

Languages of the Old Testament

laṇ'gwáj-es

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LITERATURE

There were only two languages employed in the archetypes of the Old Testament books (apart from an Egyptian or Persian or Greek word here and there), namely, Hebrew and Biblical Aramaic, both of which belong to the great family of languages known as Semitic.

I. The Semitic Languages.

The languages spoken in Southwestern Asia during the historical period dealt with in the Bible have been named Shemitic, after the son of Noah from whom the majority of peoples speaking these languages - Arabs, Hebrews, Arameans and Assyrians ([Gen 10:21](#) ff) - were descended. To show, however, that the description does not fit exactly the thing described - the Elamites and Lydians having probably not spoken a Shemitic language, and the Canaanites, including Phoenicians, with the colonists descended from those at Carthage and elsewhere in the Mediterranean coast lands, as well as the Abyssinians (Ethiopians), who did, being reckoned descendants of Ham ([Gen 9:18](#); [Gen 10:6](#) ff) - the word is now generally written "Semitic," a term introduced by Eichhorn (1787). These languages were spoken from the Caspian Sea to the South of Arabia, and from the Mediterranean to the valley of the Tigris.

1. Members of Semitic Family:

The following list shows the chief members of this family:

(1) South Semitic or Arabic:

Including the language of the Sabeian (Himyaritic) inscriptions, as well as Ge'ez or Ethiopic. Arabic is now spoken from the Caucasus to Zanzibar, and from the East Indies to the Atlantic.

(2) Middle Semitic or Canaanitish:

Including Hebrew, old and new, Phoenician, with Punic, and Moabite (language of MS).

(3) North Semitic or Aramaic:

Including (a) East Aramaic or Syrian (language of Syrian Christians), language of Babylonian Talmud, Mandaean; (b) West or Palestinian Aramaic of the Targums, Palestinian Talmud (Gemara), Biblical Aramaic (“Chaldee”), Samaritan, language of Nabatean inscriptions.

(4) East Semitic:

Language of Assyria-Babylonian inscriptions.

2. The Name Hebrew:

With the exception of a few chapters and fragments mentioned below, the Old Testament is written entirely in Hebrew. In the Old Testament itself this language is called “the Jews’” ([2Ki 18:26](#), [2Ki 18:28](#)). In [Isa 19:18](#) it is called poetically, what in fact it was, “the language (Hebrew “lip”) of Canaan.” In the appendix to the Septuagint of Job it is called Syriac; and in the introduction to Ecclesiasticus it is for the first time - that is, in 130 BC - named Hebrew. The term Hebrew in the New Testament denotes the language of the Old Testament in [Rev 9:11](#), but in [Joh 5:2](#); [Joh 19:13](#), [Joh 19:17](#) this term means the vernacular Aramaic. In other passages it is doubtful which is meant. Josephus uses the same name for both. From the time of the Targums, Hebrew is called “the sacred tongue” in contrast to the Aramaic of everyday use. The language of the Old Testament is called Old Hebrew in contrast to the New Hebrew of the Mishna, the rabbinic, the Spanish poetry, etc.

3. Old Hebrew Literature:

Of Old Hebrew the remains are contained almost entirely in the Old Testament. A few inscriptions have been recovered, i.e., the Siloam Inscriptions,

a Hebrew calendar, a large number of ostraka from Samaria, a score of pre-exilic seals, and coins of the Maccabees and of the time of Vespasian and Hadrian.

Literature.

E. Renan, *Histoire generale et systeme compare des langues semitiques*; F. Hommel, *Die semit. Volker u. Sprachen*; the comparative grammars of Wright and Brockelmann; CIS; article "Semitic Languages" in *Encyclopedia Brit*, and Murray's *Illustrated Bible Dictionary*.

II. History of the Hebrew Language.

Hebrew as it appears to us in the Old Testament is in a state of decadence corresponding to the present position of spoken Arabic. In the earliest period it no doubt resembled the classical Arabic of the 7th and following centuries. The variations found between the various strata of the language occurring in the Old Testament are slight compared with the difference between modern and ancient Arabic.

