

Finding ‘language’ in the Hebrew Bible

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Abstract. In the Hebrew Bible, *lashon* [לָשׁוֹן] and *safah* [שָׁפָה] are both translated as ‘language’. In Genesis 10, survivors of the flood went their separate ways each according to their *lashon*. In Chapter 11, the builders of the Tower of Babel all spoke the same *safah*. Focusing on *lashon*, it changes radically over the Biblical millennium. From ~1400 BCE, *lashon* describes ways in which individuals speak. By 550-450 BCE, it was synonymous with ‘nation’ or ‘people’ and used in a manner more familiar to us today.

Keywords. language, Biblical exegesis, historical change in meaning

1. Introduction. This paper will first look at a fascinating Biblical puzzle involving two words that prompted this inquiry. It will then describe the observations drawn from a deeper dive into the use of these words throughout the Hebrew Bible. This will be followed by an explanation of the evolution in the use of one of the two words, from the Davidic to the post-Exilic eras. After this, an attempt to speculate on the original meaning of the other term will be made. And finally, should these explanations and speculations be found lacking, it will offer a potentially amusing orthogonal observation encountered in passing through the texts.

2. Fascination. To begin with, what was the puzzle that triggered this inquiry? The English translation of Chapter 10 of *Genesis* describes the dispersal of the sons of Noah – Shem, Ham, and Yafeth – and their descendants. According to the text, they divided “according to their clans and their languages,” as in (1). In the first verse of Genesis chapter 11, shown in (2), the story of the Tower of Babel, it states in English translations that (at that time) “All the earth had one language and one (set of) words.”

(1) These are the descendants of Ham, according to their clans and **their languages**,
in their lands and their nations. [Genesis 10:20]

(2) All the earth had **one language** and one (set of) words. [Genesis 11:1]

In the Hebrew text, Genesis 10:20 says that they were divided ‘according to their languages’, *lilshonotam* [לְלִשְׁוֹנָתָם]), using the word *lashon* [לָשׁוֹן] for ‘language’. In Genesis 11:1, the phrase ‘one language’ *safah* ‘*ehat* [שָׁפָה אֶחָת] uses the word *safah* [שָׁפָה] for ‘language’.

(3) לְאַלֶּה בְּנֵי־הָם לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתָם לְלִשְׁוֹנָתָם בְּאַרְצֹתָם בְּגוֹיֵיהֶם [Genesis 10:20]
le’eleh benei ham lemishp’hotam **lilshonotam** b’artzotam
to.these sons.of Ham to.their.families **to.their.languages** in.their.lands
begoyehem
with.their.nations

‘These are the descendants of Ham, according to their clans and **their languages**,
in their lands and their nations.’

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- (4) וַיְהִי כָל־הָאָרֶץ שָׂפָה אֶחָת וּדְבָרִים אֶחָדִים [Genesis 11:1]
 vayehi ha'aretz **safah** 'echat udvarim 'ahadim
 it.was the.land **language one** and.words ones
 'All the earth had **one language** and one (set of) words.'

How could it be, a reader might ask, that the whole earth had 'one language' *safah* 'echat (שָׂפָה אֶחָת) when the descendants of Noah dispersed and settled each according to 'their languages' *lilshonotam* (לְלִשְׁוֹנֹתָם)?

This begs for a closer examination of the two words *lashon* [לָשׁוֹן] and *safah* [שָׂפָה], each of which are commonly translated as 'language', and which are quite distinct in some ways, but not in others. We can prefigure the distinction between them, perhaps, by suggesting that the difference between one *safah* [שָׂפָה] and another is much greater than the difference between one *lashon* [לָשׁוֹן] and another. To put this in contemporary terms, we might say that a resident of London and a resident of Washington, D.C., don't speak the same *lashon* [לָשׁוֹן], the first speaking British English and the second American English, but that they both share the same *safah* [שָׂפָה]—namely, the English language, or *safah anglit* [שפה אנגלית].

3. Observation. Responding appropriately to what is begged, we will now have a look at the distribution of *lashon* and *safah* throughout the Hebrew bible. The two words, together in their various forms, show up nearly 300 times in the text, with *safah* being used about 33% more often than *lashon*. They each have multiple interpretations, and both their frequencies and interpretations vary significantly as one goes through the texts, as shown in Tables 1 and 2 here below.

