approaches to study a culture of the past, whether a distant or a close one, in time or in space, does it from his own perspective. Very often history, as scientific as it may be, is very much linked to a process of private, as well as collective, identity formation. This humanistic research has sometimes the function of forming a new identity, sometimes reviving an extinct one and very often, the function of reinforcing and justifying an exiting one; or, as phrased it the 20th century historian, Edward H. Carr in his essay about the question “What is History?” in 1961:

“My first answer therefore to the question 'What is history?' is that it is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between present and the past.”²

In other words, the historian always founds his research on some evidence from the past but while conducting an ongoing dialogue with the society he acts in and he is influenced by the different tendencies of his epoch. And indeed, the epoch of the polemic that is the focus of this essay is no exception and I will content myself here with two prominent examples.

A first good example for this is the monumental multivolume essay “The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire” written by the English historian of the ‘Enlightment’, Edward

² Carr, E. H. ,What is history?, London, 1965, p. 30 .

Gibbon. This important essay, which is referred to many times as one of the first modern scientific historical essays, has by itself a clear objective. The anti-clerical positions of Gibbon are quite clear all along this monumental work. In fact, one could even say that this essay concerns more the rise of Christianity than the decline of the Roman Empire. One way or the other, the accusations, coming out of Gibbons essay, are quite clear. It is the rise of the Christian institutions that are to be blamed for the loss of the Greco-Roman classic culture in the Middle-Ages. An outstanding example for this point of view could be found in the chapters dealing with ‘Julian the Apostate’.³ Gibbon’s descriptions of Julian, who tried to reinstitute the pagan cults in the Roman Empire, as a hero, while giving demonic descriptions of the Christian priests and institutions, is very obvious.

Closer in time and space to our polemic is the second example I want to present in this introduction, the case of the French historian and philosopher, Jules Michelet. In his epoch, much dipper into the 19th century, the “historical science” was already perceived much more as an “objective” science and as completely detached from the subjective point of view of an historian. Michelet’s essay from 1846, “Le Peuple”⁴, however, is closely linked to his subjective point of view, which centers the historical events on a certain essence he calls “le peuple français” – the “French Nation”, a completely innovative concept at that time.



Jules Michelet

³ Gibbon E., The Decline and Fall of The Roman Empire, New York, 1946. Chapters 22-23.

Thus, Michelet became one of the most known examples, if not the even the initiator, of the historiographical current called 'National Historiography'. In another monumental essay of Michelet from 1853, on the topic of the French revolution, this perspective is even clearer. All while using relatively advanced methods, as inspection of archives and the use of strong factual evidence, Michelet is the first to describe the French revolution as an event of this so called "French Nation".⁵ Former historians wrote the history of the French revolution from the perspective of the beaten French monarchy; others took side with some revolutionary fraction or another. Michelet, however, was the first to refer to the revolution as an event of the "French People".

Thus, it is no wonder that in the newborn science of Assyriology, the culturo-political discourse of the 19th century could be recognized. The different approaches, some of them very ideological towards language, civilization, culture and race, were very eminent at the time. The approaches towards the new found material was sometimes very openly self-referred to as anti-Semite vs. philo-Semite. In some discourses, it was openly argued that some races were superior to others and therefore, some "linguistic advantages" of one language, which was attributed to one "dynamic race", were praised on the expense of "linguistic disadvantages" of some other language, which was attributed to some other "degenerated race".

This typical way of presenting those matters was driven by an essentialist approach that assumed a primordial and indispensable link between language, religion, culture, ability, human spirit and race. It was common at that time to give some 'ethic definitions'⁶ to the

⁴ Michelet J., Le Peuple, Paris, 1946

⁵ See:

צוקרמן מ., היסטוריונים והמהפכה הצרפתית, תל-אביב, תשי"ן, עמ' 28-31.

(Zukermann M., Historians and the French Revolution, Tel-Aviv, 1990, pp. 28-31.)

⁶ An 'ethical definition' is a definition that was given by modern scholars but had no name or was called differently by the object of their research. For example, when an historian uses the term 'the Byzantine empire' he uses an ethical definition, because no king or subject of that empire called it that way. For the

different ethnical groups of Mesopotamia, in order to reinforce the validity of racial analysis of this new found textual material. The attribution of the terms “Semites”, “Scythians” or “Indo-Europeans” to the different ethnical groups found in Mesopotamia, or some strong differentiations that were made between some “Semite” and “Indo-European” mythology, was driven much more from an urge to understand the scholars’ own culture than from an attempt to clarify the ancient Mesopotamian one.

It is in this context that the emergence of ‘the Sumerian Problem’ should be seen. The polemic of ‘the Sumerian Problem’, in its first phase⁷, raised the question whether or not existed, in Mesopotamia, a non-Semitic language prior to the Akkadian language (which is linguistically linked to the family of Semitic languages). This present article will focus on the role of one of the most important scholars of the Semitic languages at that time, Joseph Halévy. I will argue that the thesis of Halévy about the Sumerian language was driven by his ‘philo-Semitic’ position. This position, by itself, has to be seen as a direct reaction to the anti-Semitic tendencies of some of his rivals in the academic world, as well as a reaction to the same tendencies in the more popular strata of the second half of the 19th Century.

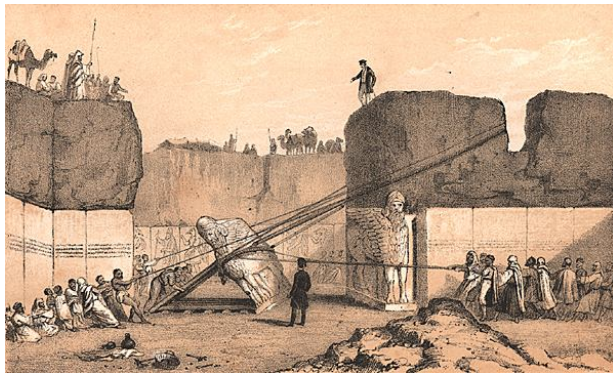
contemporaries, this empire was only known as ‘the Roman Empire’. It is only the modern scholars that called this political entity the ‘Byzantine empire’, in order to differentiate it from the other Roman Empire, the western one.

