THE EDWARD ULLENDORFF LECTURES IN SEMITIC PHILOLOGY

FIRST LECTURE

EDWARD ULLENDORFF AND THE STUDY OF SEMITIC LANGUAGES

BY

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I. Edward Ullendorff—scholar and teacher

It is a very great honour for me to inaugurate a series of annual lectures on Semitic philology in memory of Edward Ullendorff (1920-2011). Edward was not only my teacher; he was also my friend.

Since many present at our meeting this evening may not have met Edward personally and know him only from his writings, it seems proper to begin the first of a series of Edward Ullendorff Lectures in Semitic Philology with a few words about the scholar to whose memory the series is dedicated. Thereafter we shall turn to the Semitic languages, the field of study for which Edward cared so deeply and to which he contributed so much.

Edward was born in Berlin in 1920 and attended the Zum Grauen Kloster school in his home city. Already as a schoolboy he was fascinated by Semitic languages and Semitic civilization and began the study of Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic. In Hebrew he became so proficient that he was able to prepare bar-mitzva candidates to declaim their scriptural portion(s) and by the time he left school he could also speak the language rather well. Equipped with Hebrew speech, in 1938 Edward left a frightening and rapidly darkening Germany for Palestine, then under British mandatary rule. He often said that it was much more the linguistic attraction of a Hebrew-speaking country than the political appeal of Zionism that drew him to Palestine.

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1. The appearance of the word “philology” (as opposed to, for example, “linguistics” or “studies”) in the title of this lecture series would surely have pleased Edward himself, a philologist par excellence. Various definitions of “philology” have been offered. One of which I think Edward may have approved is that of the late D.R. Shackleton Bailey, who remarked that philology is simply “looking things up” (R.F. Thomas, “David Roy Shackleton Bailey 1917-2005” in Proceedings of the British Academy 153 = Biographical Memoirs of Fellows vii, 2008, 20). For conciseness, practicality and sheer common sense, this definition would be hard to improve upon. For further discussion, with many references, see S. Pollock, “Future philology? The fate of a soft science in a hard world”, Critical Enquiry 35 (2009), 931-961 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/599594>.
He enrolled to study Semitic languages at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Several of his fellow students were to become, like Edward himself, distinguished Semitists, and among his teachers were numbered some of the leading scholars of the 20th century. Among these, Edward had the deepest and most abiding admiration for H.J. Polotsky, whom he regarded as his scholarly mentor and to whom he always generously and proudly acknowledged a huge personal debt. After Polotsky’s death in 1991, Edward, in homage to the great scholar to whom he referred as “Maestro”, published and annotated Polotsky’s letters written to him, mostly in German, over a period of some 40 years.2

The academic tradition of the Hebrew University was at that time distinctly German in character; German scholarship of the finest kind, transplanted to Palestine and taught in Hebrew. This was the tradition that Edward subsequently brought to Britain. The degrees in Semitic languages which he introduced at St. Andrew’s, Manchester and London were deliberately modelled upon the Jerusalem syllabus of the 1930s. His classroom methods also reflected this tradition.

Edward was a superb teacher. Beginning with the very first lesson, he always taught from the text. He did not teach formal grammar with his students, but only read texts. Grammatical points were explained as they cropped up in the material being read. In five years of study with him, we never did a single didactic grammatical exercise; we did, however, read a large number of texts. He expected students to learn by themselves the grammar of whatever language was being read. He would tell us what books to consult (and not to consult) and thereafter he took knowledge of their contents pretty much for granted.

The first class I had with him was Amharic. Fresh from school, where things were conducted very differently, the initial shock was quite large. He had informed us beforehand that at the first lesson we would be expected to know the Ethiopian syllabary; he did not want people in class who didn’t know the Amharic letters. He had also told us to acquire and bring along a copy of his An Amharic Chrestomathy. The date of the first class duly arrived. Having in his opening words explained that instruction in Amharic grammar was unnecessary since most of the information is already available elsewhere (he named some of the books), he proceeded to read aloud, dissect and analyse the first sentence of the chrestomathy, isolating every

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syllable, parsing every word, construing every phrase and clause, explaining how it all hung together. It was a revelation. This took several hours (classes were open-ended without fixed finishing times). Having guided us through the first sentence, he ended saying “This week I have explained the first sentence of the passage to you; next week you will do the same for me with the second sentence”. This was the way things had been done in Jerusalem and this was the way Edward did them in Britain.

Edward had a very strong sense of belonging to a noble academic tradition of Semitic philology and had unbounded reverence for the great names of the past, from the pioneers who made the first discoveries, in particular Hiob (Job) Ludolf (1624-1704), the founder of Ethiopian studies in Europe, to the great scholars of the 19th century who created new academic disciplines, and their 20th century successors who carried the tradition forward.

Edward, being so firmly attached to the scholarly past, was somewhat suspicious of scholarly innovation, especially of untried and untested innovation. The academic world suffers from fads and fashions no less than other walks of life, and he was reluctant to exchange without very good reason the classic works of the past for their allegedly superior voguish modern replacements. Of course, new discoveries, new data and new methods which lead to a real advance in knowledge and understanding Edward was the first to welcome—the whole purpose of scholarly activity is to know more, understand better and reach the truth. But change for the sake of change, rewriting of known facts, introduction of fancy and unnecessary new terminology, glib theorizing, the cult of novelty etc. were anathema to him, especially when practised by people whose scholarly equipment seemed to him to be deficient. He had little time for those long on theory but short on knowledge. He was an inveterate opponent of any sort of humbug and what he called “meretricious scribbling”.

A look around at our standard works of reference will show, I think, that Edward was on the whole perfectly right. To whom do we automatically turn to receive instruction in the grammar or lexicon of, for example, Classical Arabic, Biblical Hebrew, Jewish Aramaic, Mandaic, Syriac or Ethiopic? Of course to Wright, Lane, Gesenius, Dalman, Nöldeke, Dillmann and Praetorius, all of whom wrote their classic works before the 20th century had begun, in many cases long before the 20th century

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had begun. These are the books we would not, indeed could not, be without. And in
the comparative Semitic field, what is there to approach Nöldeke’s magnificent
Beiträge (1904) and Neue Beiträge (1910)? Over a century later we still read them with
awe and return to them frequently for illumination and inspiration. And what about
Brockelmann’s Grundriss, published exactly one hundred years ago in 1913? Of course
it requires alteration and updating in various places, but what is there to come
anywhere near it, let alone replace it? Edward had enormous admiration for the great
scholars of the past. Theirs were the books which inspired him, and theirs were the
books with which he in turn inspired us, his students.

While Edward was hugely respectful of the past history of Semitic studies, he
was profoundly pessimistic of their future. The decline in our universities of serious
textual and philological study filled him with despair. Genuine, disinterested learning
is becoming a rarity in the modern world, a largely unwanted rarity. It has insufficient
“impact factor”. Scholars are turning (and being turned) into fund-raising academic
managers; their research more and more monitored by boards of internal and external
officials, moderators, so-called “peer reviewers” etc., whose job is to assess, approve,
quantify, monetize and then market an increasingly devalued product. Scholarship
has not benefited from all this bureaucratic interference. Quite the contrary. Edward
did not welcome many of the current developments. For example, in Jewish studies,
he could not countenance courses taught by professional career academics whose
knowledge of Hebrew is inadequate for research purposes and whose familiarity with
the scholarly literature limited to what happens to have been written in, or translated
into, English. He was very saddened by “the demise of the Hebraist” and felt strongly
that the golden age of Semitic studies had passed, never to return.

Further information about Edward Ullendorff, the scholar and teacher, will be
found in a detailed obituary by four of his former pupils, published in Biographical
Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy xii (2013), 404-432.

4. In this connection Edward would often use M. Cohen’s apposite expression “la bien fâcheuse rupture
de la chaîne bibliographique”.

5. E.U., “The demise of the Hebraist (principally in Britain)”, Scripta Classica Israelitica 15 (1996), 289-
292.
II. “The knowledge of languages in the Old Testament” (1962)

Having said something in general terms about Edward Ullendorff himself, it is time to say something about his approach to the study of the Semitic languages. On an occasion such as today, it is appropriate to choose material connected to Edward’s own interests. Fortunately, since those interests were so wide and covered in one way or another virtually the whole field of Semitics, this is not difficult. I should like to take a cue from two of his writings of which I am particularly fond, one an article, the other a book. The article is “The knowledge of languages in the Old Testament” (1962); the book is *Ethiopia and the Bible* (1968), containing Edward’s British Academy Schweich Lectures for 1967. These two works show, I think, Edward on top form in some of his favourite subjects. He is here at his most typical and at his best; Semitic languages, Semitic philology, Ethiopia and the Bible come together. These studies reveal not only his linguistic mastery of the many sources and his sovereign command of the scholarly literature, but also his easy familiarity with the history of different Semitic civilizations, the technicalities of texts and versions etc.—in other words, the knowledge of everything required to deal seriously with a serious subject. They also show his remarkable knack of asking interesting, important questions. Needless to say, they are also beautifully written. Edward’s prose is always a joy to read.

The title of the article “The knowledge of languages in the Old Testament” [pl. 1] contains three items. What is meant by (i) “Old Testament” in this context seems clear enough. But what constitutes (ii) “knowledge” and (iii) “languages” is far harder to define. These are somewhat fluid and elusive concepts. There are many different degrees and modes of “knowledge”, and the very notion of “languages” as discreet, definable entities can be problematical. Edward was very interested in such questions; indeed, some of his best known pieces concern precisely these subjects.