Here, we see two tables illustrating the distribution of the words *safah* and *lashon* in accordance with their meanings and uses. Note that the Hebrew Bible texts themselves are partitioned into what I take to be four useful sections. While dating the authorship and the composition of any of these texts is a minefield, the texts associated with each column appear to have an internal consistency that is somewhat born out in the changes in use and frequency of these words in each of their meanings.

- Genesis through Kings (inclusive of the five books of the Torah, plus Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings) corresponds to the pre-monarchic and monarchic period.
- The prophetic writings, beginning with Isaiah, mostly reflect pre- and post-exilic times.
- The books grouped as Writings (Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, etc.) are divergent from the rest in that they are largely poetic.
- The books considered in the last column, including Esther, Daniel, and Ezra, are all later and post-exilic.

<i>safah</i>	From Genesis through Kings	Prophets from Isaiah	Writings (Psalms, Proverbs, ...)	Late books (Esther/Daniel)	Total
'lip(s)'	3	6	6	1	16
'edge'	25	4	0	4	33
'speech'	9	11	85	0	105
'language'	5	7	1	0	13
Total	42	28	92	5	167

Table 1. The distribution of *safah* in the Hebrew Bible

<i>lashon</i>	From Genesis through Kings	Prophets from Isaiah	Writings (Psalms, Proverbs, ...)	Late books (Esther/Daniel)	Total
‘tongue’	3	4	8	0	15
‘tongue-shaped’	5	2	0	0	7
‘speech’	2	15	58	0	75
‘language’	4	9	0	14	27
Total	14	30	66	14	124

Table 2. The distribution of *lashon* in the Hebrew Bible

Focusing first on safah, we find that it can mean ‘lip(s)’ as in example (5), ‘edge’ (e.g., the seashore, a riverbank, or a fabric binding) as in example (6), ‘use of the lips’ (e.g., speech) as in example (7), and, as we have seen, possibly ‘language’ as in example (4) above.

- (5) בְּגָדָיו יִהְיוּ פְרֻמִּים וְרֹאשׁוֹ יִהְיֶה פָרוּעַ וְעַל-שָׁפָם יֵעֲטָה [Leviticus 13:45]
b’gadav yiheyu prumim v’rosho yiheyeh faru’a v’al-**safam** ya’teh
his.clothes will.be torn and.his.head will.be bare and.on-**his.lip** will.be.covered
‘his clothes shall be rent, his head shall be left bare,
and **his upper lip** shall be covered over’

- (6) עַם-רָב כַּחֹל אֲשֶׁר עַל-שְׂפַת־הַיָּם [Joshua 11:4]
‘am-rav caḥol ‘asher ‘al-**sfat-hayam**
people-many like.sand that.is on-**lip-of.the.sea**
‘an enormous host, numerous as the sand that is on the **seashore**’

- (7) וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לִפְנֵי יְהוָה הֵן אֲנִי עָרֵל שְׂפָתַיִם וְאֵיךְ יִשְׁמַע אֵלַי פְּרָעָה [Exodus 6:30]
vayomer Mosheh lifnei [G-d] hen ani ‘**aral** **sfatayim**
spoke Moses before G-d behold I.am **uncircumcised lips**
v’eich yishma’ elai Par’oh
how will.listen to.me Pharaoh
‘Moses spoke before G-d, See, I get **tongue-tied**. How will Pharaoh listen to me?!’

Turning to *lashon*, it can mean ‘tongue’ (of a person or other creature) as in example (8), ‘tongue-shaped’ as in example (9), ‘use of the tongue’ (speech) as in example (10), and also ‘language’ as we saw in example (3).

- (8) וְלֹכֵל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יַחְרִצְ-כֶּלֶב לִשְׁנוֹ לְמַאֲשׁ וְעַד-בְּהֵמָה [Exodus 11:7]
ulchol bnei yisra’el lo yeheratz-kelev **leshono** l’me’ish v’ad-behemah
unto.all children.of Israel not will.move-dog **his.tongue** to.a.human or.to-a.beast
towards any of the Israelites, no dog will move **his tongue** (snarl) at human or beast

- (9) וַיְהִי לָהֶם גְּבוּל מִן-הַיָּם הַמֵּלַח מִן-הַלָּשׁוֹן הַנֶּגֶב הַזֶּה [Joshua 15:2]
vayehi lahem gvul negev miktzeh yam hamelaḥ min-**halashon**
it.was to.them border southern from.corner.of sea.of the. salt from-**the.tongue**
haponeh negbah
that.turns southward
‘Their southern border was from the tip of the Dead Sea, from **the tongue**
that turns southward.’