This term is used in opposition to an ‘emic definition’, a definition that was in use in the time of the subject of the research. For example, when an historian uses the term ‘the third Reich’, he uses an ‘emic term’, because this term was known and very much in use during the Second World War.

⁷ After the ‘Sumerian Problem’ was solved and there were no more doubts about the fact that a non-Semitic language was spoken in Mesopotamia and that it was the speakers of this language who developed the cuneiform script, the ‘Sumerian Problem’ became focused around the question: “where did the Sumerian come to Mesopotamia from?”. This polemic, however, is out of the topic of this article.

1. The Birth of Assyriology – the Discoveries that Evoked the Polemic of the “Sumerian Problem”

In the year 1842 the French consul in Mosul, Paul-Émile Botta, started his excavations at Kuyunjik and Khorsabad (ancient Dur-Sharrukin), which he wrongly identified as Nineveh at first. Some 3 years later, however, it was an English traveler and orientalist, Sir Austen Henry Layard, who started his digging in Kuyunjik and the modern tell of Nimrud, ancient Kalhu that was the one to identify Kuyunjik as part of the enormous complex of the ancient Assyrian capital of Nineveh. The discoveries of these two men initiated the interest of the West in the ancient culture of Mesopotamia.



Layard excavating in Nineveh

It is only slightly later event that should be considered as the starting point of Assyriology as a textual science, the final decipherment of the Behistun inscription. This inscription was mostly discovered by Sir Henry Creswicke Rawlinson, an English officer and later colonial statesman. He worked on copying and deciphering the inscription during the

1830's and 1840's, when as by the end of the 1830's Rawlinson had completed the complex enterprise of it's copying from its very high cliff.⁸

The decipherment of the inscription was at least as equally complex as the enterprise of copying it. Similarly to the 'Rosetta Stone', the fact that the Behistun inscription was a trilingual one was an important key for its decipherment. However, unlike the 'Rosetta Stone', none of the languages of the Behistun inscription were really known to modern scholars.⁹ Even so, from the analyze of the names of the Persian kings that were known from the Bible and the classical sources as well as from the later Persian languages already known, Rawlinson was able to decipher the old Persian column of the inscription. From that point on, the way to the decipherment of the two other columns of the inscription, that were more or less a translation of one another, was open.



<http://www2.hawaii.edu/~cdaniel/visuals/darius.htm>

The Inscription of Darius in Behistun: the inscription that led to the decipherment of Akkadian, Elamite and Old-Persian.

⁸ For this see for example: Roaf M. Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia and the Ancient Near East, Oxford, 1990, pp. 152-153.

⁹ The actual existence of the cuneiform script was already somewhat known in the West for some time. At the beginning, it was thought to be some kind of decoration, but by the 18th century it was already quite clear that it was actually a writing system. It was around the year 1800 that a Danish scholar and bishop of Copenhagen, Friedrich Münter, started deciphering a writing system that was based on the cuneiform writing and that was used to write old-Persian, one of the languages of the Behistun inscription. By 1802, this script was almost completely deciphered by a high-school teacher called Georg Friedrich Grotefend.

This task, however, was already fitting a group of scholars and several important orientalist were gathered for this mission. The priest Edward Hinks from Dublin, Jules Oppert from France and Rawlinson himself were working simultaneously, at this point, on the decipherment of the rest of the inscription. They found that the two other languages in the inscription were Elamite, a language that was spoken during the first three millennia BCE in regions that are today part of modern Iran, and Akkadian – that was at that point called “Babylonian” or “Assyrian” – a language of ancient Mesopotamia that would become the main language of the documents written in cuneiform.

The newly deciphered “Babylonian” confronted the above-mentioned scholars with what appeared to them as a contradiction. They recognized the Akkadian language as being a Semitic language. But the fact that the cuneiform system that was used to write Akkadian was a syllabic system did not fit, in their opinion, with the Akkadian linguistic nature. Like the other Semitic languages, the Akkadian conjugations and phonetics systems are based much more on consonants than on syllables. Therefore, the scholars expected from Akkadian speakers to develop an alphabetic system to express their language, similarly to what happened for the other Semitic languages as Arabic, Hebrew or Aramaic.

This contradiction led Hinks to an assumption that the cuneiform script was developed by speakers of another language. He assumed that this fourth language, which was not represented in the Behistun inscription, was in fact an Indo-European one and suggested to call it, at that point, ‘Proto-Babylonian’. In addition to that, he assumed that the speakers of that language, “Arians”, as he perceived them to be, got the idea of writing from the Egyptians, developed it according to their language and then brought it later on to Mesopotamia.¹⁰

Thus, regarding the old-Persian column of the Behistun inscription, Rawlinson in fact only elaborated what was already known. See: Wasserman, p. 150 and: Jones T., The Sumerian Problem, New-York, 1969, p. 3

¹⁰ For a more detailed description of Hinks’ opinion as well as the representation of the languages in the script see: Jones, *ibid*, pp. 5-9.

Rawlinson also shared this assumption with father Hinks. He suggested calling this yet unknown language ‘Akkadian’. The title “King of Sumer and Akkad” was already known to Rawlinson from the Mesopotamian documents he studied. The name ‘Akkad’ was known to him from the biblical sources. The name ‘Sumer’, however, was not mentioned in any other source but the cuneiform ones. Therefore, and as part of Rawlinson’s general tendency to use the findings from the ancient Near-East to affirm the biblical and the classical sources¹¹, he decided to call this yet unknown language: ‘Akkadian’.