1. Oldest Form of Language:

Hebrew was no doubt originally a highly inflected language, like classical Arabic. The noun had three cases, nominative, genitive, and accusative, ending in *-um*, *-im*, *-am*, respectively, as in the Sabeian inscriptions. Both verbs and nouns had three numbers (singular, dual and plural) and two genders, masculine and feminine. In the noun the dual and plural had two cases. The dual and 2nd and 3rd person plural and 2nd person singular feminine of the imperfect of the verb ended in *nūn*. In certain positions the "m" of the endings *-um*, *-im*, *-am* in the noun was dropped. The verb had three moods, indicative, subjunctive, and jussive, ending in *-u*, *-a*, and *-*, respectively; as well as many forms or stems, each of which had an active and passive voice.

2. The Hebrew of the Old Testament:

In the Hebrew of the Old Testament most of these inflexions have disappeared. Of the three cases of the noun only the accusative *-am* has survived

in a few adverbial forms, such as *'omnām*, “truly.” The dual has entirely disappeared from the verb, and also from the noun, with the exception of things that occur in pairs, such as hand, eye, which have no plural. The nom. case of the dual and plural of the noun has disappeared, and the oblique case is used for both. Except in cases of poetic archaism the final nun of the verb has been lost, and, as the final vowels have fallen away in verbs, as well as in nouns, the result is that the jussive forms serve for indicative and subjunctive also. Many of the forms or stems have fallen into desuetude, and the passive forms of two alone are used.

3. Its Uniformity:

One of the most remarkable facts connected with the Hebrew of the Old Testament is that although that literature extends through a period of over 1,000 years, there is almost no difference between the language of the oldest parts and that of the latest. This phenomenon is susceptible of several explanations. In the first place, nearly the whole of the Old Testament literature is religious in character, and as such the earliest writings would become the model for the later, just as the Koran - the first prose work composed in Arabic which has survived - has become the pattern for all future compositions. The same was true for many centuries of the influence of Aristophanes and Euripides upon the language of educated Greeks, and, it is said, of the influence of Confucius upon that of the learned Chinese.

4. The Cause Thereof:

But a chief cause is probably the fact that the Semitic languages do not vary with time, but with place. The Arabic vocabulary used in Morocco differs from that of Egypt, but the Arabic words used in each of these countries have remained the same for centuries - in fact, since Arabic began to be spoken in them. Similarly, the slight differences which are found in the various parts of the Old Testament are to be ascribed, not to a difference of date, but to the fact that some writers belonged to the Southern Kingdom, some to the Northern, some wrote in Palestine, some in Babylonia (compare [Neh 13:23](#), [Neh 13:24](#); [Jdg 12:6](#); [Jdg 18:3](#)).

5. Differences Due to Age:

The Old Testament literature falls into two main periods: that composed before and during the Babylonian exile, and that which falls after the exile. But even between these two periods the differences of language are comparatively slight, so that it is often difficult or impossible to say on linguistic grounds alone whether a particular chapter is pre-exilic or post-exilic, and scholars of the first rank often hold the most contrary opinions on these points. For instance, Dillmann places the so-called Document P (Priestly Code) before Document D (Deuteronomistic Code) in the regal period, whereas most critics date D about 621 and P about 444 BC.

6. Differences of Style:

It is needless to add that the various writers differ from one another in point of style, but these variations are infinitesimal compared with those of Greek and Latin authors, and are due, as has been said above, largely to locality and environment. Thus the style of Hosea is quite different from that of his contemporary Amos, and that of Deutero-Isaiah shows very distinctly the mark of its place of composition.