- (10) נִאֶמַר מֹשֶׁה ... לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים אֲנֹכִי ... כִּי כִבְד־פֶּה וְכִבְד־לָשׁוֹן אֲנֹכִי [Exodus 4:10]
 vayomer mosheh ... lo ish dvarim anochi ... ki chvad-peh
 said Moses ... not man words am.I ... because heavy-mouth
 uchvad **lashon** anochi
 and.heavy **tongue** am.I
 Moses said ... I have never been a man of words ... I am slow of mouth
 and slow of **tongue**.

Just as both *lashon* and *safah* can both seemingly mean ‘language’ per se, as we saw in Genesis 10 and 11, they can also both refer to how one speaks, as we see above in examples (7) and (10). In Exodus 4:10 and 6:30, *peh* ‘mouth’, *lashon* ‘tongue’, and *sfatayim* ‘lips’ are all used to describe Moses’ not being articulate enough to serve as a public spokesperson to the Egyptian Pharaoh or to his people. He is described as having a ‘heavy’ mouth, a ‘heavy’ tongue, and having little control over his lips.

It is worth examining more closely how *safah* and *lashon* are used to refer to ‘speech’ and ‘language’ across the four (approximate) periods of use set out in the tables. Tables 3 and 4, below, illustrate this.

<i>safah</i>	From Genesis through Kings	Prophets from Isaiah	Writings (Psalms, Proverbs, ...)	Late books (Esther/Daniel)	Total
‘speech’	9	11	85	0	105
‘language’	5	7	1	0	13
Total	14	18	86	0	118

Table 3. The distribution of *safah* as meaning ‘speech’ or ‘language’

<i>lashon</i>	From Genesis through Kings	Prophets from Isaiah	Writings (Psalms, Proverbs, ...)	Late books (Esther/Daniel)	Total
‘speech’	2	15	58	0	75
‘language’	4	9	0	14	27
Total	6	24	58	14	102

Table 4. The distribution of *lashon* as meaning ‘speech’ or ‘language’

In the earlier books of the Bible, from Genesis through Kings, *lashon* and *safah* show up with the meaning ‘language’ only in Genesis 10 and 11, and in Deuteronomy 28. *Lashon* in Genesis 10 and Deuteronomy 28 seems to refer the language varieties spoken by different groups. As for *safah*, which is used five times in Genesis 11 and nowhere else, it is not certain what it means, even though it is uniformly translated as ‘language’.

It isn’t until the later prophetic books that both *safah* and *lashon* show up together with both seeming to mean ‘language’. There they seem to be distinguishable in that *chivdei leshon* ‘heavy language’ might be a language that is difficult to understand while *imkei safah* ‘deep language’ might be thoroughly incomprehensible. This opposition is seen in Ezekiel 3:5, example (11) below. Here ‘heavy language’ might have the same or similar force as ‘heavy dialect’.

- (11) כִּי לֹא אֶל-עַם עִמְקֵי שָׁפָה וְכִבְדֵּי לָשׁוֹן אֵתָהּ שְׁלֹחַ אֶל-בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל [Ezekiel 3:6]
 ki lo el-am ‘imkei safah vechivdei lashon
 for not to-a.people.of deep language and.heavy language
 atah shaluah el-beit yisra’el
 you are.sent to-the.house.of Israel
 ‘For not to a people of unintelligible speech and difficult language,
 you are sent to the House of Israel’

In Psalms, Proverbs, Job, and other poetic books, *lashon* and *safah* are pretty much interchangeable and almost never refer to ‘language’ per se, as opposed to the words that people speak. An example of this is shown in (12), which contrasts *sfat emet* ‘lips of truth (truthful speech)’ with *leshon shaker* ‘a lying tongue (deceitful speech)’.

- (12) שִׁפְתֵי-אֱמֶת תִּכּוֹן לְעַד וְעַד-אֶרְגִּי’אֵה לָשׁוֹן שָׁקֵר [Proverbs 12:19]
 sfat-emet tikon la’ad v’ad-argi’ah leshon shaker
 lip.of-truth is.established forever and.for-an.instant tongue.of lie
 ‘Lips of truth [truthful speech] is established forever.
 A tongue of lies [false speech] lasts a moment.’