Sir Henry Creswicke Rawlinson

And, indeed, immediately as those scholars went to inspect the numerous amounts of tablets that the excavations of Layard and Botta yielded, mainly from Assurbanipal’s palace, they could clearly identify the existence of this “Akkadian” language, in addition to the many tablets written in the “Semitic” ‘Babylonian’ they already knew from the Behistun inscription. This additional language was mainly used in texts of mythical, religious, literary and lexical nature. Many of them were bilingual texts, which allowed the scholars to try and understand the nature of this language that Hinks and Rawlinson discovered. As was predicted by the decipherers of the Behistun inscription, this language was not linguistically linked to the family of Semitic languages. Although Jules Oppert

¹¹ For this tendency of Rawlinson see: Carena O. History of the Near Eastern Historiography and its Problems: 1852-1985, Part One: 1852-1945, Kavelaer, 1989, p. 83.

suggested already in 1869 to call this language ‘Sumerian’ (as it is accepted today) the term ‘Akkadian’ continued to be in use by most scholar even into the 20th century.¹²

However, Hinks’ assumption that the non-Semitic language of Mesopotamia, the so-called “Akkadian”, was an Indo-European language was found to be a wrong one. In addition to that, as more and more documents were found, it became clearer that it was the speakers of this non-Semitic language who developed the cuneiform writing, and that it was done originally in Mesopotamia. Once more Hinks was proved to be wrong when he assumed that the cuneiform was an elaboration of the Egyptian system taken to Mesopotamia.

At this stage, the different scholars tried to link the so-called “Akkadian” to the family of ‘Turanian’ languages that includes the groups of Hungro-Finish languages and the group of ‘Uralo-Altaiic’ languages (that includes Turkish and Mongolian, for example).¹³ At that point, it was clear to those scholars that it was the speakers of this non-Semitic language who developed the cuneiform script until a new scholar, Joseph Halévy, entered the scene in the first half of the 1870’s. Halévy tried to revoke the existence of this non-Semitic language, as a spoken one, and by that he opened the polemic of the ‘Sumerian Problem’.

¹² In order to prevent confusion, I will only stress here that the Semitic language they found and that is called today ‘Akkadian’ was called at that time: “Babylonian” or “Assyrian”. The non-Semitic language that was found in Nineveh that is today called ‘Sumerian’ was called at that time “Akkadian”. One should always keep that in mind when inspecting articles from the 19th century on that subject.

¹³ Those languages are sometimes also called “Scythian” in the 19th century. This term is also used in this epoch as a general name to all the languages in Europe that are not Indo-European, Semitic or Chinese.

2. Joseph Halévy and his Position towards the ‘Sumerian Problem’ Polemic

It was the orientalist and epigraphist Joseph Halévy who led the camp of the so-called at the time “Anti-Akkadian” approach. Halévy thought this second language of ancient Mesopotamia, the non-Semitic one, to be some kind of priests’ code similar to the Hieratic in Egypt. He understood this language to be a completely artificial language, which was never used as a spoken one. Even if the discovery of the later found cuneiform tablets proved that he was wrong, he kept his position until the day he died and he never stop trying to prove that this language was never spoken, long after it was proven otherwise.

Some reasons for Halévy’s stiff position could already be found in his former activities and personal background. Joseph Halévy was born in 1827 in Adrianople (modern Edirne) that was a part of the Ottoman Empire at the time. He started his carrier as a school teacher in his native city and later in Bucharest. He was also a writer, philologer of Semitic languages, archeologist and orientalist. The events of his life were also very much linked to the newly born Zionist movement. He was one of the firsts members of ‘Hibat Zion’, he wrote in a biblical and ornate style in the Hebrew papers of the time (Halevanon and Hamagid), he translated poetry into Hebrew and he also called to establish a society called “Merape’ Lalashon” (“Remedy for the Language”), aiming to expend the use of the Hebrew language and inventing new words for it.¹⁴

¹⁴ For Halévy’s biography see: Polozky, H. J., *HALEVY, JOSEPH*. In., Encyclopedia Judaica, Vol. 7, Jerusalem, 1971. Pp. 1185-1186.

Halévy also acted as a liaison between the ‘Alliance Israélite Universelle’ (‘Kol Israel Haverim’) society and the Falashian community in Ethiopia. As a result of Rabbi Azriel Hildesheimer famous ‘Qol Qore’ manifest in the Jewish press, calling for the spiritual rescue of Ethiopian Jewry from 1864, Halévy initiated his journey to Africa and Arabia. He left Europe in 1866 and by 1867 he got to Ethiopia and contacted the ‘Beta Israel’ community there.¹⁵ Later on, he got to south Arabia, which was closed to western travelers at the time. Disguised into a Jewish Rabbi from Jerusalem, he succeeded to contact the Jewish Yemenite community.

This journey had a strong impact over his academic interests and made some important contributions to the field of oriental studies and Semitic philology. Not only he contacted Jewish communities in distant regions of the world, but he also brought many inscriptions and epigraphic material from those regions. From south Arabia, he brought an amount of some 800 old south Arabian inscriptions, the biggest corpus of this kind of inscriptions at the time.



The “Young Daniel”, a Falash youngster that Halévy brought back from his journey to Ethiopia.

¹⁵ For a detailed article about Halevy’s voyage to Ethiopia see:

5-66. עמ' ד"תשנ, ירושלים, 58, פעמים (עורך). י. בצלאל: ב. הקדמה והערות - מסע בחבש לגילוי הפלישים ויוסף הלוי, ס. קפלן

(Kaplan S., *Joseph Halévy / a Journey in Ethiopia for discovering the Falashian – Introduction and remarks*, in: Bezalel Y. (Editor), Pe'amim 58, Jerusalem, 1994, pp. 5-66.

Afterwards, he became specialized in the old Ethiopian languages, the languages of the region that was the second focal point of his journey, and by 1879, he was appointed to direct the studies of the Ge'ez language in the 'École Pratique des Haute Études' in Paris, a position he held until the end of his days. In 1893, he founded the 'Revue Sémitique' and was one the main writer in this journal. This journal dealt mainly with Semitic epigraphy (Sabaean, Canaanite, Aramaic), Old Ethiopian, Early Christianity, research on the Bible and the polemic against the 'Biblical Criticism' approach.