7. Foreign Influences:

A much more potent factor in modifying the language was the influence of foreign languages upon Hebrew, especially in respect to vocabulary. The earliest of these was probably Egyptian but of much greater importance was Assyrian, from which Hebrew gained a large number of loan words. It is well known that the Babylonian script was used for commercial purposes throughout Southwestern Asia, even before the Hebrews entered Canaan (see TEXT), but the influence of Babylon upon Palestine seems to have been greatly exaggerated. The main point of contact is in the mythology, which may have been common to both peoples. In the later, especially post-exilic stages of the language, many Aramaisms are found in respect to syntax as well as vocabulary; and in later phases still, Persian and even Greek words are found.

8. Poetry and Prose:

As in other languages, so in Hebrew, the vocabulary of the poetical literature differs from that of the prose writers. In Hebrew, however, there is not the hard-and-fast distinction between these two which obtains in the classics. Whenever prose becomes elevated by the importation of feeling, it falls into a natural rhythm which in Hebrew constitutes poetry. Thus most of the so-called

prophetic books are poetical in form. Another mark of poetry is a return to archaic grammatical forms, especially the restoration of the final *nūn* in the verb.

9. Home of the Hebrew Language:

The form of Semitic which was indigenous in the land of Canaan is sometimes called Middle Semitic. Before the Israelites entered the country, it was the language of the Canaanites from whom the Hebrews took it over. That Hebrew was not the language of Abraham before his migration appears from the fact that he is called an Aramean ([Deu 26:5](#)), and that Laban's native language was Aramaic ([Gen 31:47](#)). A further point is that the word "Sea" is used for the West and "Negeb" for the South, indicating Palestine as the home of the language (so [Isa 19:18](#)).

10. Its Antiquity:

As the aboriginal inhabitants of the land of Canaan were not Semites, we cannot infer the existence of the Hebrew language any earlier than the first immigrations of Semites into Palestine, that is, during the third millennium BC. It would thus be a much younger member of the Semitic family than Assyrian-Babylonian, which exhibits all the marks of great antiquity long before the Hebrew language is met with.

11. When Hebrew Became a Dead Language:

The Babylonian exile sounded the death-knell of the Hebrew language. The educated classes were deported to Babylon or fled to Egypt, and those who remained were not slow to adopt the language used by their conquerors. The old Hebrew became a literary and sacred tongue, the language of everyday life being probably Aramaic. Whatever may be the exact meaning of [Neh 8:8](#), it proves that the people of that time had extreme difficulty in understanding classical Hebrew when it was read to them. Yet for the purpose of religion, the old language continued to be employed for several centuries. For patriotic reasons it was used by the Maccabees, and by Bar Cochba (135 AD).

Literature.

Gesenius, *Geschichte der hebr. Sprache und Schrift*; Bertheau, "Hebr. Sprache" in *RE*, 2nd edition; see also "Literature" in the following section.

III. Chief Characteristics of Hebrew.

The special marks which particularly distinguish a language may be found in its alphabet, in its mode of inflection, or in its syntax.

1. Characteristic Sounds:

The Hebrew alphabet is characterized by the large number of guttural sounds which it contains, and these are not mere palatals like the Scotch or German chapter, but true throat sounds, such as are not found in the Aryan languages. Hence, when the Phoenician alphabet passed over into Greece, these unpronounceable sounds, א, ב, ג, ד were changed into vowels, A, E, H, O. In Hebrew the guttural letters predominate. "In the Hebrew dictionaries the four gutturals occupy considerably more than a fourth part of the volume; the remaining eighteen letters occupying considerably less than three-fourths." Besides the guttural, there are three strong consonants, ז, ט, ש which are sounded with compression of the larynx, and are quite different from our *t*, *k* and *s*. In Greek, the first was softened into a *θ*, the other two were dropped as letters but retained as numerals.

2. Letters Representing Two Sounds:

Though the Hebrew alphabet comprises no more than 22 letters, these represent some 30 different sounds, for the 6 letters *b*, *g*, *d*, *k*, *p* and *t*, when they fall immediately after a vowel, are pronounced *bh(v)*, *gh*, *dh*, *kh*, *ph (f)* and *th*. Moreover, the gutturals א and ב each represent two distinct sounds, which are still in use in Arabic. The letter "h" is sometimes sounded at the end of a word as at the beginning.