Knowledge
What does it mean to “know a language”—in this case a Semitic language? With ancient Semitic languages the European scholar is of course concerned only (or mainly) with reading knowledge. But how much can he know? Great literary languages such as Akkadian, Arabic, Hebrew, Syriac and Ethiopic can be known very well. They are comparable to, for example, Greek, Latin or Sanskrit. Each has enough material to keep a scholar fully occupied for the whole of his career. But how much, say, Ugaritic, Liyanite (now called “Dedanitic”) or Palmyrene can he know?

A scholar of Classical Arabic could never manage to read more than a fraction of the literature in a lifetime; a scholar of Palmyrene could read the whole corpus in an afternoon or two. It is clear that very different levels of knowledge are involved. In Arabic it is possible in a long and busy career to cover only a tiny portion of the whole and yet be very learned in the language indeed; in Palmyrene it is possible to know everything there is to know and still remain very ignorant. At least in Palmyrene (and other epigraphic languages) we have some texts to read. But some Semitic

8. Composition or speech in these languages is of course not normally needed. But there are exceptions, e.g. a university teacher of Akkadian may require his students to translate into that language as a didactic exercise; at early Orientalist conferences leading scholars would compose and present short ditties in the language of their speciality and one of Edward’s articles even deals with the recital by a colleague of grace in Ugaritic: “Grace in Ugaritic?”, Ugarit and the Bible, ed. G.J. Brooke et al. (Ugaritisch-Biblische Literatur 11, Münster 1994) 355-361. There are several examples of classical Ethiopic written by Europeans. Two spurious theological treatises, ostensibly of the 17th century, were in fact written by a 19th century Italian priest, Giusto da Urbino; the young Littmann published a Geez collection of original poems and verse translations (including a version of Gaudeamus igitur) and Edward has discussed, inter alia, an Ethiopic memorial text in Westminster Abbey which turns out to have been composed by none other than Job Ludolf—“An Ethiopic inscription in Westminster Abbey”, Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society III ii/2 (1992), 167-173 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1356186300002352>, reprinted in E.U., From Emperor Haile Selassie to H.J. Polotsky. An Ethiopian and Semitic Miscellany (Wiesbaden 1995), 69-75.

In native circles, on the other hand, the written use of traditional “dead” Semitic languages such as classical Arabic, Hebrew, Syriac and Geez, has of course always been quite usual, especially for religious or scholarly purposes, e.g. Abba Gregory (Gorgoryos) corresponded with Ludolf in Geez and there exists indigenous modern Geez poetry. Speech in these normally unspoken languages is much rarer, but, for example, a Muslim cleric or a Syrian Orthodox priest may for ideological reasons preach in Classical Arabic or Syriac respectively and Hebrew sermons were routine long before the recent revival of the language as a vernacular. Spoken classical Syriac is today cultivated in some circles even for secular purposes (kthobonoyo).
languages are attested by only a single text and others have no texts at all: thus we have only one document from which to study the enigmatic language of Deir ‘Allā, and Amorite is completely textless, consisting only of proper names. Such “languages” cannot be “known” in any real sense.

Languages
The huge differences in the manner and scope of attestation of the various Semitic languages mean that we know a good deal about some, but virtually nothing about others. This naturally makes for serious difficulties of linguistic identity. In what Semitic language, for example, is the aforementioned Deir ‘Allā text written? Is it Aramaic?9 If so, what kind? If not Aramaic, what language is it? Indeed, what is Aramaic at all?10

Even when dealing with distinct linguistic types of Semitic, such as Hebrew and Aramaic, the dividing line can be difficult to establish. To us Hebrew and Aramaic are two different languages, each with a set of hallmark features, but this separate identity may not have been so obvious at all times and in all circumstances. During the early stages of their emergence from Proto-(Northwest) Semitic the two languages must, by logical necessity, have been more similar than they subsequently became in our written sources. And at the end of its spoken life the separate identity of Hebrew was likewise very blurred. It has been well said that during the period of transition when Aramaic replaced Hebrew in Palestine in the early centuries A.D. it is likely that many people in that bilingual environment did not actually know what language they were speaking.11 Hebrew probably merged imperceptibly into Aramaic until it was finally completely absorbed by it. A similar thing happened later when Aramaic itself was supplanted by Arabic. In neither case, I think, should we envisage an abrupt change from one distinct language to another, but a gentle, protracted merger of two closely related types. We should rather imagine here a seamless continuum of gradually shifting identity—typologically related speech forms now diverging into

9. It is worth observing that in Semitic epigraphy the identity of short, fragmentary texts may depend as much upon palaeographical as upon linguistic criteria.


11. Z. Ben-Ḥayyim, *A Grammar of Samaritan Hebrew* (Jerusalem—Winona Lake 2000), 341. This highly important book first appeared in Hebrew (see below n. 73).
separateness, now overlapping and converging into likeness.\textsuperscript{12} In the same way as it is not possible to pinpoint exactly where German becomes Dutch, French becomes Italian or Spanish becomes Portuguese, so we cannot always separate the various types of Semitic into discreet linguistic compartments. Consequently, it is not easy to say how many Semitic languages there actually are.

Classification
This brings us to classification, a topic in which Edward was particularly interested. The Semitic languages as a whole (at least the classical Semitic languages) are very closely related. They bear a marked family likeness. This very family likeness causes extra difficulties when we come to classification. The number of truly diagnostic isoglosses is remarkably small. The problem is compounded by the fact that Semitic languages have always been spoken in close proximity to each other, so that in classifying them into groups we need to consider not only genetic but also areal factors of languages in contact. We are often at a loss to say whether a given feature occurs in two languages because both have inherited it from their common Semitic ancestor (“Proto-Semitic”),\textsuperscript{13} or because one has borrowed it from the other (or both have received it from a third party) at a later period. It is thus far from simple to establish precise genetic relationships within the Semitic family and state how the various languages relate to each other. We often cannot advance with safety very much beyond the banality of merely affirming their shared Semitic character.

Edward was accordingly rather wary of ambitious classification schemes which pretend to more than a simple geographical arrangement of the some of the more obvious facts. Here too, it is easy to think that he was right. Edward, for conceptual convenience as well as for practical linguistic reasons, believed in the traditional existence of a South Semitic branch of the family. To this branch it has long been supposed, and by many still is supposed, that both E(pigraphic) S(outh) A(rabian) (today often called “Ṣayhadic”) and Geez (classical Ethiopic) belong. Indeed, Edward was of the opinion that the complex of languages known as ESA and Geez were but

\textsuperscript{12} The situation is nicely described by E. Renan, \textit{Histoire générale et système comparé des langues sémitiques} (\textsuperscript{5}Paris 1878), 418/9.

\textsuperscript{13} As noted already long ago, this reconstructed Proto-Semitic ancestor was itself not uniform, but like any natural language will have consisted of different layers, periods and dialects. The concept of “Archaic Proto-Semitic” (as opposed to ordinary Proto Semitic) is prominent in the recent book of R. Hasselbach, \textit{Case in Semitic} (Oxford 2013), e.g. 6/7, 320, 325/6, 329ff.
two successive stages, Arabian and African respectively, of a single language. But recent classification proposals will have none of this: in some schemes of cutting the Semitic cake there is now no “South Semitic” at all, and ESA and Geez, far from being a single genetic entity, do not even belong to the same branches of the Semitic family, ESA being assigned to the new “Central Semitic” and Geez to “West Semitic”.

Or take the case of the language of Ebla, an ancient variety of Semitic discovered in the 1970s. How does the new Eblaite/Eblaitic fit into the old family tree? Well, the answer you get depends upon where you look. For example, in one rather frequently quoted book on Semitic languages Eblaite is called “Palaeosyrian” and belongs with Amorite and Ugaritic to a “North Semitic” branch. Against this, in the most recent classification that I have seen, there is no such branch as “North Semitic” and Eblaite is assigned to East Semitic as a variety of Akkadian.

This kind of thing does not inspire confidence. When scholars can reach such very different groupings of the same set of data, it is hard not to agree with the view of Polotsky, Edward’s revered mentor, that there are serious problems with the theoretical basis of the classificatory operation. One thing that is, however, pretty generally agreed is that linguistic relationship cannot be established by etymological guesswork based upon a few random similarities, but only by systematic correspondence of key grammatical features. In this context it is worth recalling that it was none other than Job Ludolf, the founding father of Ethiopian studies and acknowledged by Edward as “among the greatest Semitists of any period”, who over 300 years ago first insisted upon this principle, which he stated on several occasions.

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14. It may be of interest to recall that the notion of “Mittelsemitisch” (with Arabic as its only representative) was used by W. Schmidt, Die Sprachfamilien und Sprachenkreise der Erde (Heidelberg 1926), 62.

15. A.D. Rubin, A Brief Introduction to the Semitic Languages (Piscataway 2010), 6, 25.

16. E. Lipiński, Semitic Languages. Outline of a Comparative Grammar (Leuven 1997), 50. The term “palaeo-Canaanite” has also been used.


Ludolf’s early recognition, which was not to be properly implemented until the 19th century, is very much more than just a small methodological advance; it is nothing less than the basis of modern historical linguistics. As interest in Adamic, pre-Babel proto-languages increases, and palaeontological, long-range comparison today expands Afroasiatic into Eurasiatic, Nostratic and beyond, it is good to be reminded of the simple virtues of regular sound shifts and verifiable morphological correspondences.

