

III. THE BACKGROUND OF THE HEBREW LANGUAGE

The science of Linguistics divides the languages of humanity into a number of language families. These are groups of languages which resemble each other, so that it can be assumed that the different languages making up the family ultimately developed from a single language spoken in the far past. We know of the existence, in the present and past, of some 4,000 languages. The number of language families exceeds a hundred. Research has on various occasions shown that language families hitherto thought to be distinct really formed one family. It is quite likely that some such "family ties" are still waiting to be discovered. Some links between families may exist but perhaps never be discovered, for the more remote in the past the ancestor language, the more difficult it is to find the connections between its descendants. Languages constantly change, and the common features of a language family gradually disappear.

In the last few decades it has become certain that the family to which Hebrew belongs is very numerous and far-flung. It is variously called nowadays Hamito-Semitic, Afro-Asiatic, or Erythraic (the latter after the Red Sea which divides it). According to the present state of our knowledge, it comprises the following sub-groups, from East to West: The Semitic languages in Asia and Ethiopia; about 100 languages in Somalia, Ethiopia and the Sudan named collectively Cushitic; the ancient Egyptian language and its daughter language, Coptic; a number of closely related languages extending from western Egypt as far as Morocco and the western Sahara, and called Berber, but in the Sahara Tuareg; and a number of Chadic languages in West Africa, the most important among which is Hausa, used as a trade language over a large area. The main common character-

istic of all these languages is the conjugation of the verb. Almost all of them have *Binyanim* (causative, reflexive, etc. formations) like Hebrew, and show similar prefixes and suffixes for the different persons. Many other similarities are coming to light, as well as a stock of common words. Thus in far-away Hausa, *mutu* means "to die," like Hebrew *mut*, and a "man" is called *mutum*, corresponding to the Hebrew word *mētīm* "men." The latter word also illustrates the difficulties in showing up the relationship, for it occurs in Biblical Hebrew only in the plural, and very rarely, and in Arabic, for instance, has disappeared.

We do not know at what time in history people spoke the common ancestor language from which all these were derived, where it was spoken in Asia or Africa, or whether its speakers had light-brown skins, like the Semites and ancient Egyptians, or black ones like the present speakers of Chadic, or were white like the Berbers. We can assume with some degree of probability that at a certain point there separated from the common stock a group of people who spoke the ancestor language of the Semitic languages, which we call Proto-Semitic. This was at any rate earlier than 3000 B.C.E. Formerly it was widely assumed that the speakers of proto-Semitic lived in the Arabian Peninsula. It was also believed that the Classical Arabic language, as we meet it in texts from the 6th-7th century C.E., was practically identical with Proto-Semitic. Some scholars subscribe also today to either or both of these views, but there are weighty grounds for thinking that the Arabian Peninsula was first settled (except for sporadic earlier isles of population) at the time when the Israelites conquered Canaan, that the speakers of Classical Arabic were the descendants of tribes whom we still find in the 9th century B.C.E. in the Syrian Desert, near the borders of Syria and Palestine, and that literary Classical Arabic was formed in the Christian period through the mixture of several earlier dialects. As for the speakers of Proto-Semitic, we do not know where they dwelt, nor how their descendants came to the countries in which we find them at the beginning of recorded history. It is not even certain that the speakers of the known Semitic languages were descendants of the people who

spoke Proto-Semitic. It may well be that relatively small groups of migrants or conquerors imposed their language upon populations which formerly spoke other languages.