3. Consonants Representing Vowels:

A peculiarity of the Hebrew alphabet is that the letters are all consonants. Four of these, however, were very early used to represent vowel and diphthong

sounds, namely, ,**א** *h*, *w* and *y*. So long as Hebrew was a spoken language no other symbols than these 22 letters were used. It was not until the 7th century AD at the earliest that the well-known elaborate system of signs to represent the vowels and other sounds was invented (see TEXT).

4. The Syllable:

A feature of the Hebrew language is that no word or syllable may begin with a vowel: every syllable begins with a consonant. This is also true of the other Semitic languages, except Assyrian-Babylonian. When in the course of word-formation a syllable would begin with a vowel, the slight consonant **א** is prefixed. Moreover, more than two consonants may not stand without vowels intervening, as in the English word “strength.” At most, two consonants may begin a syllable, and even so a slight vowel is sounded between them, as *k^erō*! A word may end in two consonants without vowels, as *'amart*, but no word or syllable ends in more than two.

5. Three-Letter Roots:

The outstanding feature of the Semitic family of languages is the root, consisting of three consonants. Practically, the trilateral root is universal. There are a few roots with more than three letters, but many of the quadrilateral roots are formed by reduplication, as *kabkab* in Arabic. Many attempts have been made to reduce three-letter stems to two-letter by taking the factors common to several roots of identical meaning. Thus **דום**, **דמה**, **דמם**, “to be still,” seem all to come from a root **דמ**. It is more probable, however, that the root is always trilateral, but may appear in various forms.

6. Conjugations or Derived Stems:

From these trilateral roots all parts of the verbs are formed. The root, which, it ought to be stated, is not the infinitive, but the 3rd singular masculine perfect active, expresses the simple idea without qualification, as *shābhar*, “he broke.” The idea of intensity is obtained by doubling the middle stem letter, as *shibbēr*,

“he broke in fragments”; the passive is expressed by the *u*-vowel in the first place and the *a*-vowel in the last, as *shubbar*, “it was broken in fragments.” The reflexive sense prefixes an *n* to the simple root, or a *t* (ו) to the intensive, but the former of these is often used as a passive, as *nishbar*, “it was broken,” *hithkaddēsh*, “he sanctified himself.” The causative meaning is given by prefixing the letter *h*, as *mālakh*, “he was king,” *himlikh*, “he caused (one) to be king.” A somewhat similar method of verb building is found outside the Semitic language, for example, in Turkish. In some of these Semitic languages the number of formations is very numerous. In Hebrew also there are traces of stems other than those generally in use.

7. Absence of Tenses:

There are no tenses in Hebrew, in our sense of the word. There are two states, usually called tenses, the perfect and the imperfect. In the first the action is regarded as accomplished, whether in the past or future, as *shābhar*, “he broke,” “he has broken,” “he will have broken,” or (in prophetic narrative) “he will break”; in the second, the action is regarded as uncompleted, “he will break,” “he was breaking,” “he is breaking,” etc. The present is often expressed by the participle.

8. The Pronouns:

The different persons, singular and plural, are expressed by affixing to the perfect, and by prefixing to the imperfect, fragments of the personal pronouns, as *shābhartī*, “I broke,” *shābharnū*, “we broke,” *nishbōr*, “we will break,” and so on. The fragments which are added to the perfect to express the nominative of the pronouns are, with some modification, especially the change of *t* into *k*, added to the verb to express the accusative, and to the noun to express the genitive; for example, *shābhartā*, “you broke,” *sh^ebhār^ekhā*, “he broke you,” *bēth^ekhā*, “your house”; *šāpharnū*, “we counted,” *š^ephārānū*, “he counted us,” *šiphrenū*, “our book.”