Finally, in the later books, especially Esther and Daniel, we don’t find *safah* at all, and *lashon* ‘language’ is almost exclusively used as a synonym for ‘people’ and ‘nation’, as in example (13).

- (13) בְּאַיִן דְּרִינֻשׁ מְלָכָא כְּתִיב לְכֹל-עַמְמַיָּא אֱמַיָּא וְלִשְׁנַיָּא [Daniel 6:26/Aramaic]
 beidayin Daryavesh Malka ktav lechol-amemayya umayya v’lishanayya
 then Darius King wrote to.all-peoples nations and.languages
 ‘And then King Darius wrote to all the peoples, nations, and languages.’

Reviewing what we’ve observed, *safah* occurs in the early books (Genesis through Kings) with the meaning ‘edge’ [25x], ‘lip(s)’ [3x], or the ‘product of one’s lips – i.e., speech’ [9x]. It is translated as ‘language’ [5x] in only one chapter of Genesis – the story of the Tower of Babel. In the prophetic texts beginning with Isaiah (through Malachi), *safah* occurs much less frequently with the meaning ‘edge’ [4x] but continues to be used to mean ‘lip(s)’ [6x], or the ‘product of one’s lips – i.e., speech’ [11x]. In these texts, it is occasionally also used to mean ‘language’ as in ‘a language’ [7x]. In the more poetic texts of Psalms, Proverbs, Job, and Song of Songs, *safah* almost always means the ‘product of one’s lips – i.e., speech’ [85x] and sometimes ‘lip(s)’ [6x]. There, it is never used to mean ‘edge’ [0x] and only used to mean ‘language’ once [1x] in reference to Tower of Babel story of Genesis 11. In very late texts (Daniel and Chronicles), *safah* hardly occurs at all, and only with the meaning ‘edge’ [4x] and ‘lips’ [1x]. It is not used to mean ‘speech’ or ‘language’ in any of those texts.

Turning to *lashon*, we find in the early books that it is used to mean ‘tongue’ [3x], ‘tongue-shaped’ [5x], the ‘product of one’s tongue – i.e., speech’ [2x], and ‘language’ [4x]. In the prophetic texts, *lashon* continues to be used to mean ‘tongue’ [4x] or ‘tongue-shaped’ [2x] but is more frequently used to mean the ‘product of one’s tongue – i.e., speech’ [15x], and ‘language’ [9x]. In the poetic texts, *lashon* is used to mean the ‘product of one’s tongue – i.e., speech’ [58x] and sometimes ‘tongue’ [8x]. It is never used to mean ‘tongue-shaped’ [0x] or ‘language’ [0x]. In very late texts (Esther, Daniel, and Nehemiah), it is only used to mean ‘language’ [14x].

4. Explication. We have seen that *safah* and *lashon* cooccur with a meaning corresponding to ‘language’ per se, [12x] and [13x] respectively, only from Genesis through the Prophets. It is worth comparing their use in these texts. *Lashon* is often used to describe the way one speaks – as in Moses’ being inarticulate (i.e., having a ‘heavy tongue’), and to the extent that it is used to refer to ‘language’ per se, it distinguishes among varieties of language – that is, varieties that are often quite distinct, but which likely are mutually intelligible. *Safah*, on the other hand, only is used 7x outside of Genesis 11 to mean ‘language’ per se, and in these instances it appears to refer to languages that are strange, incomprehensible, and completely foreign. So, perhaps it is for this reason that Genesis chapter 10 could refer to each clan having its own *lashon* (or language variety) and chapter 11 could assert that all the people, in the story of the Tower of Babel, had the same *safah* (perhaps the same macrolanguage).

In the remainder of this section, we will examine the historical circumstances that make our assessment of *lashon* plausible and consider how the meaning of *lashon* evolved from the time of the early Kingdom of Israel to the post-Exilic period (and after) as depicted in the later books of Esther and Daniel. Following this, we will turn to make a wild but somewhat plausible speculation on the seemingly aberrant use of *safah* in Genesis 10 the Tower of Babel story.

