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## **Comparative Vocabulary in Semitic Languages – Arabic, Syriac and Hebrew**

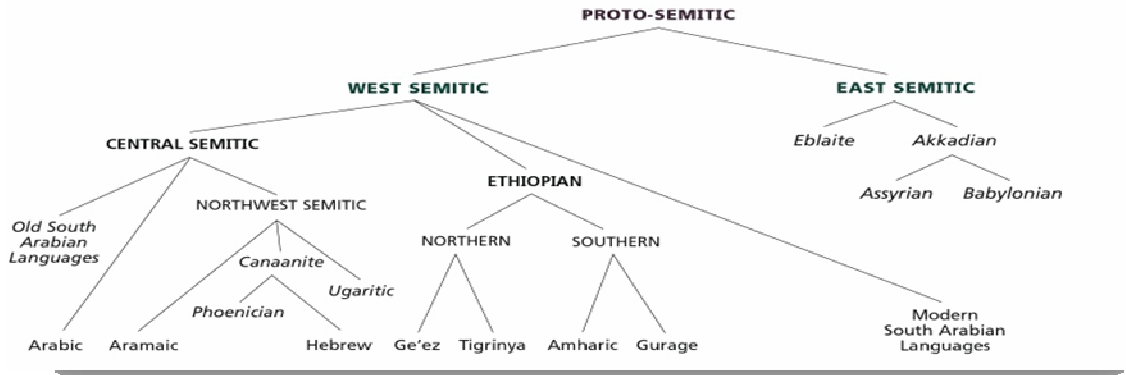
**Nassim Obeid, Ph.D. Candidate**

# Comparative Vocabulary in Semitic languages: Arabic, Syriac and Hebrew

Nassim Obeid, Ph.D. Candidate

## Introduction to Semitic Languages

Each of human language has its own historical developments which differ from age to age, and most of the languages have a system of writing, and that system also can be modified, and it is not stable.



Semitic languages are part of the Afro-asiatic family. This family contains many languages which were spoken in ancient world from the Mediterranean in the west to Iraq in the east, and from Ethiopia north to Anatolia. In the age of Islamic empire it was spoken by many people as the religious language (Arabic) from east of north India and west China to north Magnolia to south Russia, and from Spain to middle Africa and all Arab countries.

Nowadays, the major languages that still used are Arabic and Hebrew, both are still spoken. Arabic is by far the most common; some dialects of Arabic are spoken by more than 250 million speakers, from Morocco to Tajikistan, and it is also used in Classical and Modern Standard forms, for religious and other formal purposes. Modern Ethiopic languages like Amharic, Tigrinya, and Tigre are spoken by 25 million people in Ethiopia and Eritrea. Modern Hebrew is the language of 5 million inhabitants of Israel. And Aramaic dialects continue as the languages of a few hundred thousand speakers who have left the Middle East in recent years and spread far and wide.

## **Classification of the Semitic Family**

The classification offered by the Western studies in the field of Semitic languages is different from the classification offered by the Eastern studies in many aspects. Each group (Western studies and Eastern studies) tried to give their evidences for their theories. In fact, both groups were influenced by their religious backgrounds. Western scholars classified the Semitic languages based on the Bible, especially the Old Testament. For them, Hebrew is the original and the oldest language and based on that assumption they classified other languages. On the other hand, Eastern scholars were influenced by the Islamic point of views. For them Arabic, which is language of Holy Quran, is the original language of all other Semitic languages. So, in their studies, they considered Arabic as the oldest language in the Semitic languages family, which is nearer to the proto Semitic language. Perhaps the truth may be in between the two.

## **Language Timelines**

### **Arabic**

Arabic belongs to the Semitic language family. The earliest evidence of Arabic was found in inscriptions written in Nabatean and Palmyrene (although the script letters were Aramaic). Evidence for Arabic is available from between the first centuries B.C.E. and C.E. There were several dialects of Old Arabic that predated Classical Arabic, which drew on the Qur'an and pre-Islamic poetry in the 7th century C.E. and is spoken up to the present, along with many dialects.

Within a hundred years after the death (in 632 C.E) of the Prophet Muhammad, Arabic had become the official language of a world empire whose boundaries stretched from the Oxus River in Central Asia to the Atlantic Ocean, and had even moved northward into the Iberian Peninsula of Europe.