9. Formation of Nouns:

The same principles are followed in regard to the noun as to the verb. Many nouns consist solely of the three stem-letters articulated with one or with two vowels, except that monosyllables generally become dissyllabic, owing to the difficulty of pronouncing two vowelless consonants together: thus, *melekh*, “king,” *ṣēpher*, “book,” *gōren*, “threshingfloor” (instead of *malk*, *ṣiphr*, *gorn*), *dābhār*, “a word or thing,” *ḵārōbh*, “near.” Nouns denoting place, instrument, etc., are often formed by prefixing the letter *m* to the root, as *mishpāt*, “justice” from *shāphat*, “he judged,” *mazlēgh*, “a fork.” Intensity is, given to the root idea, as in the verb, by doubling the middle consonant: thus, *ḥōrēsh* “working,” *ḥārāsh* (for *ḥarrašh*), “workman”; *gonebh*, “stealing,” *gannabh*, “a thief.” Similarly, words denoting incurable physical defects, *’illēm*, “dumb,” *’iwwēr*, “blind,” *ḥērēsh* (for *ḥirrēsh*), “deaf and dumb.” The feminine of nouns, as of the 3rd person of verbs, is formed by adding the letter *t*, which when final is softened to *h*, *g^ebhīrāh*, “queen-mother,” “mistress,” but *g^ebhirtēkh*, “your mistress.”

10. Internal Inflexion:

The inflexion of both verbs and nouns is accompanied by a constant lengthening or shortening of the vowels of the word, and this according to two opposite lines. In verbs with vowel-affixes the penultimate vowel disappears, as *hālakh*, “he went,” *hāf^ekhū*, “they went”; in the noun the ante-penultimate vowel disappears, as *dābhār*, “a word,” plural *d^ebhārīm*. As the vowel system, as stated above, is very late, the vocalization cannot be accepted as that of the living tongue. It represents rather the cantillation of the synagogue; and for this purpose, accents, which had a musical as well as an interpunctional value, have been added.

11. Syntax of the Verb:

Hebrew syntax is remarkable for its simplicity. Simple sentences predominate and are usually connected by the conjunction “and.” Subordinate sentences are comparatively rare, but descriptive and temporal clauses are not uncommon. In the main narrative, the predicates are placed at the beginning of the sentence, first simply in the root form (3rd singular masculine), and then only when the

subject has been mentioned does the predicate agree with it. Descriptive and temporal clauses may be recognized by their having the subject at the beginning (e.g. [Gen 1:2](#)). A curious turn is given to the narrative by the fact that in the main sentences, if the first verb is perfect, those which follow are imperfect, and vice versa, the conjunction which coordinates them receiving a peculiar vocalization - that of the definite article. In the English Bible, descriptive and temporal clauses are often rendered as if they were parts of the main sentence, for example, in the first verses of Genesis of which the literal translation is somewhat as follows: "At the beginning of God's creating heaven and earth, when the earth was without form and void, and God's spirit (or, a great wind) moved upon the face of the water, God said, Let there be light." It will thus be seen that the structure of Hebrew narrative is not so simple as it appears.

12. Syntax of the Noun:

In the Semitic languages, compound words do not occur, but this deficiency is made up by what is called the construct state. The old rule, that the second of two nouns which depend on one another is put in the genitive, becomes, in Hebrew, the first of two such nouns is put in the construct state. The noun in the construct state loses the definite article, and all its vowels are made as short as possible, just as if it were the beginning of a long word: for example, *ha-bayith*, "the house," but *bēth ha-melekh*, "the house of the king," "the palace"; *dabhar*, "a word," but *dibh^e rē rū^ah*, "words of wind," "windy words."