The Israelites first established themselves around 1200 BCE as a confederation of 12 Tribes and then around 1047 BCE as the Kingdom of Israel. During this time, they were surrounded by other peoples and tribes (Figure 1) who spoke languages closely related to Hebrew. One might say that the Israelites and their neighbors all spoke approximately the same *safah* [שפה] but had different *leshonot* [לשונות]. The peoples of Edom in the southwest, Moab, Ammon, and Aram in the east, and Phoenicia to the north all spoke variants of Canaanite (a subgroup of closely related Northwest Semitic languages), and the speakers of these languages could likely communicate with each other [MacDonald 2000, Wilson-Wright 2019].



Figure 1. Biblical Edom, Ammon, Moab, Aram, and Phoenicia (~830 BCE)²

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transjordan_in_the_Bible#/media/File:Transjordan_kingdoms.png

Knowing how closely related the Canaanite languages were, we might imagine that speakers in this region could communicate with each other quite readily, much as speakers of British, Indian, and American English can do so today. The languages spoken in this area might have constituted a “dialect continuum” of sorts, wherein adjacent tribes and kingdoms spoke varieties that were more like each other than those that were more distant from each other. There is both textual and archeological evidence for this.

The first comes from the text of Ruth, which describes Elimelech, from the tribe of Judah, moving with his wife Naomi and sons Mahlon and Chilion from Bethlehem to Moab on account of a famine on the west side of the Jordan River. Elimelech dies, and his two sons marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. Later, Naomi’s two sons also die, and she decides to return to Judah, telling her daughters-in-law to return to their own families. In this story, one might assume that Naomi and her Moabite daughter-in-law Ruth understood each other – Naomi speaking the Israelite *lashon* and Ruth using the Moabite *lashon*. When Ruth says to Naomi, “wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God,” she is most likely speaking in her own Moabite *lashon* (dialect).

Moabite textual evidence confirms this. Sometime around 840 BCE, King Mesha of Moab successfully rebelled against subjugation by Israel and defeated the “House of David” (Judah). On this occasion, the king had inscribed a commemorative stone tablet (i.e., a stele) recording the event. As can be seen in Moabite King Mesha’s 840 BCE stele (see Figure 2), the Moabite Kingdom adopted Hebrew script. A 2022 article in *Biblical Archeology Review* confirms that Moab and Judah were contemporaneous and that they used the same *safah*, with each having its own *lashon* (dialect) [Gilb 2023, Lemaire 1994, Lemaire & Delorme 2022, Tigay 2023].



Figure 2. Mesha stele³

The text of this 2900-year-old tablet would have been comprehensible both to the people that wrote it and to the surrounding Israelite tribes. A sample of text from the tablet shown in Figure

³https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7b/P1120870_Louvre_st%C3%A8le_de_M%C3%A9sha_AO5066_rwk.JPG

3 was written in a modified Ancient Hebrew script and bears the words “et Nabah al Yisrael” or “Take Nabah against Israel”. Example (14) provides the equivalent Hebrew text and translation.

- (14) את . נבה . על . ישראל
 et . nabah . ‘al . yisra’el
 take . Nabah . against . Israel



Figure 3. Partial image from the Mesha stele, showing reference to “Israel”⁴

Just as Israelites and Moabites each had their own *lashon* (dialect), so too did Israelite tribes, apparently, and besides having their own dialects, they also fought with each other. This is attested in Judges Chapter 12, which depicts a battle between the tribes of Ephraim and Gilead. The tribe of Gilead defeated Ephraim, and Judges 12:5-6 describes the Gileadites setting up sentries on the Jordan River to stop fleeing Ephraimites from crossing over and escaping. It happens that where the Gileadite *lashon* (dialect) had a [ʃ] in certain words, a speaker of the Ephraimite *lashon* would substitute an [s] in those same words. In this case, the Hebrew word *shibboleth* (שִׁבְלֶת) – meaning an ‘ear of grain’ – was used by the Gileadite sentries to test the Ephraimite soldiers, who pronounced it *sibboleth*. According to the text, Gileadite sentries identified fleeing Ephraimite soldiers in this manner and killed thousands of them. It is also from this text that we get the English word *shibboleth*, meaning ‘a choice of phrasing or single word, that distinguishes one group of people from another’.⁵

It is following the First Temple period that the meaning of *lashon* changes rather significantly. The Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and the First Temple in 587 BCE resulted in the exile of about 25% of the defeated kingdom’s population (leaders, priests, and wealthy) [Finkelstein & Silberman 2001: 296–314]. In Babylon, Hebrew-speaking Jewish exiles found themselves in a foreign place, surrounded by profoundly different peoples and languages. One might speculate that consciousness of being different, distinct from those around them, crystalized, and that they saw their language as what made them different. It is not surprising that in texts of this period, *lashon* ‘language’ is synonymous with *am* [עַם] ‘people’ and *ummah* [אֲמָה] ‘nation’ [Dubinsky & Epstein 2023]. After Cyrus the Great of Persia conquered the Neo-Babylonian Empire in 539 BCE, the Jews were returned to Israel (see Figure 4).