### **Syriac**

Syriac was an important Christian literary and liturgical language from the 3<sup>rd</sup> through the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. Syriac was based on the East Aramaic dialect, which became one of the centres of Christianity in the Middle East at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. The earliest Syriac inscriptions date from the first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century; the earliest documents not inscribed on stone date from 243.<sup>1</sup> Because of theological disputes, Syriac-speaking Christians divided during the 5<sup>th</sup> century into Nestorians, or East Syrians, under the Persian sphere of influence, and Jacobites, or West Syrians, under the Byzantine sphere. After this division the two groups developed distinct dialects differing chiefly in the pronunciation and written symbolization of vowels. Arabic

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<sup>1</sup> "Syriac language." Encyclopædia Britannica. [Ultimate Reference Suite](#). Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2008

dialects have been impacted by Syriac Languages especially in slang.<sup>2</sup> And Syriac is still spoken in a few villages in Syria.

### **Biblical Hebrew**

The earliest form of Hebrew is known as Biblical Hebrew. Spoken in ancient times in Palestine, Hebrew was supplanted by the western dialect of Aramaic beginning about the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC; the language continued to be used as a liturgical and literary language, however. It was revived as a spoken language in the 19th and 20th centuries and is the official language of Israel<sup>3</sup>. The oldest parts of the Bible, may have been written in the period 1300-1200 B.C.E. and are considered Archaic Hebrew.

The Hebrew used in most of the Bible is considered Classical Biblical Hebrew and covers the period from the first temple to the Babylonian exile. Late Biblical Hebrew covers the period of Persian domination, from 538 B.C.E. (post-exile) to 332 B.C.E., when the conquest of Palestine by Alexander of Macedon began the period of Hellenic domination<sup>4</sup>. During the Babylonian exile (586-538 B.C.E.) Hebrew was highly influenced by another Semitic language, Aramaic, which was the lingua franca of the Near East. Thereafter, Aramaic grew in influence, especially in urban areas like Jerusalem and among the aristocratic (urban) and commercial classes. Hebrew, on the other hand, continued to be the language of the rural population which constituted the majority of the people. Though Aramaic was the spoken language among the urban population, most of the official and administrative documents were written in Hebrew. The language used in official documents laid the groundwork for the legal language that was later used in the rabbinical academies in Palestine.

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<sup>2</sup> See Samiyyr al-Abdu. "Al-siraniyah al-arabiya" (Syriac –Arabic) p.68

<sup>3</sup> "Hebrew language." Encyclopædia Britannica. Ultimate Reference Suite. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Hecker, Bernice Varjick. The Biradical Origin of Semitic Roots. P.8

א	'alep	'	ל	lamed	l
ב	bet	b	מ ם	mem	m
ג	gimel	g	נ ן	nun	n
ד	dalet	d	ס	samek	s
ה	he	h	ע	ayin	ʿ
ו	waw	w	פ ף	pe	p
ז	zayin	z	צ ץ	tsade	ṣ
ח	het	ḥ	ק	qop	q
ט	tet	ṭ	ר	reš	r
י	yod	y	ש	šin	š
כ ך	kap	k	ת	taw	t

### Hebrew (Jewish square)<sup>5</sup>

Recent excavations have disclosed examples of Hebrew dating from the fifteenth century B.C.E. These writings show how closely related Biblical Hebrew is to other ancient Semitic languages.

The history of the Hebrew language is usually divided into four major periods: Biblical, or Classical, Hebrew, until about the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, in which most of the Old Testament is written; Mishnaic, or Rabbinic, Hebrew, the language of the Mishna which a collection of Jewish traditions, written about AD 200, Medieval Hebrew, from about the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD, when many words were borrowed from Greek, Spanish, Arabic, and other languages; and Modern Hebrew.

The Hebrew language developed rapidly between the first and third century of the Common Era, after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E. During the second century, the center of Jewish life shifted from Jerusalem to the Galilee, a region in which the mixed population spoke Aramaic and Greek. Even the rabbinic academies which studied the Mishna, adopted Aramaic as the spoken language. Though Hebrew was no longer spoken, it continued to be used in liturgy and the study of the Bible. Hebrew remained the spiritual language of the Jewish people.