Semiticity
When we look at the old Semitic languages, their shared Semitic character is plain to see; the family likeness stands out at once. Edward was fascinated by the fact and implications of what may be conveniently referred to as “Semiticity”. To us today the Semiticity of, for example, Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic in their classical forms is very obvious, so much so that no linguistic training is required to perceive it. But was it equally obvious in the ancient world, Edward asked, to the speakers of Semitic languages themselves? Did speakers of different Semitic dialects in the Biblical period understand each other? Did they even realize that they were speaking related languages? For example, to judge from the written remains, Hebrew and the contiguous Moabite look very similar indeed, but could Hebrews and Moabites necessarily communicate with ease? Edward supposed that in this case they could. But what about the greater distance between Hebrew and Aramaic? To what extent were these languages mutually intelligible? Were speakers of Hebrew and Aramaic in Biblical times conscious of their shared Semitic identity? These are difficult, and


20. Thus e.g. V. Thomsen, Geschichte der Sprachwissenschaft bis zum Ausgang des 19. Jahrhunderts, trans. H. Pollak (Halle 1927), 43/4 (where, however, Ludolf is not mentioned as the initiator of the principle).

21. The search for such connections is, of course, nothing new—there are hardly any two language groups in the world between which affinity has not been advocated by somebody or other. Beyond the confines of Hamito-Semitic (= Semitohamitisch, Afroasiatic, Afrasian, Afro-Semitic, Lisramic, Noachite etc.), Semitic has often been connected with Indo-European (and with Celtic in particular), while more adventurous suggestions have included the languages of the Americas and Polynesia. A highly significant and tireless figure in these endeavours was L. Reinisch (1832–1919), who already in his Der einheitliche Ursprung der Sprachen der alten Welt (Vienna 1873) proposed a common (African) origin for Hamito-Semitic (“Erythräisch”), Indo-European and the languages of Africa.
ultimately unanswerable questions. But they are well worth asking. Edward asked them when he wrote about “The knowledge of languages in the Old Testament”.

Comparative Semitic philology was born in response to the fact of related Semitic languages. The very existence of Semiticity demands an explanation. When and by whom was it first recognized that the languages we now call “Semitic” were genetically related to one another?

A few hints may be gleaned from the Greek and Latin writings of the early Church. When the North African St. Augustine (d. 430), commenting on Hebrew ‘Edom’, reports that edom means “blood” in Punic, this does not necessarily indicate any recognition of Hebrew and Punic as related. The Palestinian Epiphanius (d. 403), distinguishes Hebrew from Aramaic (“Syriac”), with both of which he was familiar, but says nothing about any possible connection between them. More precise information is available from the contemporary St. Jerome (d. 420). Jerome clearly affirms the affinity between the Hebrew and Aramaic which he had learnt in order to translate the Holy Scriptures into Latin. Jerome’s awareness, however, was not the instinctive awareness of a native, but the acquired awareness of a European outsider. He had learned Hebrew and Aramaic as an adult, in Syria and Palestine, when his mind was already formed, and he thus had, like us, the advantage of detached observation. He was also somehow aware of the connection, if only indirectly, between Hebrew and Punic. In his preface to Job, Jerome describes his second

22. Some interesting reflections are presented by I. Goldziher, Der Mythos bei den Hebräern (Leipzig 1876), 288-290.

23. Enarrationes in Psalmos ad Ps. 136:7 (PL xxxvii, col. 1772): Interpretatur autem, quantum dicunt qui illam linguam noverunt, Edom, Sanguis: nam et Punic Edom, sanguis dicitur. Cf., for example, P. Schröder, Die phönizische Sprache (Halle 1869), 90 n. 6; Th. Nöldeke, Neue Beiträge zur semitischen Sprachwissenschaft (Strassburg 1910), 118.


version, i.e. that made from the Hebrew, as not following any predecessor but made ex ipso hebraico arabicoque sermonem et interdum syro ..., here mentioning Hebrew, Arabic and Aramaic in the same breath.27

Among native speakers, the first recognition of Semiticity occurs, as far as I know, among the Jews. While both Biblical and Talmudic literature distinguish between Hebrew and Aramaic, different terms for the languages, e.g. לְשׁُוֹן מַכָּרָא versus לְשׁُוֹן תָּרָעָם, reveal nothing about any apprehended connection. On the other hand, the indiscriminate application of the term ἑβραϊστί etc. in the New Testament and Josephus to both languages may well bear witness to a perceived relationship between them; no clear details, however, are forthcoming. One imagines that the Targumists and Rabbinic sages must surely have noticed the similarity between their Hebrew and Aramaic and realized that it can hardly have been accidental, but explicit statements about the relationship are remarkably scarce. I can refer only to BT Pesahīm 87b, where there is a discussion about why Israel was exiled to Babylonia (and not elsewhere). According to R. Ḥanina this was because the Aramaic spoken in Babylonia was close to the Hebrew of the exiles: רבי חנינא אמר מפני שקרוב לשונם לשלון תורה “R. Ḥanina said: Because their language is close/related to the language of the Torah.”28 The implication, made explicit by Rashi, is that Hebrew-Aramaic linguistic kinship would ensure that knowledge of the Torah, according to divine plan, would not be lost in exile (וַלִּא תשתכּח תורה מָהַר and the Torah would not be forgotten among them quickly”).29 R. Ḥanina provides no further details and the seed he sowed bore no immediate issue.

Poenorum, qua Chaldaeeae vel Hebraeae similis est et syrae, non habeat genus neutrum, quoted by Renan, Histoire générale, 199 n. 3.

27. Further examples, from Eusebius, Basil and others, are given by M.F.J. Baasten, “A note on the history of ‘Semitic’”, in Hamlet on a Hill. Semitic and Greek Studies presented to Professor T. Muraoka on the Occasion of his Sixtieth Birthday, ed. M.F.J. Baasten & W. Th. van Peursen [= Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 118] (Leuven etc. 2003), 64/5. The collection and analysis of such statements among the ancients might well prove interesting.


Syriac writers too, in particular the translators of the Peshitta, must have perceived the kinship between their own language and Hebrew. If it is true that the development of the Syriac Massora owes much to its Jewish counterpart, considerable familiarity with Hebrew would seem to be implied. A little knowledge of Hebrew was either retained or acquired by certain later Syriac authors such as Jacob of Edessa (d. 708) and Ishoʿdad of Merv (9th cent.), but statements by them about any linguistic affinity seem to be both extremely rare and extremely vague.

One also supposes that Arabic-speaking translators such as Ḥunayn b. Ishāq (d. 873) in Iraq in the 9th century can hardly not have noticed the obvious similarity between Arabic and Syriac, into which languages they translated from Greek. Vague recognition of the general relationship between Arabic, Hebrew and Aramaic appears here and there in Arabic literature, e.g. al-Masʿūdī (d. 956), usually in the form of brief remarks made in the context of Biblical history, the dispersal of nations and the language of paradise. Considered, reasoned statements on the subject seem to be very rare. One of these is provided by Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064), in whose opinion Arabic, Hebrew and Aramaic (“Syriac”) had once been a single language that by a natural process of development had since split into three.

Since Ibn Ḥazm’s view is virtually unique (as far as I know) among Arab authors and it is improbable that he himself actually knew much Hebrew and Aramaic, he


31. A few details of Jacob’s Hebrew were given long ago by A. Merx, *Historia artis grammaticae apud Syros* (Leipzig 1889), 36. Whether his knowledge of Hebrew was comparable to that of Jerome, as suggested by A. Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur* (Bonn 1922), 248 may be doubted.

32. Instead of here listing relevant recent studies (especially by J.A. Lund, Y. Moss and A. Salvesen), I refer to a forthcoming article by R. Contini, “Aspects of linguistic thought in the Syriac exegetical tradition”, which the author kindly made available to me and in which the necessary details will be found. The article is due to be published by Peeters in the proceedings of the Duke University Syriac conference.

33. See *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, viii, 1007/8 s.v. ‘Sām’ [W.P. Heinrichs].


almost certainly received this notion from the Jews, among whom the Semiticity of
the three languages had meanwhile become common knowledge. It is known that Ibn
Ḥazm consulted with Jewish scholars. A Jewish source is particularly likely as Ibn
Ḥazm was an exceptionally broad-minded man (he also knew some Latin) and lived
during the golden age of Arabic and Hebrew culture in Spain, where such linguistic
information would have been freely available to anybody curious enough to seek it.
In fact he was from Cordoba, the cradle and centre of Jewish philology in Andalusia
(Hasdai b. Shapruṭ, Dunash b. Labraṭ, Menahem b. Saruq etc.). Cordoba was the home
town of Ibn Janāḥ (d. c. 1040) and (somewhat later) of Maimonides, both of whom
stated the genetic affinity of Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic in terms rather similar to
those used by Ibn Ḥazm. The same idea can be found in, for example, Judah ha-Levi
and Ibn Ezra. The relatedness of these three languages in fact became axiomatic
among mediaeval Arabic-speaking Jewish philologists. Indeed, it was the contact with
Arabic that proved the decisive catalyst in the recognition of their common origin.

The first to follow up the fact of genetic connection between the Semitic
languages was the North African Judah ibn Quraysh in the early 10th century, who
not only realized the relatedness of Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic, but turned the
comparison between them into a new branch of scholarship. He understood,
moreover, that similarity (tašābuḥ) and blend (imtizāj) between languages may be
cased by geographical proximity (qurb al-mujāwara fī al-bilād) as well as by common
origin (al-muqāraba fī al-nasab).36 The term al-muqāraba fī al-nasab “affinity of ancestry”)
is tantamount to saying that Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic are
all derived from Proto-Semitic. Ibn Quraysh did not attempt to identify further the
common origin he had deduced from his data. Attempts at reconstructing Proto-
Semitic (or parts of it) were not to begin until 1000 years later in the 19th century.