13. Poverty of Adjectives:

The Hebrew language is very poor in adjectives, but this is made up for by a special use of the construct state just mentioned. Thus to express magnitude the word "God" is added in the gen. case, as in the example above ([Gen 1:2](#)), "a mighty wind" = a wind of God; [Psa 36:6](#), "the lofty mountains" = the mountains of God (so [Psa 68:15](#)); [Psa 80:10](#), "goodly cedars" = cedars of God; so "a holy man" = a man of God; "the sacred box" = the ark of God, and so on; compare in the New Testament, [Mat 27:54](#), "the son of God" = [Luk 23:47](#), "a righteous (man)." Matthew was thinking in Aramaic, Luke in Greek. A similar use is made of other words, e.g. "stubborn" = hard of neck; "impudent" = hard of face; "extensive" = broad of hands; "miserable" = bitter of soul.

Literature.

The articles on the Hebrew Language in Schenkel's *Bibel-Lexikon*, 1875, by Noldeke; in *Encyclopedia Brit*, 9th edition, by Robertson Smith; 11th edition by Noldeke; in the *Imperial Bible Dict.*, 1866, by T. H. Weir; also those in *HDB*, *EB*.

Grammars:

A. B. Davidson's *Elementary Heb Grammar and Syntax*; Gesenius, *Heb Grammar*, English translation by Cowley, 2nd edition.

Dictionaries:

Brown, Briggs and Driver, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*; Gesenius, *Handwörterbuch*, 15th edition; Feyerabend, *Hebrew-English Pocket Dictionary*; Breslau, *English and Hebrew Dictionary*.

IV. Biblical Aramaic.

1. Aramaic Portions of the Old Testament:

The Aramaic portions of the Old Testament are the following: *Ezr* 4:8 through 6:18; 7:11-26; *Dan* 2:4 through 7:28; [Gen 31:47](#) (two words); [Jer 10:11](#). The language in which they are written used to be called Chaldee, but is now generally known simply as Biblical Aramaic. It represents a further declension from classical Semitic as compared with the Hebrew. The following are the principal points in which Biblical Aramaic differs from Hebrew.

2. Phonology:

The accent is placed on the last syllable, the first vowel disappearing, e.g. *ʾābhadh* for Hebrew *ʾābhadh*. It is curious that the same feature is found in Algerine and Moroccan Arabic: thus *ḡaṣr* becomes *ḡsar*. Dentals take the place of sibilants: *ḡhabh* for *zāhābh*; *telāth* for *shālôsh*. The strong Hebrew **ש** frequently becomes **ס** and Hebrew **שׁ** becomes **סׁ** thus, *'ar'ā'* for *'erec*; *ʾūḡ* for *cūḡ*.

3. Grammar:

In Hebrew the definite article is the prefix *hal* (*ha-*); in Aramaic the affix *ā*; the latter, however, has almost lost its force. The dual is even more sparingly used than in Hebrew. The passive forms of verbs and those beginning with *nūn* are practically wanting; the passive or reflexive forms are made by prefixing the letter *t* to the corresponding active forms, and that much more regularly than in Hebrew, there being three active and three passive forms.

4. Syntax:

In regard to syntax there is to be noted the frequent use of the participle instead of a finite verb, as in Hebrew; the disuse of the conjunction “and” with the vocalization of the article; and the disuse of the construct state in nouns, instead of which a circumlocution with the relative *dī* is employed, e.g. *celēm dī dhehabh*, “an image of gold.” The same periphrasis is found also in West African Arabic.

5. Aramaic More Decadent than Hebrew:

It will thus be seen that if Hebrew represents a decadent form of an original classical language which was very similar to classical Arabic, Biblical Arabic stands on a still lower level. It is not to be supposed that Hebrew passed into Aramaic, though on the analogy of Arabic that view is not untenable. Rather, the different Semitic languages became fixed at different epochs. Arabic as a literary language crystallized almost at the source; Hebrew and the spoken Arabic of the East far down the stream; and Aramaic and Moroccan Arabic farthest down of all.

Literature.