It is customary to divide the Semitic languages into five branches, each centred around an important language of civilization. The oldest documented branch (3rd millennium B.C.E.) is called Akkadian, and comprises Babylonian and Assyrian, with hundreds of thousands of documents and literary works preserved on clay tablets in cuneiform script. The Canaanite branch is first documented a little before the middle of the second millennium B.C.E., and comprises, amongst others, Hebrew. The third branch, Aramaic, appears first in inscriptions in Syria of the 9th century B.C.E. It then penetrated into the area of Akkadian, which it gradually displaced as spoken, and later also as written language (though some Akkadian was written even in the first century C.E.), and later similarly pushed out the Canaanite languages. Various dialects of Aramaic were used by Jews at different times: "official Aramaic" in Southern Egypt in the 5th century B.C.E., Biblical Aramaic, the Aramaic of the Targums (translations of the Bible), the Aramaic of the Babylonian Talmud and the Galilean Aramaic of the Palestinian Talmud, the language of the *Zohar* (Spain, 13th century), and the various types of Aramaic spoken by present-day Jews from Kurdistan (Northern Iraq) and Azerbaijan (N.W. Persia), which also possess a literature. The central language of the Aramaic branch is Syriac (2nd-13th centuries C.E.) with a large Christian literature. Next to it in importance is Mandaic in Southern Iraq, which was the vehicle of a gnostic literature. The earliest inscriptions of the fourth branch, Arabic, date from somewhere in the middle of the first millennium B.C.E., and appear in areas on the rim of the Arabian Peninsula. The language of civilization, Classical Arabic, was, as stated above, formed between 300 and 600 C.E. It had already a considerable oral literature of great artistic perfection when the conquests of Islam in the 7th century spread its use over the area occupied by all previous Semitic languages and beyond, and the contact with the Greek and Persian cultures made it into one of the great literary and scientific

languages of mankind. Literary Arabic has remained one and the same from Oman to Mauretania, but the spoken dialects vary greatly, and could really be considered separate languages. Except for literary use by Jews (cf. chapter 9, note 2) and in dialogue in some novels, spoken Arabic has become a full-fledged written language only in Malta, where it is written in Latin characters. Arabic has been extensively used for literary purposes by Jews. Probably somewhat earlier than the first Arabic inscriptions, there appear in the eastern part of present-day Yemen and in present-day South Yemen inscriptions in a number of languages, collectively named South Arabian. The largest number is preserved in Sabaic—the language of the Queen of Sheba—which lasted until ca. 600 C.E., and in its latest stages comprises some inscriptions evidently put up by Jews. Today Arabic is spoken in those areas, though traces of South Arabian influence can be found in the local dialects. A different type of South Arabian has been preserved until this day in a number of non-literary languages spoken at the southern extremity of Oman (Mehri, Shahari, etc.) and on the island of Soqatra in the Indian Ocean. A language related to South Arabian was written in northern Ethiopia under the name of Ge'ez (Classical Ethiopic) from the 3rd century C.E. onwards, and developed a large literature both during its life and after it ceased to be spoken. In it are preserved some of the Pseudepigrapha of the Bible, and a few Jewish sectarian works used by the Falasha. Today there are in Ethiopia a number of Semitic languages, partly or all descended from Ge'ez, amongst which Amharic stands out as being the national language of Ethiopia and the only one to possess a modern literature.

Till not so long ago it was generally accepted that each of these branches formed at one time a common language, from which the languages and dialects making up that branch in historical times were descended. Some scholars reconstructed a picture, according to which the speakers of those original languages of each branch had emigrated from the Arabian Peninsula in "waves" in the order in which we have here enumerated them. The different branch languages, of course, went

back to Proto-Semitic, and thus the whole of the Semitic languages was shown as a "family tree," in which Akkadian formed a main branch by itself, called East Semitic, while Canaanite and Aramaic were grouped together as North-West Semitic, and Arabic and South Arabian and Ethiopic as South (-West) Semitic. This picture of the development of the Semitic languages was however disturbed when more recently some languages were discovered which did not fit into any of the branches. These were Ugaritic (discovered in 1929) in the North-West corner of the Semitic area ca. 1500-1200 B.C.E., and Amorite, a language known only through the proper names of a people found in the 3rd and 2nd millennia B.C.E. in northern Iraq, in Syria, and probably also in Palestine if they are the same as the Emorites of the Bible. As yet no new model of the relationships of the Semitic languages has emerged, but some scholars think that certain ones of the "branches" we have mentioned may have arisen not by the fission of an older language, but rather through the influence of certain dialects upon others around them.