The mother tongue of Ibn Quraysh was Arabic, and as a learned Jew he was very
familiar, as a matter of course, with Hebrew and Aramaic too. He thus knew (in
different ways) three Semitic languages: Arabic he spoke and read and used in daily
life; Hebrew and Aramaic he knew (and knew very well) from prayer, liturgy and
books. This was an excellent position from which to start. He exploited his native
trilingual Semitic background as a source for Biblical exegesis, using roots of Aramaic
and Arabic to establish or refine the meanings of words in the Hebrew Bible. He used

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36. The passage in question appears in the edition of D. Becker, The Risāla
of Judah ben Quraysh (Tel-Aviv 1984), 117 [Hebrew].
Mishnaic Hebrew too (and occasionally even Berber). In doing so, he became the founder of comparative Semitic philology, or at least the first practitioner of the new art with a name, a book, a method, a deliberate purpose and a scholarly identity.37

III. Applied comparative Semitic philology

Thus far we have talked in general terms. It is now time to look at a few concrete examples of the comparative Semitic method applied to the text of the Hebrew Bible.

While Ibn Quraysh’s Risāla, written in Arabic, is the first systematic, organized application of the comparative method in Semitic lexicography, there are examples of it before him. Leaving aside possible embryonic Talmudic instances,38 I would like to mention here a couple of examples of the comparative Semitic method from the early Judaeo-Arabic world in order to show how the early mediaeval Arabic-speaking Jewish philologists sought to extract meaning from an often resistant Hebrew text. In their hands the relatedness of Hebrew to Aramaic and Arabic became an exegetical tool for interpreting the Bible.

Some very interesting examples are found in an anonymous ancient Judaeo-Arabic Bible glossary, from the 9th (or even the 8th) century, now housed in the Bodleian Library.39 This glossary contains selected words from the book of Ezekiel translated into Arabic. One of the entries is הַחֹדֶ֖רֶת of Ezekiel 21:19, where, with reference to a sword, we read הַחֹדֶ֖רֶת לָהֶֽם, translated by the AV (21:14) as “(it is the sword ...) which entereth into their privy chambers”.

To the (Israeli) Hebrew reader of today, Ezekiel’s הַחֹדֶ֖רֶת presents no problem. To him it is instinctively obvious that it means “to penetrate”, along the lines of AV “which entereth”, for חד’׳ר ל + ח׳ץ “to penetrate sth.” is a common Modern Hebrew verb

37. For further details on Ibn Quraysh and the philology of this period see A. Maman, Comparative Semitic Philology in the Middle Ages (Leiden—Boston 2004); J.M. Delgado, La semitística comparada en Alandalús (Zaragoza 2006); I. Eldar, תורת הלשון העברית בימי הביניים. האסכולה האנדלוסית = Hebrew Language Study in Medieval Spain (Jerusalem 2014) [Hebrew].

38. Some of the exegetical suggestions of R. Levi (פתי etc.) may presuppose relatedness between Hebrew and the speech of “Arabia”; this, however, is not made explicit.

39. Bodl. Heb. e105.4-8. The full text will shortly be published, together with other old glossaries, by J. Blau & S. Hopkins.
which everybody knows. But this ostensibly transparent interpretation is not among the three possibilities suggested by our old Judaeo-Arabic author. To him, writing well over 1000 years ago, the meaning of התודר was not obvious at all. And one well understands his predicament, for the verb חד״ר occurs in the Hebrew Bible only here.

So what does our ancient exegete do? First of all, he does not adopt the modern idea that the text must have only one meaning; he is quite happy to suggest three. Let us have a quick look at his three proposals and try to understand the linguistic reasoning behind them.

Ezekiel 21:19

AV (21:14) “(it is the sword ...) which entereth into their privy chambers”.

(i) The verb희ד is a hapax legomenon. There are, therefore, no other Biblical Hebrew occurrences with which to compare it. On the other hand, the root does occur in Aramaic, where it is rather common and means “to turn, return, go around”. If this is the meaning in Aramaic, “to turn” may well be valid for Hebrew too. Accordingly, our glossator translates this meaning into Arabic as دائره and this, in Hebrew letters, is what appears as first choice in his glossary. Here he attributes to the scarce Hebrew root the meaning that that root has in Aramaic.

(ii) But that root, or something resembling it, exists in Arabic too. Perhaps the Arabic meaning is what Ezekiel intended? The Arabic xdr means, among other things, “to lurk” and the second gloss offered is to be interpreted as الخادرة, in all likelihood with the sense “the one which lurks”.

(iii) Having given one exegetical option based on Aramaic (“which turns”) and another on Arabic (“which lurks”), our anonymous author now turns to Hebrew. Perhaps Hebrew itself will provide a clue? The verb חד״ר does not, as we have

40. Syriac hdr, BT hdr, e.g. הדרן lit. “we have returned” > Israeli Hebrew חד״ר “an encore”.
mentioned, occur elsewhere in the Bible. The sequence *ḥrd*, however, does. It is in frequent use and means “to terrify”, so perhaps it may be legitimate to take Ezekiel’s *חרד* in the same sense? The assumption is that the sequence of what we would call the second and third root consonants does not really matter. If, therefore, *חרד* means “to terrify”, the same may also be true of its metathetical twin *חדּוּר*. Hence the translation > Arabic النازعة. This interpretation is based on inner-Hebrew resources only.

We see, therefore, that our author uses the possibilities offered by three Semitic languages in order to make sense of the Biblical text. Note that in the wake of *חדּוּר* itself all three of his glosses have the shape of a feminine singular active participle of the first verbal stem—it is always good to keep to the Hebrew form as much as possible.

אִבְחַת־חָ֑רֶב
Ezekiel 21:20
Our glossary’s treatment of the following verse in Ezekiel is no less interesting. In Ezekiel 21:20 there occurs the expression אִבְחַת־חָ֑רֶב. Many modern Israelis know this expression. They have heard it, or read it, and may even use it, but they do not know exactly what it means. This is because nobody knows exactly what it means. The word אִבְחָה*, אֲבָחָה* occurs only in construct with חֶרֶב “sword” in the fixed combination אִבְחָה חֶרֶב. Again, it is a *hapax legomenon* in the language, all subsequent occurrences in Hebrew literature going back to this verse in Ezekiel, which runs: נָתַּתִּי אִבְחַת־חָ֑רֶב, translated by the AV (21:15) “I have set the point of the sword against all their gates”.

While חֶרֶב “sword” is a very well-known word, for the unique אִבְחָה we can do little more than guess at its meaning from the context. Beside “the point of the sword” of the AV, various other meanings have been assigned to this combination—“slaughter of the sword”, 41 “brandishing of the sword”, “blow of the sword”, “thrust of the sword”, “flash of the sword”, “fear of the sword”—but all these are more or less suitable guesses, no one of them really having any advantage over any other. In the absence of any parallel, the only way to tilt the balance in favour of a particular interpretation is to provide a plausible etymology in support. This is precisely what

41. LXX σφάγια ῥοµφαίας seems to reflect אִבְחָה חֶרֶב (יה).
some of the early Jewish exegetes strove to do. Again, our glossator offers three interpretations. Let us see how he arrived at them.

Ezekiel 21:20

AV (21:15) “I have set the point of the sword against all their gates”.

(uda’aw = עֲדוֹאָה “enmity”

(du’ar = דּוֹעֵר “fright”

(ayhah = אֱיָפָה “license”

(i) The first interpretation offered is “enmity”, Arabic عدواة. How was this meaning reached? To understand this we must realize that our author lived before the discovery of the triliteral Semitic root which we in our studies take for granted and according to which our dictionaries are arranged. For him two root consonants were sufficient. His etymological conceptions revolved around the biliteral base. The biliteral base is here provided by the first two consonants of the word אִבְחַת, viz. א״ב. Now this is the biliteral base of better attested Hebrew words such as יֵבוֹא and אֵיבָה. If אויב and איבה contain the biliteral base b and mean “enemy” and “enmity” respectively, then (so the reasoning goes) the same meaning may be assigned to אִבְחַת as well. Hence the Arabic translation عدواة “enmity”.

(ii) That our glossator’s etymological conception really is biliteral is strongly suggested by the second interpretation he offers. The second gloss explains אִבְחַת as “fright”, in Arabic ذعر. This is reached by isolating the biliteral base at the end of the word, viz. ח״ת. This combination is present in Biblical words such as חית. Accordingly, the same meaning may be present in אִבְחַת too, in which case Arabic ذعر is a very suitable translation—indeed it translates חית in other ancient Judaeo-Arabic texts as well.42

(iii) Having given interpretations according to the biliteral bases b and h at the beginning and at the end of the word respectively, our author now turns to base b in

42. The existence of the acoustically similar ובשת naturally favoured this interpretation, the more so as ובשת and חית may occur together in a single verse (Job 7:14); for further details see P. Wechter, Ibn Barun’s Arabic Works on Hebrew Grammar and Lexicography (Philadelphia 1964), 191 n. 333.
the middle of אִבְחַת. With ה and חת he reached his interpretations on the basis of Hebrew alone: the beginning of אִבְחַת resembles אֶבָּחָה and may therefore mean “enmity”; the end of אִבְחַת resembles חִתּית and may therefore mean “fright”. But with his third proposal, he does not look for other words containing bḥ in Hebrew, but crosses the language boundary and turns to Arabic. There he finds the word אֶבֶּחָה. For us the root of this Arabic word is triliteral bwh (IV), but for the author of our glossary the biliteral base bḥ is quite sufficient. The meaning intended is “authorization, license”, i.e. free rein (to use the sword).

The rendering of Hebrew אִבְחַת by the phonetically similar Arabic אֶבֶּחָה is extremely interesting. It shows that for our author it is a matter of indifference whether the biliteral base bḥ occurs in a Hebrew or an Arabic word. We may add Aramaic too. To him the distinction is immaterial. What occurs in one Semitic language can for exegetical purposes be transferred to another and the Biblical text thus made to reveal its meaning.