<sup>5</sup> From: <http://ling.ucsd.edu/~rose/Semitic%20Languages/Writing%20systems.ppt>

The Hebrew of the middle Ages was highly influenced by Arabic in its vocabulary, word structure, and syntax. Throughout the middle Ages, Hebrew, though not ordinarily spoken, continued to be used for a variety of purposes: religious, literary, commercial, and even entertainment.

Under the impact of Islamic culture during the ninth to the thirteenth century, rabbinic, philosophical, and poetic works in Hebrew flourished. Jews living in Spain, Portugal, and Northern Africa composed significant literary works in Hebrew.

At the beginning of the Enlightenment period, towards the close of the eighteenth century, the vernacular of the masses in Europe was Yiddish; but most scholars and writers continued to write in Hebrew. The first classics of Modern Hebrew literature were written in Eastern Europe at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century.

With the influx of Jews from Europe and the Middle East speaking scores of vernaculars, Hebrew assumed a new role serving as a unifying factor within this Babel of languages, and became the mother-tongue of the younger generation of Jewish people in Palestine. At the same time, influenced by the vocabulary and linguistic structure of the languages spoken by the new immigrants, Hebrew grew and developed.

In my studies, I found Arabic, Hebrew and Syriac are so related to each other, they are closer more than we expect. When you compare both languages (Hebrew and Arabic) in details, by using biggest historical dictionaries, you will be surprised when you find the basic or original meanings are one and the same for most of the old words in Arabic and Hebrew.

### **Comparing vocabularies in Arabic Hebrew<sup>6</sup> and Syriac<sup>7</sup>**

In this paper the words have been collected from different dictionaries in Arabic, Syriac and Hebrew, and classified according to normal meaning categories, such as body parts, fruits & vegetables, kinship, and common and cultural words.

What I found in this comparison was the deep relationship between these languages in words which related to everyday use, and the differences are more in the words, which represented new concepts just as new technical words, because nowadays borrowing words from other languages is more easily resorted to in Hebrew, which prefer to use the new words as they are without changes or with little change. But, in Arabic, the grammarians prefer to derive new words from within and by using analogy. For example the word “University” is used as it is in Hebrew *oniversitah* (אוניברסיטה), but in Arabic they use *jami'a* (جامعة) which is derived root *gm*, the word *jami'a* means in old meaning: meeting of people together, and that word *jami'a* used

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<sup>6</sup> See for Hebrew words meaning: Qujman, ARABIC HEBREW DICTIONARY

<sup>7</sup> See: Louis Costaz, S.J. Syriac-English Dictionary, see also Samiyyr 'abdu. “Al-sirianiyah al-'arabiya” (Syriac – Arabic) p.84-87

nowadays for “University” means a corporation of teachers and students formed for the purpose of giving and receiving instruction in a fixed range of subjects, offering courses and research facilities in mainly non-vocational subjects and having acknowledged powers and privileges, especially that of conferring degrees.

Also I found that the words which related to fruits and vegetables are similar if they are found in all areas of Semitic lands. Such: *date* which is available from olden days until now, so it is in Arabic *تمر tamr* , in Hebrew *תמר tamar*. If under this category of fruits and vegetables names for vegetables and fruits that are adopted into the Semitic lands from outside, their names differ from one language to another: “Corn” in Arabic *ذرة ora* , in Hebrew *תירס tiras*. If we take the words of “body parts,” these words are all similar and same in these languages because they are more used every day, and will not change due to different times or areas. For example: “Hand” in Arabic *يد yad*, in Syriac *ܝܕܝܐ ayda*, in Hebrew *יד yad*. Most of these are also similar in pronunciation.

### Some Impressionistic Measurements of Similarities

I can say that the similarities in words may be as follows:

For “Body parts,” the similarity is around: **95%**

For “Fruits & vegetables“ the similarity is around: **60%**

For “Kinship” the similarity is around: **80%**

For “Common and cultural words” the similarity is around: **70%**

Now, let us see **some** of these comparative words:

#### Body parts:

English (meaning)	Arabic with <sup>8</sup> transcription	Syriac <sup>9</sup> with transcription	Hebrew <sup>10</sup> with transcription
Hand	يد yad	ܝܕܝܐ ayda	יד yad
Head	رأس	ܩܘܦܠܐ	ראשי

<sup>8</sup> For Arabic words see Ibn Manqur, , “Lisan Al-ʿArab” ( The tongue of Arabs), (Arabic- Arabic Dictionary).