⁴https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f3/P1120871_Louvre_st%C3%A8le_de_M%C3%A9sha_AO5066_d%C3%A9tail_rwk.JPG

⁵ According to Speiser 1942 and Rendsberg 1988, the difficult to pronounce sound was more likely [θ], rather than [ʃ], the former being much harder to pronounce for those who don’t have it in their language variety. Regardless of which phonetic difference was in play, it is nonetheless likely that different Israelite tribes had different *lashonot* ‘dialects’ in the same manner as did their Moabite, Ammonite, and other neighbors.



Figure 4. Map showing the independent provinces of Judea and Samaria⁶

It is under Persian sponsorship of the Jewish return from exile and rebuilding of the Temple that we find the first references to *lashon* ‘language’ as synonymous with *am* ‘people’. In Esther 1:22, example (15), the Persian King Ahashverosh (אַחַשְׁוֵרֹשׁ) dispatches letters “to every province in its own script and to every nation in its own language.” As Aramaic was an official Persian language and universally understood, the only reason for sending a letter to the Jews in Hebrew (and to others in their own languages) would be to acknowledge them (and others) as a separate people [Rosenthal et al. 1986].

- (15) וַיִּשְׁלַח סְפָרִים אֶל-כָּל-מְדִינֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ [Esther 1:22]
 vayishlah sfarim el-kol-medinot hamelech
 sent missives to-all-the.provinces.of the.king
 אֶל-מְדִינָה וּמְדִינָה כַּכְּתָבָהּ וְאֶל-עַם כַּלְשׁוֹנָם
 el-medinah umdinah kichtavah ve’el-‘am va’am kilshono
 to.province and.province like.script and.to.people and.people like.their.language
 לְהֵיוֹת כָּל-אִישׁ שָׂרֵר בְּבֵיתוֹ וּמְדַבֵּר כַּלְשׁוֹן עַמּוֹ
 liheyot kol-ish sareir beveito umdaber kilshono ‘amo
 that.it.be every-man rule in.his.home and.speak in.the.language.of his.people
 ‘Dispatches were sent to all the provinces of the king, to each province in its own script
 and to each people in their own **language**, such that every man should rule in his
 own home and speak **the language of his people**.

⁶ https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/87/Palestine_under_the_Persians_Smith_1915.jpg

After the Babylonian exile and subsequent return to Jerusalem, prayer comes to have a formal, communal role previously served by sacrificial offerings in the Temple. And so, the Jews' *lashon* 'language' is first taken to distinguish them from other peoples around them and then used in prayer as ritually equivalent to sacrifice [Dubinsky & Epstein 2023]. We find this explicit acknowledgement of the parallel status of *am* 'people' and *lashon* 'language' in example (16), from the daily morning prayers [Sefaria 2024].

- (16) וּבָנוּ בְּחֵרְתָּ מִכָּל־עַם וְלָשׁוֹן
 uvanu vaharta mikol-**am** velashon
 and.in.us you.chose from.all-**people** and.language
 You have chosen us from every **people** and **language**.

This is made even more explicit in the Silent Prayer for Festivals where the phrase 'you raised us up from all the languages' in example (17) appears to make *lashon* 'language' completely synonymous with '*am* 'people' [Sefaria 2024].

- (17) אַתָּה בְּחֵרְתָּנוּ מִכָּל הָעַמִּים אֲהַבְתָּ אוֹתָנוּ וְרָצִיתָ בָּנוּ
 atah bahartanu mikol ha'amim ahavta otanu v'ratzita banu
 you you.chose.us from.all the.peoples you.loved us and.you.were.pleased with.us
 וְרוֹמַמְתָּנוּ מִכָּל הַלְשׁוֹנוֹת
 v'romamtanu mikol halshonot
 and.you.raised.us from.all the.languages
 You chose us from all the peoples, loved us, and desired us,
 and raised us up from all the languages.

