Non-Semitic Loanwords in the Hebrew Bible: A Lexicon of Language Contact

By Ben Noonan

Without realizing it, most English-speakers today use a number of words that are not English in origin. In fact, nearly 75 percent of the words in English have been borrowed from other languages, including common words such as people (borrowed from French), zero (borrowed from Italian), and even chocolate (borrowed from Nahuatl/Aztec). Words like these that have been borrowed from one language to another, or loanwords, frequently appear in the various languages of the world.

Biblical Hebrew and Biblical Aramaic also contain words borrowed from different languages. Many of the Hebrew Bible’s loanwords are from other Semitic languages, such as Akkadian. However, a good number of the loanwords in the Hebrew Bible come from non-Semitic languages like Egyptian, Hittite, and Persian. These non-Semitic loanwords are the topic of my book, Non-Semitic Loanwords in the Hebrew Bible: A Lexicon of Language Contact.
In many cases, we can identify with relative certainty the specific language that a non-Semitic loanword comes from. An excellent example is the Hebrew word פַּרְעֹה ‘pharaoh’. This word comes from Egyptian pr-ˁ, which originally referred to the Egyptian ruler’s ‘great house’ but eventually came to be used as a title for the ruler himself. Because this word designates an Egyptian ruler and therefore a concept foreign to ancient Israel, Hebrew speakers had no native word to refer to it. So, they adopted the Egyptian word for ‘pharaoh’ into Hebrew. Other good examples of words in Hebrew that have an Egyptian origin are חֹתָם ‘seal, signet ring’ (borrowed from Egyptian htm) and פרַש ‘reed, rush plant’ (borrowed from Egyptian ṭwf).

Statue of Pharaoh Ramesses II, Luxor Temple. (Wikimedia Commons)
In other instances, we know that a word is not original to Hebrew or the Semitic languages but cannot identify its specific source. For example, the Hebrew word "יין" ['wine'] has no native etymology in either Hebrew or any of the other Semitic languages, indicating that it is not original to them. Furthermore, related words occur in many non-Semitic languages, such as Greek οἶνος, Latin vinum, and Georgian ღვინო. Scholars continue to debate the origin of all these terms, and a convincing etymology has yet to be offered. Thus, Hebrew "יין" and all these related words are representative of an ancient culture word, or word of unknown origin.
In my book I present a comprehensive listing of the Hebrew Bible’s 235 non-Semitic loanwords. Of these 235 loanwords, I identify 150 words that were borrowed directly from a non-Semitic language into either Hebrew or Aramaic. The vast majority (135) of these non-Semitic loanwords come from Egyptian, Greek, Hittite, Luvian, Hurrian, Old Indic, or Old Iranian. The remainder (15) come from other less well-known languages like Philistine.

The distribution of these non-Semitic loanwords is summarized in the following table. Numbers represent raw counts, and percentages in parentheses represent the ratio of loanwords to the total number of words for each category. (Keep in mind that some words are found in more than one canonical division, which is why the sum of the numbers in the canonical divisions doesn’t equal the total number in each category.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Entire Hebrew Bible</th>
<th>Torah</th>
<th>Former Prophets</th>
<th>Latter Prophets</th>
<th>Writings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All</td>
<td>Egyptian</td>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>Hittite/Luvian</td>
<td>Hurrian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>150 (1.78%)</td>
<td>54 (0.64%)</td>
<td>8 (0.09%)</td>
<td>6 (0.07%)</td>
<td>11 (0.13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torah</td>
<td>43 (1.30%)</td>
<td>30 (0.91%)</td>
<td>0 (0.00%)</td>
<td>4 (0.12%)</td>
<td>4 (0.12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former Prophets</td>
<td>31 (0.95%)</td>
<td>14 (0.43%)</td>
<td>0 (0.00%)</td>
<td>3 (0.09%)</td>
<td>9 (0.28%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latter Prophets</td>
<td>59 (1.47%)</td>
<td>35 (0.87%)</td>
<td>1 (0.02%)</td>
<td>6 (0.25%)</td>
<td>10 (0.25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writings</td>
<td>106 (1.83%)</td>
<td>23 (0.40%)</td>
<td>7 (0.02%)</td>
<td>3 (0.05%)</td>
<td>8 (0.14%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The above data, combined with the other data surfaced by my study, reveal some interesting patterns in the Hebrew Bible’s distribution of loanwords. These patterns include the following:

- The two most common donor languages are Egyptian and Old Iranian, but words from these languages are concentrated in certain places. Egyptian terminology particularly appears in the Joseph Cycle (Genesis 37–50) and the book of Exodus. The vast majority of Old Iranian loanwords appear in the books of Esther, Daniel, and Ezra.
- In general, the Hebrew Bible’s source-critical divisions do not possess a distinctive loanword vocabulary. Thus, whereas vocabulary has played a significant role historically in the practice of source criticism, non-Semitic loanwords can offer little help in this regard.
- The distribution of non-Semitic loanwords roughly corresponds to the date of the individual books’ composition. On the one hand, the number of Egyptian, Hittite and Luvian, and Hurrian loans is greater in texts traditionally attributed to earlier periods. On the other hand, the number of Greek, Old Indic, and Old Iranian loanwords is greater in texts traditionally attributed to later periods.
- Almost all the foreign loanwords (approximately 96%) in the Hebrew Bible are nouns. This pattern reflects the cross-linguistic tendency for nouns to be borrowed more frequently than other parts of speech. It also indicates that the Hebrew Bible’s non-Semitic loanwords are primarily cultural (rather than core) terms.

In addition to surfacing interesting patterns like these, investigation of the Hebrew Bible’s non-Semitic loanwords enhances our understanding of the Hebrew Bible and the world in which it was written in at least several other ways.

First, analysis of the Hebrew Bible’s non-Semitic terminology leads to a better understanding of the biblical text. Knowledge of a loanword’s origin can help clarify its meaning and the connotations associated with that word. Because the meaning of the biblical text depends in part on the meaning of its individual words, the study of non-Semitic terminology ultimately leads to better translation and exegesis of the biblical text.

Second, exploration of the non-Semitic vocabulary in the Hebrew Bible enhances our knowledge of both the biblical languages and the ancient Near East’s non-Semitic languages. We see how foreign sounds were perceived by speakers of Hebrew and Aramaic and how those individuals treated foreign words linguistically. This provides significant insight into the phonology, orthography, and morphology of the languages of the ancient Near East.

Third, study of the Hebrew Bible’s non-Semitic loanwords informs our knowledge of contact between Hebrew and Aramaic speakers and the speakers of non-Semitic languages. While loanwords can sometimes serve rhetorical purposes, most often direct borrowings reflect historical interactions between different cultures. The presence of non-
Semitic terminology in the Hebrew Bible therefore provides insight into the historical relationships between the ancient Israelites and non-Semitic people groups.

In sum, the Hebrew Bible’s loanwords represent a fascinating topic of study. Analysis of these loanwords’ origins and distribution sheds significant light on the Hebrew Bible and the world in which it was written. By doing so, we gain a better understanding of the linguistic and historical contact between the ancient Israelites and non-Semitic peoples such as the Egyptians, Hittites, and Persians.

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