After these early starts in comparative philology, the exploitation of Aramaic and Arabic became, in the wake of Ibn Quraysh, a regular exegetical tool for the explanation of difficult Biblical vocabulary. The use of the method, however, proved to be a sensitive issue within mediaeval Jewry and gave rise to bitter ideological disputes. The appeal to other languages (especially to Arabic, the vehicle of Islam) in order to elucidate the Biblical text seemed in some quarters to demean the status and impugn the integrity of the Holy Tongue. While some exegetes regarded the common Semitic heritage as a general license to interpret obscure (or even not so obscure) Hebrew words in the light of Aramaic or Arabic, others either restricted the legitimacy of the comparative method to particularly opaque cases or were ideologically opposed to it altogether. Thus, while, for example, the Karaite lexicographer David b. Abraham al-Fāsī willingly and frequently admitted that there are many words in the Hebrew Bible which receive their plain interpretation from Aramaic and Arabic, Dunash recommended that recourse to the philological method

43. Cf. Wechter, op. cit., 61/2, where אֶבֶּחָה (X) is the preferred translation.

44. E.g. the hapax legomenon אֲחַטֶּנָּה Gen. 31:39 is said to be an Arabic word from the root חָט “to put”. The verbal root ʿrq occurs only twice in the Bible: Job 30:3, 17. Al-Fāsī tells us that the first occurrence means “flee” in accordance with Aramaic (“Targum”), while the second is to be understood “veins” after the Arabic (the same two interpretations of ʿrq are given by Saadiah Gaon ad loc.). See S.L. Skoss
should be had under duress only (i.e. when Hebrew itself provided no clue to the meaning) and Menaḥem objected to any use of Arabic on principle.

With the passing of the golden age of Judaeo-Arabic civilization and the rise of Biblical learning outside the orbit of Arabic in the lands of central Europe, the important achievements of mediaeval Biblical philology fell into oblivion until rediscovered by modern scholarship. It is worth noting that many of the etymological combinations suggested in the Middle Ages by Arabic-speaking Jewish exegetes such as Ibn Janāḥ and Ibn Barun have been proposed independently by modern scholars unaware of the work of their mediaeval predecessors. The comparative Semitic method practised by these mediaeval Jewish philologists matches exactly that still used by modern Biblical lexicographers and exegetes. It is described in J. Barr’s *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* (Oxford 1968), of which Edward wrote a detailed review.

IV. Ethiopia and the Bible (1968)

Let us now turn to the Bible in Ethiopia, the subject of Edward’s 1967 Schweich Lectures. *Ethiopia and the Bible* [pl. 2] contains a chapter on Bible translations into Ethiopian languages. In his treatment of the Bible in Geez Edward was mainly interested in tracing the antecedent stages which resulted in that translation, viz. the identity of the Greek Vorlage from which the Ethiopic version was made, by whom the work was done and when. I should like to take a brief look here at the subsequent development of the text and illustrate a point or two from its later history.

The passage I wish to discuss occurs in the story of the pious midwives in the first chapter of Exodus, where in verses 20-21 we read:

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45. Thus expressly J. Barth, *Wurzeluntersuchungen zum hebräischen und aramäischen Lexicon* (Leipzig 1902), iii.


47. Research into these matters was carried further by M.A. Knibb, *Translating the Bible. The Ethiopic Version of the Old Testament* = The Schweich Lectures of the British Academy 1995 (Oxford 1999). This book is dedicated to E.U.
Exodus 1:20-21

AV “[20] Therefore God dealt well with the midwives: and the people multiplied, and waxed very mighty.

[21] And it came to pass, because the midwives feared God, that he made them houses.”

The transmission history of this latter verse in Ethiopia is of considerable interest, but the problems involved began long before its translation into Geez. The words of the Hebrew at the end of v. 21 seem pretty straightforward and the AV’s “he made them houses” renders them perfectly, but one is nevertheless entitled to wonder what they actually mean. The three words present three questions of exegesis: (i) Who is the subject of the verb “to make”? (ii) For whom was it done? (iii) What kind of “houses” are meant? In other words, who made what and for whom? Nothing here is fully clear.

Reading the Hebrew text, the obvious subject of וַיַּשַּׂ לָהֶם בָּתִּים would seem to be God, and thus the verse is normally understood. But from a formal point of view the subject of the masculine singular verb וַיַּשַּׂ could equally well be Pharaoh, and indeed according to some mediaeval Jewish exegetes (Rashbam, Tosafists) it was Pharaoh, not God, who made the houses in question. While there is marginal evidence for the singular in Greek too (ἐποίησεν “he made”), the LXX here has the plural “they made”: ἐποίησαν ἑαυταῖς οἰκίας. But who made? The plural Greek verb ἐποίησαν may of itself be either masculine or feminine. Theoretically the “people” of the preceding verse could be considered, but the feminine plural reflexive ἑαυταῖς (< לָהֶם [masc.!]) makes it pretty clear that the intended subject of the verb here are the “midwives”.

In Dillmann’s edition of the Geez translation48 we read as follows:

Since the Geez Old Testament was translated from (some form of) the LXX it naturally has the plural here too. But Geez, unlike Greek, distinguishes between masculine and

feminine in the plural of the verb and is therefore able to indicate precisely who is meant. Whereas the Greek ἐποίησαν “they made” is neutral, the Ethiopic ከፅ is explicitly feminine. The last two words ከፅ : እንፋት (without the reflexive pronoun) can only be translated as “they (f. pl.) made houses”. Those who made the houses in the Ethiopic version are therefore not God, nor Pharaoh, nor the people, but the midwives. This interpretation is also found in early Jewish sources, namely in the Palestinian Targum tradition.\(^\text{49}\) Its presence here in Ethiopia raises interesting questions of translation history and channels of exegesis.

However that may be, I am more concerned here with the “houses”. In Dillmann’s eclectic edition the word is spelled እንፋት as expected, opening with እ alif and followed by ከ b in the sixth order, i.e. abyāta. In the later edition of the Geez text by Boyd (1911), however, made according to the Paris MS,\(^\text{50}\) we read here ... የሔጋ ከፅ : እንፋት. Here the midwives are again the subject of “they made”, but the “houses” have changed their spelling and are now written with ፊ y̱n o not with alif እ.\(^\text{51}\) What is more, the vowelless sixth order ከ b here appears as third order ከ bi with the vowel i. This is not just a chance eccentricity, for the word recurs in exactly this spelling in an indigenous Ethiopian Octateuch printed recently in Addis Ababa where we have የሔጋ : እንፋት.\(^\text{52}\) It is, therefore, a genuine part of the Ethiopian tradition. But this እንፋት looks like a different word altogether. What is it and what does it mean?

In the interpretation of ይን ያ ይ “houses” in our verse Jewish tradition waivered between actual physical buildings and metaphorical houses, viz. dynasties, families of priests, Levites and kings. Ethiopian readers also wondered what sort of houses these might have been. The Ethiopians reached their own conclusion.

There can be no doubt that the original Ethiopic translation here had እንፋት abyāta, spelled as in Dillmann’s scholarly edition. እንፋት is in accordance with the Greek LXX (ὁίκιας), the Hebrew MT (בָּתִּֽים) and is the normal Ethiopic word for

\(\text{49. Cf. A. Geiger, Uurschrift und Uebersetzungen der Bibel (Breslau 1857), 464.}\)

\(\text{50. J.O. Boyd, The Octateuch in Ethiopic, according to the text of the Paris codex ..., ii, Exodus and Leviticus (Leyden—Princeton, N.J. 1911).}\)

\(\text{51. The variant እንፋት is recorded in the apparatus of ed. Boyd from several MSS.}\)

\(\text{52. እንፋት : እንፋት : የሔጋ : እንፋት : እንፋት : እንፋት (ትፋ እንፋት : እንፋት : እንፋት : እንፋት : እንፋት : እንፋት). Note that this version reads የሔጋ “he made” (m. sg.) and includes የሔ እን ያ “to them” (f. pl.), i.e. the equivalent of the Hebrew_COMMAND : የሔን ያ ይ እን ያ (መ እን ያ ካ እ ካ ካ ካ). የሔጋ : እንፋት is recorded among the variants of both ed. Dillmann (Apparatus Criticus 68) and ed. Boyd from MS Frankfurt (C).}\)
“houses”. No philologist would think of any other reading here. But philology is one thing; practical understanding is another.

In late Geez and in the successor Ethiopian languages the consonant ‘ayn disappeared and merged in pronunciation with alif, with the result that in Ethiopic MSS great orthographic confusion reigns, so much so that to a large extent either etymological consonant may be spelled with the sign for the other. The appearance of ḏ ‘ayn in place of expected Ṽ alif is not exceptional. But the matter does not end there. In place of Dillmann’s vowelless ḏ b sādas in the sixth order, both Boyd’s edition and the native print give Ṽ b sālas, the third order vowel. The doubly curious spelling of such a common word as “houses”, which any Ethiopian scribe would know how to write, gives one pause, especially as there exists another very common Ethiopic word, Ṽabi(y) “great”, which really is spelled with Ṽ and ḏ, and whose plural is indeed Ṽabi(y)t exactly as we have here.53

One cannot resist the thought that native Ethiopian readers, puzzled by the unexpected “houses”, began at some stage to understand this Biblical verse according to the ear rather than the eye, and, seduced by the similarity/homophony of primary abyāt (byt—broken plural of Ṽy) and secondary *abi(y)āt > ʿabyāt > abyāt (by—sound fem. plural of Ṽy), instinctively took the word in the meaning “great things”. A phonetic accident, viz. the loss of ‘ayn from the Ethiopian sound system, thus paved the way to a quite new interpretation. This was made all the easier by the context, for the preceding verse 20 states that “God dealt well with the midwives”—surely, then, it was natural that he might reward them with “great things”. Once understood as “great things”, the spelling followed suit to match the new understanding and Ṽabi(y)t became Ṽabi(y).t.