His great achievements in the field of Semitic philology were a good foundation for him to begin to use his skills in the evolving field of Assyriology. Since the 1870's, he would write very acute articles against whoever recognized the existence of a non-Semitic language through the cuneiform script. It was in an article called "Observations Critique sur les Prétendus Touraniens de la Babylonie" ("A Critical Observation over the so-called Turanian [languages] of Babylonia") in the "Journal Asiatique" that he presented for the first time his theory denying the existence of a spoken non-Semitic language in Mesopotamia.¹⁶

His colleagues' reaction did not take long. In 1875, François Lenormant wrote an article as a reaction to Halévy's theory.¹⁷ In this article, Lenormant compared the non-Semitic language of Babylonia to the Turanian languages known at the time and concluded that the so called "Akkadian" was linguistically linked to this family of languages. As a reaction to that, Halévy wrote another article that strongly rejected Lenormants

¹⁶ Cooper J. S., *Posing the Sumerian Question: Race and Scholarship in the Early History of Assyriology* In: Michalovski, P., Steinkeller, P., Stone, E. C., Zettler, R. L. (ed.) Aula Orientalis: Revista de Estudios del Próximo Oriente Antiguo, No. 9, Barcelona 1991, pp. 47-58, p.49

¹⁷ Lenormant, F., La langue primitive de la Chaldée et les idiomes touraniens: étude de philologie et d'histoire suivie d'un glossaire accadien, Paris : Maisonneuve, 1875.

conclusion, called, “La Prétendue Langue D'Accad: Est-Elle Touranienne?”¹⁸ (The so-called “Language of Akkad”: Is it a Turanian One?”).

This article was perhaps Halévy's greatest contribution to the field of Assyriology. In this article Halévy, who was proficient both in Turkish and in Finnish, was easily able to prove Lenormant to be wrong by demonstrating that this mysterious language of Mesopotamia was not linked to the group of languages mentioned above. This article, therefore, could be seen from a modern perspective as Halévy's finest hour, since it is his only article with conclusions that are still valid and accepted today. But perhaps what is more interesting from the perspective of this article is the aggressive language used by Halévy and the strong accusations he mentioned against Lenormant. The fact that Halévy was boiling with rage against his adversaries is quite important in order to better understand Halévy's position in this polemic. This is all very clear from the following:

- Halévy accused Lenormant of ignorance of the Semitic languages.¹⁹
- Halévy used all the time in his article exaggerated metaphors in order to mock his opponents.²⁰
- He said, regarding his opponents' theory, that it:

“...se présente à nous comme une simple fantaisie dépourvue de toute réalité”²¹

- He concluded his article with the saying:

¹⁸ Halévy, J., La Prétendue Langue D'Accad: Est-Elle Touranienne?, Paris, 1875.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 13

²⁰ See especially: Ibid, p. 15

“ Qu'il ne faut jamais vendre la peau de l'ours
[avant] qu'on ne l'ait mis par terre !”²²

Logically, the fact that some language is not related to any other known one does not prove that it was never a spoken one.²³ For Halévy, however, his success proving that the “Akkadian” was not linked to the Turanian languages only strengthens his confidence in his thesis. His confidence only got stronger and stronger during the years. He kept on advocating his thesis in his on-going publications, mainly on the bases of some resemblances between the “Akkadian” and the Semitic languages. Those resemblances, however, were already proven at the time to derive from the constant contact between the languages, but for Halévy, they were evidence for the artificial nature of it.

Thus, the polemic went on and so did the aggravation of emotions linked to it. In 1876, Halévy tried to protect his thesis from the attacks of two other reputed scholars, Jules Oppert, mentioned above, and Eberhard Schrader, the establisher of the German Assyriology.²⁴ In a response to their claims, he does not spare them from the kind of accusations, mentioned above, when already in the first page he claims that:

“..., toutes ces constructions fantaisistes se sont écroulées
pour ne plus se relever, et la question accadienne a
aujourd'hui un problème de moins à résoudre.”²⁵

²¹ “...present itself to us as a simple fantasy lacking of any reality”. Ibid, p. 31

²² In free translation: “you don’t sell the bear’s skin before you have put it down”. Ibid, p. 31.

²³ And, indeed, the question of the provenance of the Sumerian language is still under discussion. The contemporary scholars are still trying to find links to some other languages and lately, some attempts to link it to the Dravidian languages of southern-India were being made.

²⁴ Halévy, J. La Nouvelle Évolution de L'Accadisme, Paris 1876.

²⁵ In free translation: “all those imaginary constructions are all falling apart and will never rise up again, and the “Akkadian” question has one problem less to solve.” Ibid, p. 3.



Eberhard Schrader

Halévy continued his accusations in this article by calling Schrader, as well as his other rivals, hot-headed men. He went as far as claiming that Schrader's heat got to a point of losing his senses and denying obvious facts:

“M. Schrader me parait se mouvoir au milieu d'une température, sinon aussi brûlante que celle dans laquelle se sont placés mes autres critiques et censeurs, du moins assez chaude pour fausser son jugement au point d'émettre des assertions hâtées et de nier des faits facilement constatables avec un peu plus de calme.”²⁶

As it is for many academic disputes, this polemic continued and became more and more acute over the years. It even became more personal and aggressive, especially between

²⁶ In free translation: “It seems to me that Mr. Schrader is moving in a temperature as hot as the one of my other critics and censures, hot enough at least, to forger his judgment to a point of emitting haste assertions and denying facts that would be much easier to observe with some tranquility.” Ibid, p. 3

Halévy and Oppert. An anecdote mentioned that it even turned in to be a physical clash involving some hitting with umbrellas between the two men.²⁷



Jules Oppert

As the time went by, more and more scholars became convinced that Halévy was wrong and that there was a non-Semitic language spoken in Mesopotamian antiquity. Some important scholars, like Friedrich Delitzsch and François Thureau-Dangin, who sided at first with Halévy, turned to the side of the “Accadists” or “Sumerists” as they were called by Halévy. As more ancient tablets from ancient Lagash and ancient Nippur were found, more evidences were accumulating against Halévy’s theory. By the end of the 19th century, Halévy was more or less the only “Anti-Sumerist” left, but he was, however, fully determine to hold his position until the end of his days.