<sup>9</sup> For more words in Aramic & Syriac see Al-yassuie, Rafeal. “ğara’ib al-luğa al-ʿarabiyya” (Strangers of Arabic Language) from p.171 to 210

<sup>10</sup> For more words see Al-yassuie, Rafeal. “ğara’ib al-luğa al-ʿarabiyya” (Strangers of Arabic Language) p. 211

	ra's	qrqpta	rašras
Eye	عين 'ayn	عَيْن eyn	עַיִן 'ayn
Ear	أذن 'u□un	أُذُن 'udna	אָזְנוֹן 'ozn\ 'ozen
Tooth	سن sin	سِّن šna	שֵׁן šin\sin\šean
Tongue	لسان lisaan	لِسَان lešona	לְשׁוֹן lišon\lašon
Heart	قلب qalb	قَلْب libu	לב lib\lave
Foot	قدم ارجل qadam\riql	رِجْل regloah	רגל reagel
leg	ساق saq	=	רגל Reagel
finger	إصبع 'isba□	يَصْبَع cebeoa	אצבע etsba□
heir	شعر ša□ar	شَعْر saeroa	שיער sea□r
<b>Fruits &amp; vegetables</b>			
grape	عنب □inab	عِنَاب □anbo	עֵינֵב □nav



banana	موز mwz	=	בַּנָּנָה\מוז mwz\banana
fig	تین tyyn	תַּאנָה tata	תאנה taena
palm	نخيل na□il	פֶּשְׂכֹא peškoa	דקל deaqel
cucumber	خيار □iyar	=	מלפפון melafefon
apricot	مشمش mušmuš	=	משמש mišmaše
carrot	جزر gazar	=	גזר geazer
date	تمر tamr	=	תמר tamar
Corn	ذرة □ora	=	תירס tiras
Eggplant	باذنجان ba□ingan	=	חציל chatsil\ hatseel
Lemon	ليمون laymwun	=	לימון limon
melon	شمام šammam	=	מלון mealon
Watermelon	بطيخ batyich	=	אבטיח

	ba□□e□		avati'ah
Walnut	جوز gwz	=	אגוז agoz\egoze
Tree	شجرة šagara	شجره ايلون aiylon\qiys	שיח\עץ ets\seyah
Apple	تفاح tuffa□	=	תפוח tapuach\tapuah
lettuce	خس □as	=	חסה □assa
mushroom	فطر fi□r	=	פטריות pi□riya
olive	زيتون zytwun	أشجار zayt'oa	זית zayit
onion	بصل ba□al	=	בצל bat□al
Orange	برتقال burtuqal	=	תפוז tapoose
Rice	رز\أرز ruz\'ruz	=	אורז 'orez
<b>Kinship</b>			
Father	أب 'ab	أبو 'aboa	אב 'aba\'av
mother	أم	أمه 'ameh	אם

	'um	'aemoa	'aim\aoom
Mother in law	حماه □amah	موتو xmotoh	חמות □amot
Brother	أخ 'a□	أخو 'aha	אח 'ah
sister	أخت 'u□t	أختي 'uhta	אחות 'ahut
Son	ابن bn\ibn	بنو b'roa	בן bean
daughter	بنت bint	بنات b'arot	בת bat
daughter-in-law	كنة kinnah	كنا k'altoa	כלה kallah
child	ولد walad	ولدو ylwda	ילד Ealed
Uncle	عم □am	عمو do'doa	דוד Dod
Aunt	عمة خالة □amma\□aala	=	דודה Dodah
Cousin (female)	بنت العم bint al-□am	أخوتو axyont'oa	בת דוד bit dod
Cousin (male)	ابن العم ibn al□am	عمو d'odoa	בן דוד ben dod