That this is not a mere quirk of orthography, but a genuine exegetical fact, is proved by the native Ethiopian print of the Octateuch which I mentioned earlier. This print, published in Addis Ababa in 1994 A.M. = 2001-2002 A.D. [pl. 3], is extremely valuable and of the greatest interest. Unlike the critical editions of Dillmann and Boyd, which were prepared for the use of European Semitists and Biblical scholars, the Addis Ababa Octateuch is an internal publication of the Ethiopian clergy and has a very practical purpose. Opposite the Geez text (which differs from that of both Dillmann and Boyd), in a parallel column, it contains an Amharic translation. Now

53. Since the third order vowel i before y is dissimilated > sixth order i/ø (F. Praetorius, Aethiopische Grammatik [Leipzig 1886], §18, where Ṽiyo > Ṽiø is mentioned), an inverse spelling Ṽbyā i ø > biyā i ø is a conceivable (but unlikely) possibility here.
this Amharic translation is not just a reprint of an existing Amharic version, such as that of the official Haile Selassie ‘Emperor’ Bible. It is an independent, indigenous production, uninfluenced by Western Biblical scholarship and made without reference to European translations. This traditional Amharic version ( naïtalā tərgum ከማለ ከተርጉም) shows us how the Ethiopian priests actually understand the Geez, which died out as a spoken language some 1000 years ago. The Amharic equivalent of ወገብረ ወን ዎቢያተ tālāllāq nagar adarragalāččaw “he did for them (very) great things”. The meaning is now explicit. We have thus come full circle: the “houses” really have become “great things”, not only in pronunciation and orthography, but also in meaning and understanding:55

Ethiopian Octateuch (Addis Ababa 1994 A.M.)

Geez [፳] እስመ ወአሠነየ፡እግዚአብሔር፡ለመወልዳት ። ወመጽኡ፡ሕዝብ፡ወ器件፡ስለ፡ፈርሃሁ፡ሆእግዚአብሔር፡መወልዳት፡ወገብረ፡ሎን፡ዐቢያተ ።

Amharic [፳] እግዚአብሔርም፡ለአዋላጆቹ፡በጎ፡ነገር፡አደረገላቸው፡በዙ፡እጅግም፡ጸኑ፡ጥቀ፡እስመ፡ፈሩት፡ታላላቅ፡ነገር፡አደረገላቸው ።

This case illustrates very nicely two different types of “knowledge of languages”, viz. the acquired knowledge of the scholar versus the instinctive knowledge of the native; the outside understanding of the learned critic versus the inside understanding of the indigenous reader. The contrast between the two types of knowledge is of course not peculiar to Ethiopia; it applies no less to other traditional Semitic (and non-Semitic) cultures too. It is an observable fact, for example, that an orthodox Jew may well be very learned in the content of this or that Talmudic tractate, but is unlikely to have any accurate knowledge of the phonology, morphology or syntax of the Aramaic in which the text is written. Grammar is not part of the traditional Jewish curriculum; what is important is understanding what the text is about.

54. The Amharic sometimes reflects a Geez original slightly different from that which appears in the opposite column. Our verse is a case in point. Whereas the Geez (similarly to Boyd’s edition) ends with a co-ordinate clause “and he did them great things”, the Amharic (with Dillmann’s Geez text rather than that printed in the parallel column) specifies a causal connection: “and because the midwives feared God, he did them great things”. This, however, does not affect the lexical matter at issue here.

55. The “great things” የአልበት ከየር (የእርግርበት) here in v. 21 are parallel to the “good things” ከየር (የእርግርበት) which God did to the midwives in v. 20.
I am reminded of an anecdote told about William Robertson Smith and Solomon Schechter, two outstanding students of Semitic civilization, who were good friends and colleagues at Christ’s College here in Cambridge in the 1890s. Their knowledge of Hebrew was of very different kinds—acquired at different stages of life, by different means and for different purposes. Robertson Smith asked Schechter one day why it was that Hebrew scholars did not know Hebrew grammar. Schechter replied: “You Christians know Hebrew grammar. We know Hebrew. I think we need not be dissatisfied with the division”.56 There is a great deal of truth in Schechter’s characterization: the Christian outsider could identify the Hebrew roots, parse the words and construe the sentences; the Jewish insider could instinctively understand the text.

A case such as “houses” coming to be understood as “great things” in the Ethiopian tradition not only contrasts inside versus outside understanding. It also raises questions of principle. What should an editor of the Ethiopic Bible print here? He knows very well that the original reading was “houses” as required by the Greek and the Hebrew, and surely the editor of what is called a “critical edition” has no choice but to edit what he knows to be the genuine primary reading? On the other hand, this primary reading, historically correct though it may be, no longer has any validity for the native reader, who now reads, writes and understands the word as “great things”. The philologist’s meaning and the practical meaning are in conflict; the intention of the author and the understanding of the reader do not coincide. The editor of a traditional Semitic text, especially a Biblical text, will sometimes have to ask himself what exactly is he editing, what stage of transmission does he wish to reflect and for whom is he doing it?

Textual truth has different levels. For example, some moderns have attempted to reconstruct the original Hebrew Pentateuch, but such a proto-Pentateuch (if such a thing existed at all) was certainly very different from the first Hebrew text for which we have any (indirect) evidence, viz. that which lay before the translators of the LXX in the 3rd cent. B.C. The earliest actual MSS of the Hebrew Bible found among the Dead Sea Scrolls show a text which differs from the Vorlage of the LXX; the hebraica veritas so prized by St. Jerome in turn differed from that in use among the Dead Sea community at Qumran, and the later vocalized and accented Massoretic Text of our current printed Bibles even more so. So it was with the Ethiopic Bible too. The

intention of the the original translator(s) into Geez, who wrote “houses”, and the interpretation of the later Ethiopian monks, who understood “great things”, are simply not the same. Both may described as “correct”, but their correctness is of different kinds.

V. Semitic philology since the 1930s

I should like to approach the end of this talk with a few reflections about changes which have taken place in the study of Semitic languages since Edward was a student, comparing the world of Semitic studies which he came to know in the 1930s with that of today.

We cannot say exactly how many Semitic languages there are, but however we arrive at a number it is quite certain that more of them are known now than when Edward began his career. New revelations come to light all the time. When Edward was a student, a new Semitic language had just been unearthed and deciphered: Ugaritic. It was already being taught at the Hebrew University.

Since then we have witnessed the discovery and publication of, for example, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Bar Kokhba letters, Punic texts in (Greek and) Latin letters (“Latino-Punic”), the enigmatic Deir ‘Allā text, the Ebla tablets (several thousand of them), the bilingual Tell Fekherye inscription in a previously unknown type of Aramaic, collections of Egyptian Aramaic papyri from Hermopolis and Saqqāra, hundreds of East Aramaic magic bowls from Late Antiquity, the unique Giv’at ha-Mivtar Aramaic inscription in palaeo-Hebrew script, a recent addition to the Samalian corpus (the Katanuwa inscription discovered in 2008), new documentation of pre-Islamic Arabic in Nabataean script from En ‘Avdat and in Sabaean script from Qaryat al-Faw and many non-Arabic epigraphic finds from the Arabian peninsula, including now a large corpus of remarkable documents in cursive Sabaean. To cap it all, there has recently been published what seems to be the earliest evidence of any kind of Semitic language which has come down to us, competing in age with Old Akkadian and Eblaite: “proto-Canaanite” serpent spells from the 3rd millennium B.C., written in Egyptian hieroglyphs.57 While all these discoveries have been taking place, a revolution in the study of post-Biblical Hebrew, Jewish Aramaic and Judaeo-Arabic had been made possible by the manuscript treasures of the Cairo Geniza.

57. R.C. Steiner, Early Northwest Semitic Serpent Spells in the Pyramid Texts (Winona Lake 2011).
Such materials are known to us mainly through archaeological excavation and they reveal ancient languages of the classical Semitic type, written in ways that hide from us much of the information (especially phonological information) which we should dearly like to know. At the other end of the scale we have the modern Semitic languages of living speech, collected by field work from the lips of native speakers and presented to us in full phonetic transcription.

These modern, spoken languages, which we may conveniently lump together as “Neo-Semitic”, enjoy a huge advantage over the fragmentary, partially known dead Semitic languages of history: they are complete languages which in principle can be completely known. With an ancient language such as Ugaritic we can only know what happens to be preserved in a not very extensive corpus. And even that we may not know very well; we often do not know what the words mean and never what they sounded like. There is nobody to ask. But with a Neo-Semitic language there is somebody to ask. Edward was very much aware of this discrepancy between the scantily documented written languages of antiquity and the complete spoken languages of today. In a famous paper, which provided the title for his first volume of collected studies, he asked “Is Biblical Hebrew a Language?”, 58 by which he meant: is the Hebrew which chance has preserved in the Bible a language in the full sense of the word, i.e. does it contain enough resources to serve as a communicative instrument by means of which daily life could be conducted in a fluent, efficient manner? This is certainly a very good question.