In his “Précis D'allographie Assyro-Babylonienne” from 1912, he kept on claiming the “Semitism” of the cuneiform while claiming that the differentiation between ‘Sumer’ and ‘Akkad’ is nothing but a geographical one between south and north, and that without the

²⁷ Cooper, p. 58.

“Sémitism” it is impossible to imagine the invention of writing and so-called “Sumerian” literature:

“... les sémitismes sont à la base même du syllabaire cunéiforme et par conséquent de toute la littérature dite "sumérienne", et que sans les sémitismes la création de cette écriture et de cette littérature est absolument inimaginable”²⁸

What, then, was the reasons for this over-heated polemic? Why was the Ethnical and linguistic identity of some group of people in western Asia some 5000 years ago was so important for the different people mentioned above? Was it only the young age of the Assiyriological science and the lack of documents that led Halévy to keep so stubbornly his opinion?

²⁸ In free translation: “...The “Semitisms” are even found at the base of the cuneiform syllabar, and as a result of that, all the so-called “Sumerian” literature, and that without those “Semitism” the creation of this writing system and literature is impossible to imagine”. See: Halévy, J., Précis d'allographie Assyro-Babylonienne, Paris, 1912, p. 2.

3. Race, Language and Culture in Science: The Background of Joseph Halévy's "Anti-Sumerian" Approach

At first glance, it could appear that it was simply Joseph Halévy's "Semitic pride" that messed up his mind and made him lose his integrity, as Polozky presented it in the article he wrote about him in the 'Encyclopedia Judaica'. However, from a deeper analysis of Halévy's surrounding, one can see that this Semitic pride is closely linked to the Academic milieu that he acted in. Indeed, Jerald S. Cooper inspected some of the aspects of Halévy's motivations for elaborating his thesis and for holding by it so passionately. Cooper suggests that this "Semitic pride" of Halévy should be seen as a reaction to the anti-Semitic Parisian academic discourse that was very much in action already as early as the 1860's, during Halévy's arrival to Paris.

Racism and anti-Semitism, however, were not very important tendencies in the French politics of the time. The Jews kept on having fully equal political rights in spite of all the political crises that were part of France bloody transition from the "Second Empire" to the "Third Republic". Unlike what happened in Russia at the time, stormy events as the French-Prussian war and the uprising of the 'Parisian Commune' all concentrated to the years 1870-1871, were not use, yet, as claims to deny Jews from their political equality granted to them for almost a century. Moreover, in the 1880's, comities to support the victims from the pogroms in Russia were founded in France, evidence of the fact that French political discourse was still lacking of anti-Semitic elements prior to the 'Dreyfus Affair'.²⁹

²⁹Byrnes R. F., Antisemitism in Modern France, Volume I: The prologue to the Dreyfus Affair, New Brunswick, 1950, p. 110.

However, in the scientific and cultural life, the racist and anti-Semitic tendencies of the time got more and more important. During the years 1853-1855, the count Arthur de Gobineau published his “Essai sur l’Inégalité des races Humaines” (“Essay on the Inequality of Humane Races”), an essay that connects race, culture and the rise and fall of human civilization.³⁰

Moreover, in Europe of that time the belief in the so-called ‘Arian Myth’ was developing more and more. This belief tried to claim a genuine tie between race, culture and the rise of civilizations, using, among others, the scientific disciplines of the time. Physical anthropology saw itself as tied and even dependent of philology.³¹ Thus, there is no wonder that Hippolyte Taine, for example, described the ancient peoples as represented, first and for all, by their languages, religions, literature and philosophy; that all are branches of its “community of blood and spirit”.³² In a very similar spirit, Friedrich Nietzsche, in his „Die Geburt der Tragödie aus den Geiste der Musik“ (translated to English as “The Birth of Tragedy”), was able to differentiate between a Semitic essence and an Arian essence.³³

Another important figure of the time, which I chose to focus a little more on its speech in order to demonstrate this essentialist approach linking race, blood and language, is the figure of Ernest Renan. A very important expression of his opinion regarding our subject can be found in his “Histoire du Peuple d’Israël” from 1887.³⁴ In the following passage, in which strong linkage between race and language is being made, Renan defame what he calls the “Semitic language”, especially its verbal system, all by praising the genius of the “Arian language”:

³⁰ Mosse G. L., Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism, New York, 1978, p. 52 ff.

³¹ Poliakov L. Le Mythe Aryen: Essai sur les Sources du Racisme et des Nationalismes, Paris, 1971. p. 266.

³² Ibid, p. 264

³³ Ibid, p. 264.