Hebrew closely resembles, at least in the ancient writing without vowels, its nearest neighbours, Phoenician to the north-west and Moabite in the east. In vocabulary (but not in sound or in grammar) it is also close to its immediate northern neighbour, Aramaic, and to the somewhat more remote Ugaritic. We possess a little under 400 letters written in the 14th and 13th centuries B.C.E. in Palestine, Syria and Phoenicia (present-day Lebanon) to the King of Egypt and his representatives in Asia, which were found about 1890 at Tell-el-Amarna in northern Egypt. Their preservation is due to the fact that they were written in the Babylonian language on clay tablets, Babylonian having been at the time a kind of international language. The local scribes had an imperfect command of Babylonian, and made many grammatical mistakes betraying the structure of their mother tongue, and also added to a number of words translations into their own tongue, spelled out in the cuneiform script, which indicates all vowels. From these forms and words we learn that the language spoken at that time in Palestine was of

the same type as Hebrew, or rather that it possessed certain features found only in Hebrew and Phoenician, but in no other language known to us.

The fact that a language so much like Hebrew was spoken in Palestine in the centuries before the Exodus, raises a difficult question. The ancestors of the Hebrew nation, the Patriarchs, came from Mesopotamia, where languages quite different from Hebrew were spoken. How, then, can we explain that the Hebrews used a language so close to that of the Canaanites whose land they conquered? The only possible answer seems to be that the Hebrews changed their language at some point in their history. It may be that the Book of Genesis hints at such a change of language as early as the period of the Patriarchs when it tells us (31:47) about the cairn which Jacob put up as a memento of his pact with Laban: "And Laban called it *yegar sahadutha* (in Aramaic), and Jacob called it *gal'ed* (in Hebrew)." Thus we are told that after two generations the family of Abraham used a language different from that of his relatives whom he had left behind in Mesopotamia. Such an early change of language may also explain the fact that the names borne by the Patriarchs are different from those the Israelites gave to themselves in the Biblical period, since we find no mention in the Bible of any person called Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, etc., apart from the Patriarchs. On the other hand it is not absolutely certain that the story was meant to indicate that Jacob already spoke a different language, and the author of Genesis may even have known that the change took place after the Conquest, but characterized Jacob through the language of his descendants. Still, whatever date we suggest, the fact of the change of language remains difficult. We know that neither the Patriarchs nor their descendants at first mingled with the Canaanites, and that they did not intermarry with them, but dwelt separately, and that the Israelites largely settled in parts of the country where previous Canaanite settlement had been sparse, such as the mountains of Ephraim.

Certain scholars expressed the view that the Israelites did not speak pure Canaanite, but a mixture of Canaanite and their

former language. This theory was not meant to answer our sociological queries, but to explain certain grammatical and lexical features of the Hebrew language, such as the existence of parallel forms or the inconsistent development of certain Proto-Semitic sounds. This theory of Hebrew as a mixed language did not find general acceptance amongst scholars as being the best explanation of the said phenomena. In fact we are unable to decide whether or not Hebrew contains elements from the language the Hebrews spoke before entering Canaan, for we do not know what that language was like. Nor is our information about the Canaanite of the Tell-Amarna period sufficient to assert with confidence whether a certain feature existed in pre-Israelite Canaanite or not.

The Bible tells us again and again that at the time of the Israelite conquest, Canaan was inhabited not only by the people called Canaanites, but also by other nations. Not all of the names mentioned have been successfully identified with ethnic units known from other sources, but we can say that some of those peoples were Semites, such as the Emorites, while others were non-Semitic, such as the Horites and the Hittites. At about the same time when the Israelites entered the country from the east, there came to it from across the sea a non-Semitic people, or perhaps an alliance of several peoples, known to us as the Philistines. The names of the senders of certain letters from Tell-Amarna show that amongst the rulers of Palestinian cities there were both Hurrians (the Biblical Horites) and members of another race which spoke an Indo-European language largely identical with early Sanskrit. We may thus ask why, if the Israelites adopted a new language in Canaan, they took over Canaanite, and not some of the Israelite tribes Canaanite, others Hurrian, and some perhaps Philistine, according to whatever population was dominant in each part of the country where Israelites settled. How is it that Hebrew is not full of Hurrian and Philistine words, when its readiness to accept foreign words is proved by the appearance of some hundreds of Babylonian loanwords in its earliest written stage?