The exiguousness of our ancient sources is of course a serious drawback to progress. This is partially responsible for the (in my view undeserved) reputation that Semitic philology sometimes has of being a rather backward subject. When we do not understand an ancient passage in, for example, ESA or Nabataean it may not in fact be our fault—we often simply do not have enough information and can only guess as best we can. For the provision of data we are at the mercy of historical accident. But if we don’t understand a certain feature of Mehri, Tigrinya or Maltese, it very likely is our fault. But in such a case the matter can be put right. Here, in principle, we should not be reduced to a state of guesswork, at least not to a permanent state of guesswork. The Neo-Semitic languages permit of documentation far more detailed than the dead languages of antiquity. In Biblical Hebrew not all the grammatical

inflections are attested; in Israeli Hebrew there are none which are unknown. The morphology of Biblical Aramaic inevitably contains many blanks and starred forms; in Neo-Aramaic there are (or should be) no gaps in any paradigm.

When we look at the changes that have taken place in the study of Semitic languages since Edward was a student, that which strikes me as the most generally significant is the greatly increased awareness of, and research into the Neo-Semitic languages. Emphasis today is no longer so firmly upon the classical literary and epigraphic documents of antiquity. We may greet this as a very welcome (and very necessary) development. The shift of emphasis is reflected in recent books on the subject. For example, in a survey of the field published in 1997 nine chapters are devoted to Old Semitic, followed by ten on Modern Semitic. Similarly, in a recent introduction to Semitic languages, the contribution of Neo-Semitic is deliberately highlighted and more than half(!) of the examples adduced in the book are from modern languages, including such exotic tongues as Qaraqosh Neo-Aramaic, the African Arabic of Chad and the Gurage varieties Wolane and Z(w)ay, languages which only a few years ago were virtually or completely unknown. Semitic philology is changing. It has a promising future. And there is much work to do. If one has to identify a single major development in the study of Semitic philology during Edward’s lifetime, I suppose it would be the greater prominence now accorded to the modern spoken members of the Semitic family.

One of these modern spoken members is Israeli Hebrew, a new, dynamic addition to the Semitic family; so new, in fact, that before the 20th century it did not even exist. The emergence and growth of Israeli Hebrew took place largely within Edward’s lifetime and in it he took a lively interest. He regarded it as “one of the most genuinely creative accomplishments of our time.” This Israeli Hebrew, despite the huge weight of history bearing down upon it, is constantly developing in new directions away from the classical, especially Biblical models. This prompted Edward to wonder whether Isaiah, revived from the dead and familiar with the square Hebrew

60. Rubin, *A Brief Introduction*.
script, would have been able to understand the modern *Ha’arets* (sic) newspaper. His conclusion was that Isaiah would have been able to grasp the general gist of an article on a fairly neutral subject, particularly if he had access to a good modern dictionary. But Edward added that were the resuscitated Isaiah exposed to *Ha’arets* through the ear rather than the eye, he would probably not have recognized the language as Hebrew at all. The historical orthography of Israeli Hebrew indeed reflects the pronunciation to only a rather limited extent and makes the language look much more conservative than it actually is. This is a lesson we should bear in mind when judging ancient Semitic languages too, e.g. Hebrew and Moabite, which may have been far more distinct from each other than the orthography reveals.

The distance between the Hebrew of today and the Hebrew of yesteryear is increasing all the time, so much so that Edward’s fellow student at the Hebrew University, E.Y. Kutscher, asked “Is Israeli Hebrew still Hebrew?” Many Israelis are not comfortable reading Hebrew even of the fairly recent past, finding it strange, stilted and in places even unintelligible. For this reason many European classics, e.g. Shakespeare’s plays, *Wuthering Heights* (אנקת גבהים), *Three Men in a Boat* (שלושה בסירה אחת), *Madame Bovary* (מאדאם בובארי) or *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (הקוסם מארץ עוץ) are now being retranslated; the Hebrew translations of 50 years ago (or less) are sometimes no longer read with pleasure.

But the retranslation of foreign works in accordance with the altered linguistic climate is one thing; tampering with original Hebrew writings is quite another. There has recently appeared (and been used in some Israeli schools) a parallel Bible in which the traditional text appears in one column and opposite it in another column a rendering into Israeli Hebrew. At least the Massoretic Text here remains intact.


65. anus תְּנִךְ וּדְרָי (Herzliya—Tel Aviv 2010ff.). Two volumes have so far appeared (Torah, Former Prophets). It remains to be seen whether this educational experiment will ever be more than an unfinished curiosity.

66. A parallel is offered by the ‘Shakespeare Made Easy’ series, where Shakespeare’s text and a simplified modern version appear in a single opening on opposite pages.
Other original Hebrew writings, e.g. of Bialik and Leah Goldberg, have not fared so well.

One of Bialik’s poems for children has recently been published in a lavish new edition, an illustrated edition which contains a certain major textual amendment. This amendment concerns the word בֻלבוס, which in Bialik’s pre-modern Hebrew means “potato”. This word has an interesting history. בֻלבוס, especially the plural בֻלבסין, occurs as a loanword in old Jewish sources in various botanical senses, some of which derive from Greek/Latin βολβός/bulbus. A related word, בַּולבָּה bulba etc., is used in Slavic languages in the meaning “potato” and from here it reached Yiddish. In certain Yiddish dialects בּוּלֶבֵש bávels, pl. בּוּלֶבֶס bávels is the usual word for “potato”. When in the 19th century haskala Hebrew writers of East European background needed to express “potato” in Hebrew, they adopted the already existing Hebrew הבּוֹסלב (ו)סובל and attributed to it its Yiddish sense. Bialik thus used it as “potato” in one of his nursery rhymes. But in this meaning did not survive into Israeli Hebrew, which has a different equivalent for “potato”, namely תפוח אדמה, calqued upon ‘Erdapfel’. Accordingly, the Israeli child (and parent, and grandparent) of today is unlikely to know the word הבּוֹסלב = “potato”, which nobody uses. And so Bialik’s poem has now been reissued without it. The verse containing בֻלבוס has simply been removed, censored out of existence. The new “improved” version, instead of the 13 stanzas which Bialik wrote and which many Israelis grew up with, now has only 12.

Edward did not approve of many of the changes happening today in modern varieties of Hebrew; they jarred on his eye and ear, which were accustomed to the chaste classical norms. He would have been appalled by the sight of the hallowed Massoretic Text rewritten in simplified reader-friendly Israeli Hebrew. And he would have deplored the notion of Bialik’s poems being doctored in order to make their language and content more acceptable. But such things are inevitable and, whether we like it or not, they reflect reality. When Bialik wrote his nursery rhyme (in this case in the early 1930s) very few people spoke Hebrew and the language as a whole would have been somewhat unfamiliar. Today the situation is just the opposite: everybody speaks Hebrew and the Israeli child will get on well enough with the poem except for that strange “potato”. The fate of Bialik’s diaspora “potato” is in fact a very
clear proof of the extraordinary vitality of Israeli Hebrew, a truly living modern Semitic language.\(^{69}\)

If Israeli Hebrew diverges from its ancestral models, this is even more so of the other Neo-Semitic languages: colloquial Arabic dialects, Maltese, Neo-Aramaic in all its astonishing variety, Modern South Arabian and Ethio-Semitic across the Red Sea in the Horn of Africa. In all these areas additions to the fund of data made over the last few decades have been enormous.

Earlier documentation of partially known languages has been significantly expanded. For example, for the exceptionally interesting Aramaic dialect of MaꜤlūla and the vicinity we now have more than four volumes of first-class transcribed texts, a new grammar and a teaching book at our disposal, with a large dictionary on the way; similar is the position for Mehri, virtually neglected since the great Vienna South Arabian Expedition at the end of the 19th century. These languages are not mere marginal curiosities, but vitally important: the language of MaꜤlūla is the only survivor of the Western Aramaic spoken in Syria,\(^ {70} \) Galilee and Palestine in New Testament times, and Mehri belongs to the only branch of the family which preserves intact the three unvoiced “sibilant” consonants s, ś, š of Proto-Semitic.

But MaꜤlūla Aramaic and Mehri had been known to Semitic philology for over a hundred years before the recent upsurge of interest in Neo-Semitic documentation. Other Neo-Semitic languages and dialects, on the other hand, are entirely or virtually new. All of these are vulnerable, most of them endangered, often critically; some (e.g. the Ethiopian Gafat) have already expired,\(^ {71} \) and others (e.g. the Neo-Aramaic of Barzan) are very shortly to follow suit.\(^ {72} \) We are reminded of the late Lonesome

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\(^{69}\) There is, however, more here than meets the eye. The obsolescence of בּלוּבֶם “potato”, while true enough as a linguistic fact, is actually not the real reason for the change; other obsolete forms and usages are allowed to stand unaltered in the new version of Bialik’s nursery rhyme. A stronger, non-linguistic factor is at work here. The real problem is that Bialik’s personified potato is a pauper (בלבוס האביון “Potato the Pauper”), whose participation in the vegetable dance may on account of his lowly status (במחילה) have been unwelcome—political correctness at the publishing house is unable to tolerate any such implication and thus the whole verse has disappeared. At the same time Bialik’s children’s poem has been given a different title.

\(^{70}\) After the capture and pillage of MaꜤlūla during the civil war in Syria, the fate of this remarkable language and its dispersed speakers is now in the balance.

\(^{71}\) W. Leslau found only four surviving speakers of Gafat in 1947. None have been reported since.

\(^{72}\) The imminent demise of the Neo-Aramaic of Barzan and the neighbouring villages is described by H. Mutzafi, “Two texts in Barzani Jewish Neo-Aramaic”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African*
George of Pinta Island [pl. 4]. Lonesome George died in 2012, and with his death the subspecies Pinta Island Tortoise (*Chelonoidis nigra abingdonii*) became extinct.