³⁴ Renan, E., Histoire du Peuple D’Israël, Paris, 1887

“Les langues surtout présentaient une profonde opposition. Les langues des Aryens et des Sémites étaient essentiellement diverses, bien qu'on pût remarquer entre elles certains airs de parenté. La langue aryenne avait une grande supériorité, surtout en ce qui touche à la conjugaison du verbe. Ce merveilleux instrument, créé par l'instinct d'hommes primitifs, contenait en germe toute la métaphysique que devaient développer plus tard le génie hindou, le génie grec, le génie allemand. La langue sémitique, au contraire, prit tout d'abord, en ce qui concerne le verbe, un parti défectueux. La plus grande erreur que cette race ait commise (car ce fut la plus irréparable) a été d'adopter pour la manière de traiter le verbe un mécanisme si mesquin, que l'expression des temps et modes a toujours été pour elle imparfaite et embarrassée. Aujourd'hui encore, l'Arabe lutte en vain contre la faute linguistique que commirent ses ancêtres, il y a dix ou quinze mille ans.”³⁵

³⁵ In free translation: “especially the languages showed profound opposition. The languages of the Aryans and of the Semites were essentially diverse, although some features of common background could be found. The Aryan language had great superiority, especially with anything that had to do with the conjugation of the verb. This wonderful instrument, created by the instinct of primitive men, contained in seed all the metaphysics that was needed to develop later the Hindu genius, the Greek genius and the German genius. The Semitic language, however, took, already in the beginning, a defective tangent regarding the verb. The biggest error this race had committed (because it was the most irreparable one) was to use, as for the manner of treating the verb, such a petty mechanism, in which the expression of the tenses and modes was always imperfect and clumsy. Still today, the Arabs are struggling in vain against the linguistic error that their ancestors had committed some ten or fifteen thousand years ago.

See: Ibid, vol. I, p. 9

It has to be mentioned here that Renan had a lot of influence at his time and his books were sold in tens of thousands of copies.³⁶ His lecture: “De la Part des Peuples Sémitiques dans l'Histoire de la Civilisation.” (“On the role of the Semitic Peoples in the History of Civilization”)³⁷ is also very important in order to understand Renan’s point of view that assumes a primordial connection between race, culture and history. It also represents quite well some of the tendencies that Halévy had to face when arriving to Paris and, so it seems, he had chosen to confront. In Renan’s lecture, mentioned above, he claimed that he could clearly characterize an “Aryan culture” as apposed to a “Semitic Culture”. He divided this characterization into several categories: literature and myth, religion, poetry; moral and science; development of technology and commerce:

- Renan finds that the “Aryan” mythology and literature are completely distinguished and separated from the “Semitic” mythology and literature.³⁸
- He finds on the bases of “Comparative Mythological” method that the Semitic peoples are monotheistic as part of their dogmatic and stiff character while the Aryan has pantheistic belief as part of their strong connection to nature and their strong dynamic sense of imagination.³⁹

³⁶ Byrnes, Ibid, pp. 48-49, 191.

³⁷Renan, E., De la Part des Peuples Sémitiques dans l'Histoire de la Civilisation., Paris, 1862.

³⁸ Ibid p. 10-11.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 11-12



“Pantheistic Aryans”

- Renan is able to characterize an “Aryan Politic” that aims for “freedom of the individual” and the benefit of the society. The “Semitic Politic” he characterizes, however, leads only to total anarchy or to a “bloody despotism”.⁴⁰
- When as for poetry, Renan finds that the “Semites” had only a primitive form of it. In his point of view, all the arts originated from the Greco-roman classical civilization. The Semites have only a narrow sense of moral, a stiff and egoistic one. When as regarding philosophy and science, Semites were only able to copy the classics from the Greeks (and by that he refers to the Arab civilization of the Middle-Ages). In fact, Renan claims the Semites to be anti-scientific by their nature.⁴¹
- In the field of commerce, however, Renan finds that the Semites had much more success along human history. He mentions that the Phynicians were the ones to develop the naval trade and that during the Middle-Ages commerce was controlled by Arabs and Jews.⁴²

⁴⁰ Ibid, 14-16

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 16-18.

⁴² Ibid, p. 19-20.

Renan concluded his lecture by resuming the achievements of the “Semites Peoples”. He mentioned that the West owes to the Semites only their religion, which is already disconnected from its Semitic roots and became completely “European”. Anyway, this religion only started to achieve its success when it began to detach from its “Semitic Spirit” (“L’esprit sémitique”). It is the duty of the West to continue to go further away from those Semitic roots by keeping distance from the Jewish religion and “getting closer to our hearts”.⁴³ All that, of course, by seeking the “truth” through the “scientific method”, or as he phrased it:

“Ce qu’il y a de certain, c’est qu’en cherchant le vrai par la méthode scientifique, nous auront fait notre devoir.”⁴⁴



Ernest Renan

In order to conclude all that, we could say that the racist academic discourse of the time of the “Sumerian Problem” assumed some primordial links between race, language, religion, nation, commerce, science and arts, thus, all the characteristics of a civilization. All that, while holding the so typical claim of the positivist science of the 19th century, to aim some “scientific truth”. Interesting enough is that when returning to observe the ‘Sumerian Problem’, one can find that it handles a close discourse with those points of views, all by using exactly the same categories used by Renan. When observing Halévy’s

⁴³ Ibid, p/ 24-28.

⁴⁴ In free translation: “what is certain is that when one looks for the truth through the scientific method, one has fulfilled his duty.” See: Ibid, p. 29.

article “La Nouvelle Evolution de L'Accadisme” (“The New Evolution of the Accadism (“Sumerism”))” from 1876, mentioned above, the exact same elements of analysis are present:

- In the field of poetry and literature: Halévy tried to confront Oppert’s translation of a Sumerian hymn into Sanskrit in order to find some linguistic correlations.⁴⁵ In addition to that, he contested the claim that the Arabs did not know any elevated poetry.⁴⁶
- In the field of religion: Halévy claimed that the polytheism in Mesopotamia was originally Semitic, since a religion can transfer between the races and turn into a Semitic religion.⁴⁷ Halévy stressed the fact that there was Semite polytheism in Mesopotamia, just as much as there were such beliefs in Ethiopia, as could be proven from the texts in Ge’ez, and that their Semitism is not contested and that Halévy saw them as “pure Semites”.⁴⁸
- In the field of science and commerce: Halévy contested Schraders argument claiming that Semites are supposed to use the decimal system of counting. He claimed that the fact that a sexagesimal system of counting existed in Mesopotamia is no proof to deny the Semitic nature of this system.⁴⁹ Halévy also contested Schrader’s argument claiming

⁴⁵ Halévy, J. La Nouvelle Évolution de L'Accaisme, Paris 1876. p. 4.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 13.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 7.

