

Studies In Hebrew Astronomy And Mathematics

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Hebrew names of the planets

Shay Zucker

Department of Geophysics and Planetary Sciences,
Raymond and Beverly Sackler Faculty of Exact Sciences,
Tel Aviv University, Ramat Aviv, Tel Aviv 69978, Israel
email: shayz@post.tau.ac.il

Abstract. I review in this paper the basic Hebrew planetary terminology. To complete the picture I accompany it with some historical and cultural context, and compare it to the planetary terminology in Arabic, the most widely spoken Semitic language.

Keywords. history and philosophy of astronomy

1. Introduction

As part of the International Year of Astronomy activities in Israel, a public competition was announced, whereby the public was invited to propose Hebrew names for the planets Uranus and Neptune. All the other major planets have Hebrew names, dating back even to biblical times. On the other hand, Uranus and Neptune, which were discovered at times when Hebrew was not considered a living language, are simply termed 'Uranus' and 'Neptune'.

In this contribution, I will review the origins of the Hebrew names of the planets and their context, as well as some related notation. Appropriate historical consideration of the Hebrew language cannot ignore related languages, and thus I will also review the relevant Arabic notation.

2. Historical and linguistic background

A thorough account of Hebrew origins and history is definitely beyond the scope of this contribution, so I will give here a very brief description, with only the very broad details, accounting for the major developments in the history of Hebrew.

Hebrew is a member of the Semitic languages family. The most widely spoken Semitic language today is Arabic, followed by Amharic, Tigrinya, and then Hebrew, usually considered the historic language of the Jews. Other important Semitic languages that played an important role in the history of the Middle East were Akkadian, Assyrian, Babylonian and Aramaic, most of them are now considered dead languages.

Between the 10th and the 4th century BCE, classical Hebrew flourished in ancient Israel as a spoken language. This was the language in which the bible was written. During the Hellenistic and Roman periods one finds the next phase of Hebrew – Talmudic Hebrew, between the 3rd century BCE and the 4th century CE. After this period, Hebrew ceased being a spoken language, and its use was generally confined to liturgical purposes and philosophical and scientific writings. This is Medieval Hebrew.

During the late 18th century, as part of the Enlightenment movement, Hebrew was revived as a journalistic and literary language. This tendency culminated in the 19th century in the work of Eliezer Ben Yehuda, who aimed to revive Hebrew as a mother tongue, as part of the Zionist ideology. Nowadays modern Hebrew is one of the two official

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