In the same vein we may ask another question: the Children

of Israel sojourned in Egypt for at least 190 years. Where in the Hebrew language do we find the traces of this long contact with a highly-developed civilization? There are some 40 words in Hebrew that appear to be borrowed from Egyptian, but these are either words for typical Egyptian institutions or for goods and trade terms, such as prove commercial contacts between adjacent countries, but not intimate symbiosis for several generations.¹

However, the problem extends also to the Tell-Amarna letters themselves. We would have expected that letters written in a country inhabited, according to the Biblical enumeration, by seven nations should in their deviations from Babylonian usage show traces of different languages, according to the population inhabiting the city from which each letter was sent. The words from the scribe's own language should in one case be Amorite, in another Girgashite, and the 27 letters from Jerusalem, written by a ruler with a Hurrian name, should contain Hurrian words, or perhaps Jebusite words, since Jerusalem was a Jebusite city. True, we do not know anything about Girgashite or Jebusite, but we know quite a lot about Hurrian. And yet, though the letters of Puti-Hepa, king of Jerusalem, contain an unusually high proportion of those "glosses" in the local language, these are all pure Canaanite, as are those found in letters from other parts of Palestine. Moreover, the traces of local language found in letters from Palestine are not in any systematic manner different from those in letters from Phoenicia or from Central Syria (the land of Amurru).

We thus gain the impression that the local Canaanite language of which we find such clear evidence in the Tell-Amarna letters, does not represent the spoken local dialects, which no doubt differed even within Canaanite itself, but a literary prestige language known in all the cities, and perhaps cultivated prin-

¹ A.S. Yahuda claimed in 1929 that many phrases in the Pentateuch reflected Egyptian (in English: *The Accuracy of the Bible*, New York 1935). His views have not been accepted by scholars; but even if they are correct, they refer to specific features of the story, not to Egyptian influence on the Hebrew language as such.

cipally by the scribes. It is likely that this language was based on the dialect of the great commercial sea towns Byblos, Tyre, and Sidon. If we adopt this view of the situation, it becomes much easier to explain the fact that the Israelites were influenced by such a prestige language. It is quite possible that this was influence only, not a complete change of language, and that the Israelites in fact only adopted certain striking features of it. The fact that the Tell-Amarna letters are written in Babylonian shows how well known and influential the Babylonian language must have been at that period, while in the time of the Judges and the first kings of Israel Babylonian and Assyrian influence was at a low ebb. It is therefore likely that the early Akkadian loanwords in Hebrew, many of which are connected with luxury buildings, came to the Israelites through contact with craftsmen such as could be found in the larger cities. This seems also the most likely way in which Hittite and Egyptian words came into Hebrew, for the Phoenician cities carried on a lively trade both with Egypt in the south and with the Hittite empire in Asia minor, which was destroyed before the Israelite conquest of Canaan.²

Another legacy of the Canaanite stage which we find in Hebrew are the words from the Indo-European language we mentioned before. Its bearers formed most probably a small group of professional soldiers, mainly chariot fighters. In Hebrew we find about five words which certainly come from their language, and about ten to fifteen more for which this is probable. Almost all are about horses, chariots, and arms. It is most unlikely that members of that group played any significant role during or after the Israelite conquest, and that words should have passed directly from their language into Hebrew. These words must have entered Canaanite speech before or during the Tell-Amarna period and reached Hebrew along with other Canaanite words. But the nature of this material, concerned with

² It is, however, possible that some Hittite words came in through the later Hittite (Luvian) kingdoms in northern Syria, or even through the Palestinian "Hittites" mentioned in the Bible (which some scholars believe to have been really Hivites).

the activities of an aristocratic warrior class, makes it difficult to believe that it was passed on to the Hebrews by contacts with their peasant neighbours. To know words like this requires contact with some social élite.