In 332 BCE, Alexander the Great conquered the Jewish and Samarian provinces. After his death (323 BCE), the empire was divided into the Ptolemaic (Egyptian) Empire in the west and the Seleucid Empire in the east. As with most empires, the Seleucids did not impose their language and culture upon their diverse empire. While they "preferred to rely on Greek or Macedonian soldiers and administrators for the day-to-business of governing," they also "respected the cultural and religious sensibilities of their subjects" [Hause & Maltby 2004:76].

Over the subsequent 300 years, rival generals and other pretenders to the Alexandrian Empire fought for control of it, and control of the Jewish provinces changed hands no less than five times. In 221 BCE, the Seleucid king Antiochus III invaded for the first time but failed in fully conquering the Jews until 201 BCE, after the death of the King Ptolemy IV Philopator [Schiffman 1991:62-66]. In this era, the Seleucids were fighting enemies on every side – the Parthians in the east, the Ptolemies in the south, and the Romans in the west. This led to a weakened empire and, in turn, to fears of internal rebellion. It was Antiochus III's son, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, who imagined that the Jews were set to rebel against him and began a brutal campaign of repression against them, provoking the very armed rebellion he wished to avoid. This uprising turned out to be more "a civil war between the orthodox and reformist parties in the Jewish camp" [Schultz 1981:155].

The importance of *lashon* 'language' as a marker of identity in the Jewish (Maccabean) Revolt against the Seleucid Empire (167-160 BCE) cannot be overstated. It was during this episode that the Hebrew language and culture came to the fore in an armed conflict with, and counterpoint to, prevailing Greek language and its culture. And so here, too, we find evidence of *lashon* 'language' as a marker of ethnic identity, contemporaneous with the Maccabean Revolt, in the Book of Daniel. Written partly in Hebrew and partly in Aramaic, Daniel relates events from the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, but the book itself was written in 164 BCE during

the Maccabean Revolt and is responsive to the ethnic struggle of the Maccabean Jews against the Seleucid Greeks and their Hellenized Jewish allies. In Daniel, we find that *lashon* [לָשׁוֹן] ‘language’, *am* [עַם] ‘people’, and *ummah* [אַמָּה] ‘nation’ are used as parallel terms (in Hebrew and Aramaic) in seven separate passages [Daniel 3:4, 3:7, 5:19, 6:26, 3:29, 3:31, and 7:14] as shown in example (18).

(18) a. כָּל-עַם אַמָּה וְלָשׁוֹן [Daniel 3:29]
 chol-‘am ummah v’lishan
 every-people nation and.language
 ‘every people, nation, and language’

b. לְכָל-עַמְמַיָּא אַמַּיָּא וְלִשְׁנַיָּא [Daniel 3:31]
 l’chol-‘amemayya ummayya v’lishanayya
 to.every-people nation and.language
 ‘to every people, nation, and language’