Kautzsch, *Grammatik*; Strack, *Abriss des bibl. Aramaisch*; Marti, *Bibl. aram. Sprache*; the articles on “Aramaic” or “Chaldee” in the *Biblical Dicts.* cited under III, and article ARAMAIC LANGUAGE in this Encyclopedia; the Hebrew text of Ezra, Nehemiah, Daniel, edition by Baer. Hebrew Dictionaries. generally include Biblical Aramaic.

V. Literary Characteristics of the Semites.

1. Concrete and Abstract:

The thinking of the Hebrews, like that of other Semites, was done, not in the abstract, but in the concrete. Thus, we find the material put for the immaterial, the expression for the thought, the instrument for the action, the action for the feeling. This mode of expression frequently gives rise to striking anthropomorphisms. Thus we have the eye for watchfulness or care ([Psa 33:18](#)); the long hand for far-reaching powers ([Isa 59:1](#)); broken teeth for defeated malice ([Psa 3:7](#)); the sword for slaughter ([Psa 78:62](#)); haughty eyes for superciliousness ([Pro 6:17](#)); to say in the heart for to think ([Psa 10:6](#)). It would be an interesting study to examine to what extent these expressions have been taken over from Hebrew into English.

2. View of Nature:

The Hebrew does not know the distinction between animate and inanimate Nature. All Nature is animate ([Psa 104:29](#)). The little hills rejoice ([Psa 65:12](#)); the mountains skip ([Psa 114:4](#)); the trees clap their hands ([Isa 55:12](#)); even the stones may cry out ([Luk 19:40](#)). Such expressions are not to be taken as mere poetical figures of speech; they are meant quite literally. All Nature is one: man is merely a part of Nature ([Psa 104:23](#)), even if he be the highest part ([Psa 8:5](#)). Hence, perhaps, it arises that there is no neuter gender in the Semitic languages.

3. Pictorial Imagination:

The highly imaginative nature of the Hebrew comes into play when he is recounting past events or writing history. To his mind's eye all past events are present. He sees history taking place before his eyes as in a picture. Thus the perfect may generally be translated by the English past tense with "have," the imperfect by the English present tense with "is" or "is going to." In livelier style the participle is used: "They are entering the city, and behold Samuel is coming out to meet them" ([1Sa 9:14](#)). Hence, the *oratio recta* is always used in preference to the *oratio obliqua*. Moreover, the historian writes exactly as the professional story-teller narrates. Hence, he is always repeating himself and returning upon his own words ([1Sa 5:1](#), [1Sa 5:2](#)).

4. Prose and Poetry:

A result of the above facts is that there is no hard-and-fast distinction in Hebrew between prose and poetry. Neither is there in Hebrew, or in the Semitic

language generally, epic or dramatic poetry, because their prose possesses these qualities in a greater degree than does the poetry of other races. All Hebrew poetry is lyric or didactic. In it there is no rhyme nor meter. The nearest approach to meter is what is called the *ḵīnāh* strophe, in which each verse consists of two parallel members, each member having five words divided into three and then two. The best example of this is to be found in [Psa 19:7-9](#), and also in the BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS (which see), from which the verse has received its name.

5. Hebrew Easy of Translation:

From the above description it may be inferred that the language of the Old Testament is one extremely easy of translation into foreign tongues without loss of meaning or rhythm, though it would be extremely difficult to render any modern language into classical Hebrew. Hence, the Psalms, for example, are as fine in their German or English versions as they are in the original. Where the Old Testament has been translated into the language of the country, it has become a classic. The English Bible is as important for the study of the English language as are the plays of Shakespeare.

Literature.

In addition to the articles cited under III, Herder. *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, translation by J. Marsh, 1833; Ed. König, *Stilistik, Rhetorik, Poetik in Bezug auf die bibl. Litt. komparativisch dargestellt*, 1900; the same author's brochure on the "Style of Scripture" in *HDB*, volume V; J. F. McCurdy on the "Semites" in the same volume; J. Kennedy, *Hebrew Synonyms*.