⁴⁸ Ibid p. 11-13.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 7.

that the Semites did not develop their own weight measures and did not develop trade and commerce.⁵⁰

This article of Halévy also quite explicitly dealt with differentiation between “Semites” and “Aryans” when contesting Lassen’s description of the part of each races in the western civilization, when arguing against him that:

“Les monuments exhumés à Ninive et à Babylone ont prouvé au contraire que les populations sémitiques de ces comtés possédaient au plus haut degré les facultés qu'on refusait à la race entière”⁵¹

Thus, from a comparison of Halévy’s writings to Renan’s, it seems to me that the discussion goes way beyond those old cultures that are gone and have vanished for thousands of years. Moreover, there are some basic assumptions that have nothing to do with the civilizations in question, but are very much motivating the polemic. Renan and Halévy, although they did not take part in the same polemic, were no doubt rivals considering their racial perspective: the first praised the “Aryan” race and emphasized the inferiority of the “Semitic” race when the second tried, in the opposite, to stress the brilliance of the same “Semitic” race.

All the same, some common perspectives between the two are to be stressed as well. Both are basing their claims on three pre-accepted assumptions that were very typical of the set of beliefs and different approaches of the second half of the 19th Century. It was those three perquisite assumptions, in my opinion, that motivated the most the polemic of the

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 13.

⁵¹ In free translation “The monuments unearthed in Nineveh and Babylon had proven quite the contrary that the Semitic populations of those area possessed in a high degree the faculties that were denied to their entire race.” See: Ibid, p. 10.

‘Sumerian Problem’, especially from the side of Joseph Halévy, and were the reason for this polemic to rise up to such tones and in such heat, as seen in the previous chapter:

1. There is a strong eminent tie between culture, race, literature, science, politics and language.⁵²
2. It is the concept of race that is motivating all those categories, that are, in fact, the different elements of the concept of ‘Civilization’.
3. There is an obvious, inherent and unbridgeable gap between those “races” since the dawn of history until the present.

Those perquisite assumptions and set of beliefs, in my opinion, led Halévy to his mistaken theory. They were the bases on which were formulated the limits of the discussion around the ‘Sumerian Problem’ and the polemic between “Sumerist” and “anti-Sumerist”.

⁵² And the tie between race and language was even stronger, since the different language groups and the different races, shared the same set of names.

Conclusion

The theory of Halévy is no longer accepted in contemporary Assyriology. Indeed, the scientific tools that were in the hand of Halévy and his contemporaries were, of course, not as developed as today and there were much fewer written sources. However, it seems that besides the limited tools of the time, there were some other factors to influence the scientific common beliefs. Among those factors, it looks like the essentialist approach that presumes the bond between language, race and culture, was a major one. Thus, Halévy's theory about the nature of the Sumerian language demonstrates well how, sometimes, when making a research about a civilization of thousands of years old, one actually react, consciously or not, to his own surroundings.

A theory of the kind that Halévy presented could only be elaborated in a cultural context that perceived a great gap between "Semites" and "non-Semites", a gap that never existed in the third and second millennia BCE, the time when Sumerian and Akkadian were spoken side by side. In fact, as much as could be determined, those two languages are the languages that are at the bases of the Mesopotamian culture, including its literature, religion, politics and arts, for the first three millennia BCE. The fact that Sumerian texts were copied in Mesopotamia as much as 1500 years after it stopped being a spoken language shows that the "Semites" in Mesopotamia cherished their "non-Semitic" heritage.

Perhaps a good analogy in order to illustrate the relation between those two languages could be found in the 'Classical Civilization' around the Mediterranean Sea. The Greek and Latin languages were very much at the bases of that civilization. In a similar way Akkadian and Sumerian, although having completely different origins, were at the bases

of this “bilingual” civilization and since they were spoken in a common space, many feature interchanged between the two, as visible to us today.⁵³

Interesting enough, Halévy himself indicated that the sources do not mention any clash between Sumerian and Akkadian. However, the discourse that assumed an unbridgeable gap between “Semites” and “non-Semites”, in which the academic world was caught up in, led to a false interpretation of the sources he faced. For Halévy, the fact that no such clash was described by the sources was the strongest proof for the non-existence of the Sumerians, and he saw this ethnical group as an invention of anti-Semitic scholars.⁵⁴

After Halévy’s death, there were no scholars to continue to hold his opinion in post First World War Europe. However, it was after that the horrors of the Second World War were revealed that the “anti-Sumerian” approach rose up again at the edges of the still evolving Israeli Assyriology. It was Ya’akov Pe’erman that continued to “hold up to the ‘anti-Sumerian’ method of the “famous Jewish scholar of Paris”, Joseph Halévy”⁵⁵, as mentioned in his favor by his editor’s remarks of the book he published in 1957. Similarly to Halévy, the ‘anti-Sumerian’ writing of Yaakov Pe’erman was a direct reaction to the much more fatal form of anti-Semitism of his times. This approach reflected very much the post war trauma, and Pe’erman himself had no problems declaring so:

⁵³ Michalowski, P., *The Life and Death of the Sumerian Language in Comparative Perspective*, in: Black, J., Zolyómi G. (ed.) *Acta Sumerologica*, No.22, Hiroshima, 2005. pp. 177- 202.

⁵⁴ Cooper, p. 65.