Another matter which requires for its explanation the assumption of some contact with literary circles is the linguistic character of Biblical poetry in the feature called parallelism. This is the so-called "rhyme of meaning," by which the two halves of a line of poetry express the same thought in different words, often with synonyms corresponding to each other in both halves. The number of such synonyms in any language is of course rather limited, and we find the same pairs of synonyms being used over and over again in Biblical poetry. Scholars have discovered that many of these same pairs of words also appear, partly in frequent use, in Ugaritic poetry, and a few even in later Aramaic inscriptions. Quite a few of the words in these pairs are not found in the Bible except in parallelism, but are frequent everyday words in other languages, such as *pa'al* "to do" in Phoenician and Ugaritic (*ba'al*) for Hebrew *'asah*, or *ḥazah* "to see" in Phoenician, Ugaritic (*ḥdy*), and Aramaic for Hebrew *ra'ah*. Ugarit was destroyed before the Israelite conquest, and we can hardly assume that Ugaritic tablets with copies of the epics came into the hands of Hebrew poets, or that they could have read them if they did. The most probable explanation is therefore that such stylistic matters became known to the Hebrews through local Canaanite or through Phoenician poetry. This, however, presupposes contacts with educated people, not only with the local villagers.

Some scholars believe that the original language of the Israelites was Amorite. The time of the Patriarchs coincided with that of maximum Amorite presence in Mesopotamia, On the other hand we find that the Israelites, according to the Bible, did not consider themselves related to the Amorites they found in Transjordan and Palestine, but on the contrary, felt an abhorrence towards them. We cannot fully appreciate the importance of this, since the identity of the Amorites (Emori) of the Bible with the Mesopotamian Amorites (Amurru) is not proved beyond

reasonable doubt. It is quite likely that the bearers of the Amorite names were not the only West-Semitic group dwelling among the inhabitants of Mesopotamia in Abraham's time, even if we assume that Abraham's people there spoke a West-Semitic language so as to account for the ease with which they communicated with the inhabitants of Canaan and adopted ultimately part or all of the latter's language. We know about the Amorites because they succeeded in founding or usurping kingdoms and becoming an upper class, but there may have been less successful groups about whom and whose language we know nothing. Abraham's family is known to us because of the brilliant development of their descendants in another country (after changing their language); but what would we have known about Bethuel or Laban if Isaac and Jacob had not taken their wives from there? Unlike the Amorite kings and merchants, Laban did not employ scribes to perpetuate his name and deeds on clay tablets, and we do not know which language he spoke.³

Although we have no means at present for tracing the development of the form of speech used by the group from which the Patriarchs emerged, we may confidently assume that, like every other Semitic tribe, they inherited a varied collection of words partly unchanged since Proto-Semitic, partly created by their ancestors or borrowed by them from other peoples in the course of their wanderings. It was by no means a "pure" language. When some of its speakers reached Canaan, they found there other languages, which had similarly undergone various developments and influences. Out of the contact between two already composite and complicated language worlds, Hebrew was born. We may say that the immediate cause for the emergence of Hebrew was the spiritual experience which brought Abraham from his far-away homeland to the land of Canaan.

³ The words *yegar sahadutha* which the Bible puts into Laban's mouth are in Aramaic, but the forms belong to a state of that language which is very much later than Laban's time. If the "Aramaean" attached to Laban's name does indeed refer to the same people who are afterwards called Aramaeans, he must have used a much more archaic form of the language, quite different from the Old Aramaic which, as many now think, was evolved in the neighbourhood of Damascus about 1000 B.C.E.