The analogy of endangered languages with the endangered species of the natural sciences is somehow appropriate here. Certain animals (and other forms of wildlife) may be remarkably tenacious. The Arabian leopard (*Panthera pardus nimr*) of the Judaean Desert and the Negev is regularly said to have died out in the area, but isolated specimens continue to be recorded. The Hula painted frog (*Discoglossus nigriventer*) had been considered extinct since the 1950s, but just a few years ago it was found to be still part of our world—it had been there all the time. Not only do recorded species sometimes survive against all the odds, but also new species turn up. Until very recently nobody knew of the existence of the Galapagos pink land iguana (*Conolophus marthae*) or the Indonesian psychedelic frogfish (*Histiophryne psychedelica*). Even primates(!) new to science may appear. As late as our 21st century new types of monkeys have been discovered in the forests of different continents: the kipunji (*Rungwecebus kipunji*) in Tanzania [pl. 5], an unknown titi variety (*Callicebus caquetensis*) in Columbia and a hitherto unrecorded snub-nosed monkey (*Rhinopithecus strykeri*) in northern Burma (Myanmar). Madame Berthe’s mouse lemur (*Microcebus berthae*), the world’s smallest primate, was discovered in Madagascar as late as 1992.

So too it is with fieldwork in modern Semitic languages: languages and reading traditions considered extinct may turn out to be alive after all and new Semitic dialects, even languages, have been discovered and described. Some of these fascinating survivals have been caught on the very verge of extinction; in other cases, alas, it is already too late.

The Samaritans had lain virtually out of sight of the western world for over a thousand years until their rediscovery in the 17th century. The recovery, documentation and interpretation of their Hebrew and Aramaic linguistic traditions almost single-handedly by Z. Ben-Ḥayyim has been one of the outstanding achievements of Semitic studies in the 20th century.\(^{73}\) When R. Macuch published information on Neo-Mandaic in 1965, his work was greeted in some quarters with

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\(^{73}\) Z. Ben-Hayyim, *עברית וארמית נוסח שומרון = The Literary and Oral Tradition of Hebrew and Aramaic amongst the Samaritans*, 5 vols. (Jerusalem 1957–1977) [Hebrew]. Volume 5 of the series has appeared in English translation (see above n. 11).
incredulity. Such a thing, it was said, could not possibly be, for Mandaic had died out centuries ago. But this (perfectly reasonable) assumption was actually wrong. Until Macuch confirmed the existence of vernacular Neo-Mandaic in Iran, identified it and described it, nobody knew for certain that it existed. Today we have texts, grammars, and lexical studies of this unique, critically endangered Semitic language, which in a few years from now is indeed destined to disappear—this time surely forever.

And what did we know fifty years ago about peripheral Arabic dialects spoken in Anatolia, Cyprus, eastern Iran, Afghanistan or central Africa? But for exotic surprises we do not have to go beyond the periphery of the Arabic world; Syria, for example, hitherto assumed to be fairly well known territory, has recently produced some quite extraordinary forms of spoken Arabic, the existence of which was totally unsuspected.74 We are reminded yet again that “Arabic” is but a blanket term for a whole world of different dialects and languages, some of them hardly known. Similarly, within what is conveniently lumped together as “Neo-Aramaic” the variety is so remarkable and the cleavages so deep that the general term “Neo-Aramaic”, though genetically correct, gives a quite wrong impression, for it implies an overall group similarity which is hardly there. By any criteria, we have to do here with different Neo-Aramaic languages separated geographically and confessionally, not just a cluster of similar dialects [pl. 6].

Nor have the southern parts of the Semitic world, Edward’s particular speciality, been neglected. Significant advances in the documentation of Ethio-Semitic and Modern South Arabian have taken place. The hardly known Hobyot, spoken by a few hundred people on the border of Yemen and Oman, turns out to be an independent new language75 and there have been claims of the discovery of others. I have in mind the announcement of “Dahalik: A newly discovered Afro-Semitic language spoken in Eritrea”76 and a suggestion that a remarkable dialect spoken in northern Yemen near the Saudi border may not be Arabic at all, but a lone descendant of ESA, i.e. what

74. See in particular the remarkable collection of P. Behnstedt, Sprachatlas von Syrien. II: Volkskundliche Texte (Wiesbaden 2000).


might be imagined as “Neo-Ṣayhadic”. That such claims may turn out to have been a little over-enthusiastic is quite beside the point here; the important lesson to be learned is that new varieties of Semitic speech are waiting to be discovered and that the number of variations on the Semitic theme is increasing all the time.

The evaluation and incorporation of all this new material presents a serious challenge to Semitic philology, for the modern Neo-Semitic languages of today do not always allow description in terms of the Semitic languages of the past. They do not necessarily share the marked family likeness so characteristic of the classical languages. Features considered quintessentially Semitic may not even occur in them at all. Edward was of course very much aware of this, particularly in the case of Amharic, some of whose striking “un-Semitic” characteristics he pointed out. Amharic is so highly evolved from the classical type in sound pattern, morphology, syntax and vocabulary that its Semiticity may be scarcely recognizable. With Edward, we may well wonder in what sense it can be called Semitic at all.

The wealth of Neo-Semitic data which we possess today seems to me to present a challenge more formidable than anything that Semitic philology has faced in the past—certainly greater than that presented by the decipherment of Akkadian 150 years ago. Until the middle of the 19th century the study of Semitic languages had been based upon Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic and Ethiopic in their traditional literary varieties. These classical languages, as we have noted, bear the unmistakeable Semitic stamp. But then came Akkadian. The monolithic unity of Semitic, in which Renan (and others) had so strongly believed, turned out not to tell the whole story. Akkadian did not fit the model; the model had to be changed. A new category, East Semitic, was established in order to accommodate this strange new cuneiform creature with its progressive sound pattern and divergent morphology.

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78. When we add more distant data from the Hamito-Semitic macro-family, the challenge, of course, becomes incomparably greater. How Semitic fits into the wider picture of the “halbsemitisch” (Hommel), “nicht semitisch aber semitischartig” (Praetorius) Afroasiatic languages still seems extremely obscure.


80. This geographical method of incorporating Akkadian is that still generally accepted today. Another approach was to divide the Semitic family chronologically into an older and a younger layer, Akkadian and Hebrew belonging to the former, the remaining Semitic languages to the latter. This is the model
The incorporation of the full range of synchronic Neo-Semitic facts into an overall diachronic framework of Semitic linguistic history will necessarily cause much disruption to present conceptions. It will not be enough just to add the new flood of data as incidental appendices to a pre-existing structure, or as footnotes to a traditional narrative which they may not fit. How the marriage of Old Semitic and Neo-Semitic can be effected in a single, satisfying, overall synthesis is not at all clear. We still lack the tools to do it. Perhaps it cannot be done at all.\textsuperscript{81}

But leaving aside the architecture of the grand Semitic building of the future, there is meanwhile plenty to be done in the more modest task of preparing the bricks. Before attempting an overall synthesis we should sort out some of the details. Classical Semitic, by providing historically older forms, can show us the key to the origins of processes which we find in the later languages; in turn, Neo-Semitic can provide valuable parallels to puzzling features in the older Semitic languages which for want of information we can grasp only incompletely.

The source materials, old and new, available to the modern student of Semitic philology are richer and more varied than anything we have known in the past. By using the old to understand how we arrived at the new, and by using the new to understand what became of the old, we shall better be able to answer the provocative, elusive question which Edward Ullendorff asked in 1958, viz. “What is a Semitic language?”.\textsuperscript{82}

\textsuperscript{81} A good idea of the huge scope and difficulty of the task can be gained from perusal of \textit{Israel Oriental Studies} 20 (2002) = \textit{Semitic Linguistics: The State of the Art at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century}, ed. S. Izre’el (Eisenbrauns 2002) and even more so from the comprehensive (ix, 1287 pp.) recent survey \textit{The Semitic Languages. An International Handbook}, ed. S. Weninger et al. (Berlin 2011).

THE KNOWLEDGE OF LANGUAGES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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THE amount of linguistic information, direct as well as indirect, to be found in the Old Testament is fairly limited. Of course, everyone is familiar with the naming procedure described in Genesis ii. 19-20, when God brought the animals "unto the man to see what he would call them". In the creation story we thus find a hint also at the creation of language. The faculty of using language, the possession of reason, distinguishes man from animals. That Hebrew was the original language of mankind until the time of the confusion of Babel was, of course, a widespread belief (cf. Bereshith Rabba 18): the Targum Yerushalmi (Gen. xi. 1) asserts quite simplyךלהיון קדושה והמלךسور דוהב אברים על הארץ. Talmud Sanhedrin 38b, on the other hand, thinks that Adam spoke Aramaic, while Shabbath 12b finds that אֲרַא מַלֶּאכֶת אָדָם אֱלֹהִים בֵּית תּוֹלָם אֲרָמִי.1

Genesis xi, especially verses 6 and 7, reflects accurately the power derived from the possession of language, the strength conveyed by ready communication, and the dire intellectual consequences to human society following upon linguistic profusion and confusion. The Lord said: "They are one people, and they have all one language... and now nothing will be withheld from them which they purpose to do. Let us go down and there confound their language that they may not understand one another's speech." This explanation of the diversity of languages must have answered an ancient and no doubt persistent desire to understand the perplexing problem of the linguistic barriers dividing mankind. Diversity of language is apt to engender diversity of interest and antagonism, while the possession of a common means of communication can act

Plate 3: The title page of a Geez–Amharic Octateuch
Plate 4: Lonesome George (d. 2012)
Plate 5: Tanzanian kipunji (*Rungwecebus kipunji*)
Plate 6: Poster of a Neo-Aramaic conference held in Jerusalem, June 2013