⁵⁵ יעקוב פארמן, *מאה שנים אשורולוגיה בעולם 1857-1957 וניצני אשורולוגיה בישראל*, תל אביב, תשי”ז, עמ’ י”ד.
(Yaakov Pe’erman, *A Hundred Years for World’s Assyriology and the Dawn of Israeli Assyriology*, Tel Aviv, 1957, p. XIV)

“עם ישראל בן תרבות ישראל, על עם זה רוצים להגיד שקבלנו תורה וחוקים מחמורבי ותרבות משומרים.⁵⁶ כל זה בלוף. היטלר יצר את הנאציזם אך הוא עצמו נוצר ע"י הפרופסורים. ועם כל החנופה שלהם, בתוך-תוכם, תמיד תמצאו אנטישמיות, ושיתת הגזע לא צמחה עכשיו כי אם בכותלי האוניברסיטאות. ואחד היסודות של השיטה הוא השומריזם. אני מקווה שאוכל לפרסם את עבודתי ולהוקיע בזה את השקר שבשומריזם ואת האמת ההיסטורית על תרבויות המזרח השמיים העתיק⁵⁷.”

⁵⁶ By saying that: “it is of this people [the people of Israel] that they say that we got “Torah” and laws from Hammurabi”, he is referring to the claim that there were strong anti-Semitic elements motivating the polemic of ‘Babel und Bibel’ (‘Babylon and the Bible’). This was a polemic that was provoked as a result of Friedrich Delitzsch’s series of lectures that claimed that the people of Israel originated from the Mesopotamian pagan culture. This polemic as well was characterized by the tension between “scientific truth” and the religious and cultural tendencies of the time. See:

שביט י., ערן מ., מלחמת הלוחות : ההגנה על המקרא במאה התשע-עשרה ופולמוס בבל והתנ"ך, תל-אביב, תשס"ד. Quite relevant to our discussion is the citation of Shmuel Yayvin brought in p. 208, since it links this polemic to the horrors of World War II:

"שניים-שלושה דורות לפני שערכו הטבטונים את מיידאנק ואושביינצ'ים לגופים היהודים, ערכו המלומדים הטבטוניים מיידאנק ואושביינצ'ים לרוח ישראל, לנשמה היהודית, לנכס-הראש, ממנו ינקו את לשד קיומינו ועליו היתה גאונותו לעיני העמים..... מתחת להכרה ידעו הצוררים: אם יינטל מן האומה כתב-יחד ראשוני זה, אם יכזיב וייבש מקור רוחה זה – ואבד לבסוף גם החומר היהודי באין משען ויניקה."

In free translation: “two or three generations before the Tebetons made their Maidaneks and Auschwizs to Jewish bodies, it was the Tebeton scholars who made Maidaneks and Auschwizs to the spirit of Israel, the Jewish soul and the precious mind, from which they sucked the vigor of our existence that was our genius in front of the nations..... unconsciously, the oppressors knew: if this original manuscript will be taken and if this source of inspiration will be dried up in cold – then finally, the Jewish substance will be lost, without support or sources.

⁵⁷In free translation: “The people of Israel, descendent of the culture of Israel; it is of this people that they say that we got “Torah” and laws from Hammurabi (see discussion in the previous footnote) and culture from the Sumerian. It is all a bluff. It was Hitler who created the Nazism, but he himself, was the creation of professors. Putting aside all the professors’ flattery one can always find anti-Semitism, since the racist methods were not developed just now; it has been for a long time that they are being developed between the Universities’ walls and one of its elements was the Sumerist method. I hope to be able to publish my work and by that to reject the lie that is Sumerism, and to reveal the historical truth about the Semitic civilizations of the East.” See: Pe’erman, p. XIV.

As could be seen from this citation, also the later form of this “anti-Sumerism” came as some kind of reaction to an even more cruel form of anti-Semitism. Ya’akov Pe’erman’s “anti-Sumerism” came in order to reject the “Sumerian” approach, as he calls it, because he perceived it as a part of a racist method.

It seems that Halévy insisted as well on denying the existence of the Sumerians as a reaction to the anti-Semitic approaches in the European humanistic sciences. It even seems that, more than he was handling the polemic against his direct rivals; it was the greater anti-Semitic tendencies that he aimed. Schrader was indeed anti-Semitic in his approach, but he acted from Germany and was not so much in direct contact with Halévy. Jules Oppert, who was his main adversary, was a Jew from German origin, and most certainly did not advocate the supremacy of the Aryan race. In fact, he even advised Halévy to be proud of a “Semitic” invention: the much more advanced alphabetic system of writing. It is also quite difficult to accuse Lenormant of anti-Semitism since, while handling the polemic with Halévy, he also criticized Renan and his racial approach.⁵⁸

Therefore, it seems that while attacking the “Sumerist” approach, Halévy, similarly to Pe’erman, was actually trying to reject anti-Semitic approaches of the kind of Renan. The fact, however, that he did not reject the racist prerequisite assumptions, which were mentioned in the previous chapter, but tried to act from within the racial discourse, seems to be the reason for Halévy to elaborate his wrong theory about the Sumerian language. Thus, the fact that Halévy got tangled up this essentialist and racist discourse, tying the concepts of language, religion and civilization to an essence of race, led him to identify himself with the “Semitic” race and to go against who ever claimed its inferiority.

As part as his Semitic identity, he chose to research Semitic languages. It seems that Halévy’s conception of Semitism was related much more to language and culture than to other physical appearance and human morphology. Ethiopians, southern-Arabians as well

as east-Europeans were all part of this Semitic race and his journey to those distant areas could serve to prove the fact the he identified himself with them. The real gap, so he perceived, existed between Semites and Aryans.

In fact, Halévy himself lived in an extremely multilingual surrounding: his mother tongue was Ladino, he grew up within the borders of the Ottoman Empire and knew very well its official language, Turkish. French became his language of science and most of his publications are to be found in this language. He was very active in the Hebrew cultural renaissance of the time; he was a philologist of Semitic languages and in addition to that, as a scientist, he had to know the main languages of Europe at the time. In spite of that, he was not able to imagine a bilingual culture in Mesopotamia. It was the racial and essentialist perceptions of the time that influenced him to ignore the option of cultural mergence. Halévy perceived himself as a “Semite” and it was this identity that he tried to protect. He did so by rejecting anti-Semitism, only he did it from **within** the boundaries of the racial discourse.

⁵⁸ Cooper, p. 57-58.

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