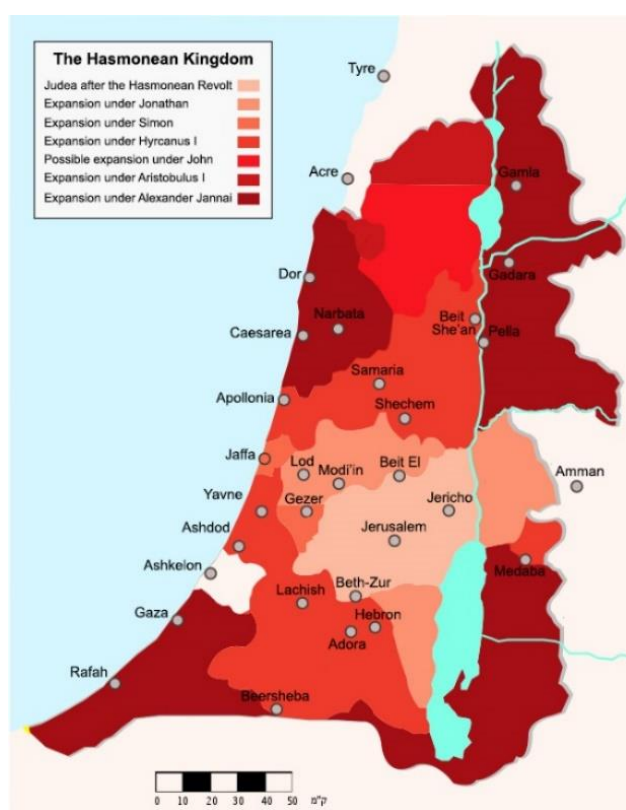


Figure 5. The Jewish Hasmonean Kingdom (140-37 BCE)⁷

5. Speculation. We now return to consider a matter that was temporarily set aside at the beginning of the previous section, which is the seemingly aberrant use of *safah* in Genesis 11 the Tower of Babel story. But for 5 occurrences in Genesis chapter 11, *safah* never means ‘language’ in any of the books from Genesis through Kings. It appears once in Zephaniah with a reference to Genesis chapter 11. This leaves exactly 7 occurrences (3 in Isaiah, 3 in Ezekiel, and one in Psalm 81) where *safah* clearly means ‘language’. It co-occurs 3 times with *lashon*, and in 2 of these cases the Israelites are contrasted with other peoples who have unintelligible *safot* or difficult *lashonot*, suggesting that if someone speaks another *safah* it’s really different and if

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Hasmonean_kingdom.jpg

someone speaks another *lashon* it might be like a hard-to-understand dialect. This is alluded to in Isaiah 19:18, which prophesies a time when the Canaanite *safah* will be spoken in Egypt. This accords with Egyptian and Canaanite indeed being two very different *safot*. So, perhaps, by the time of the prophets, *safah* did indeed mean ‘language’ as in a very foreign one. But it’s worth asking how it got there.

<i>safah</i>	From Genesis through Kings	Prophets from Isaiah	Writings (Psalms, Proverbs, ...)	Late books (Esther/Daniel)	Total
‘language’	5	7	1	0	13

Table 5. The distribution of *safah* as meaning ‘language’

In the five books of the Torah, *sfatayim* (dual/plural) is used 7 times to mean lips for speaking and *safah* (singular) appears 20 times meaning ‘edge’ (usually of a body of water). Given where speakers of different *safot* are from (outside the dialect continuum of Canaanite *lashonot*), it is plausible to imagine that they were seen to be beyond the ‘edge’ (of the Mediterranean Sea, the Sea of Reeds, the Nile River, or the Euphrates). In other words, if the Canaanite linguistic continuum is bounded by watery *safot*, then anyone from outside speaks a different *safah*.

One potential argument in support for this view is that the people at Babel were deemed to have offended G-d and violated some commandment. After the flood has ended, Noah and his sons (descendants) are commanded to *ulmil’u et-ha’aretz* [וּמְלְאוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ] ‘fill the earth’ [Genesis 9:1]. If one takes this commandment to mean that they must not remain in one region but should venture beyond the waters (rivers and seas) that surround them, then one might imagine that Genesis 11:1 is stating that they were ignoring the commandment by remaining within the one water-marked *safah* ‘edge’ that surrounded them. Accordingly, Genesis 11:1 might have the following translation, in (4’), wherein the meaning of *safah* is not anomalous at all.

- (4’) וַיְהִי כָל־הָאָרֶץ שְׂפִיחַ אֶחָד וּדְבָרִים אֶחָדִים [Genesis 11:1]
vayehi ha’aretz **safah** **ehat** udvarim aḥadim
it.was the.land **boundary one** and.words ones
‘All the earth had **one boundary** and one (set of) words.’

6. Consolation (An Ode to Oy!). Finally, because no textual discovery should be passed over in silence, I offer a small orthogonal consolation to any who might find themselves less than satisfied by what has been presented up to this point. The observation, serendipitously gleaned in passing through many verses, is that Oy! is not originally a Yiddish expression, that it is first recorded some 3500 years ago, and that it is not attributed to a Jew. Here, we see that it is first attributed to the non-Israelite prophet Balaam, who was hired by Balak, king of Moab, to place a malediction on the people of Israel [Britannica 2024]. Balaam here is bemoaning his inability to do this – hence the “Oy!” in Numbers 24:23.

- (19) וַיִּשָּׂא מִשְׁלֹו וַיֹּאמֶר אוֹי מִי יִהְיֶה מִשְׁמֹו אֵל [Numbers 24:23]
vayisa m’shalo vayomar **oy** mi yiheyeh mishumo el
he.raised his.theme and.said **oy!** who.will.live except.ordain.him G-d
‘He took up his theme and said, **Oy!** Who can live unless G-d has ordained it?’

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