Grandmother	جدّة/است gaddat\sitt	=	סבתא/גברת gvert\savta
Grandfather	جدّ jadd	=	סבא Sava
<b>Common and cultural words</b>			
Balloon	بالون balwwn	=	בלון Balon
Basket	سلة sallah	سراجة sriygt'oa	סל Sal
Bear	دب dub	دبوع ddeboa	דוב Dov
Beard	ذقن الحية □aqinli□ya	=	זקן Zakan
Bed	سرير/تخت saryr\ta□it	مدمكوا medmkoa	מיטה Mitta
Book	كتاب/سفر kitaab\sifr	כתבוע/ספיר k'tboa\sefiroa	קתבוע/ספר ktobba\seافر
bridge	جسر gizr	=	גשר Geašer
brush	مبشرة mibraša	=	מברשת Mivreašet
camel	جمل gamal	جملة gamlea	גמל Gamal

chair	كرسي kwrsy	كُرْسِيَا kwrsya	כִּסֵּא Kisae
cub	كأس كوز ka's\koz	كُوسَا kosoa	כִּס Kose
dog	كلب kalb	كَلْبَا kalboa	קָלֵב Kealev
donkey	حمار ḥimar	=	חמור ḥamor
elephant	فيل fyyl	=	פִּיל pyyl\fyyl

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<http://ling.ucsd.edu/~rose/Semitic%20Languages/Writing%20systems.ppt>

<http://jss.oxfordjournals.org/>

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### Transcription Symbols

There are differences in using transcription symbols from one scholar to another in transcribing data from Semitic languages. So, I compared them, then I selected the transcription which is used by the **Journal of Semitic studies**<sup>11</sup>(Oxford Journals, Manchester University, UK , because it's used more widely scholars working in this field of studies. These symbols are also based on IPA.

The following transliteration systems have been used:

Arabic consonants (Arabic alphabetical order)

1. [ ' ] ا voiceless glottal stop
2. [ b ] ب voiced bilabial stop
3. [ t ] ت voiceless apico-dental stop
4. [ θ ] ث voiceless inter-dental fricative
5. [ j ] ج voiced lamino-alveolar palatal affricate
6. [ χ ] ح voiceless radico-pharyngeal fricative
7. [ ʁ ] خ voiceless dorso-uvular fricative
8. [ d ] د voiced apico-dental stop
9. [ ð ] ذ voiced inter-dental fricative
10. [ r ] ر voiced apical trill roll
11. [ z ] ز voiced apico-alveolar fricative
12. [ s ] س voiceless apico-alveolar fricative
13. [ š ] ش voiceless lamino-palatal fricative
14. [ ʃ ] ص voiceless apico-alveolar emphatic fricative
15. [ ʒ ] ض voiced apico-dental emphatic fricative
16. [ t̪ ] ط voiceless apico-dental emphatic stop
17. [ d̪ ] ظ voiced inter-dental emphatic fricative
18. [ ʕ ] ع voiced radico-pharyngeal fricative
19. [ ɣ ] غ voiced dorso-uvular fricative
20. [ f ] ف voiceless labio-dental fricative
21. [ q ] ق voiceless dorso-uvular stop
22. [ k ] ك voiceless velar stop

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<sup>11</sup> See this journal in this link: <http://jss.oxfordjournals.org/> and you can download the detailed instructions, or [style sheet](http://www.oxfordjournals.org/semij/for_authors/stylesheet.pdf) from this link [http://www.oxfordjournals.org/semij/for\\_authors/stylesheet.pdf](http://www.oxfordjournals.org/semij/for_authors/stylesheet.pdf)

23. [ l ] ل voiced apico-alveolar lateral
24. [ m ] م voiced bilabial nasal
25. [ n ] ن voiced apico-alveolar nasal
26. [ h ] ه voiceless laryngeal fricative
27. [ w ] و voiced bilabial (round) velar glide
28. [ y ] ي voiced palatal (unrounded) glide

#### Vowels

1. [ i ] voiced short high front unrounded vowel
2. [ ĩ ] voiced long high front unrounded vowel
3. [ a ] voiced short central unrounded vowel
4. [ ā ] voiced long central unrounded vowel
5. [ u ] voiced short high back rounded vowel
6. [ ū ] voiced long high back rounded vowel

#### Hebrew

' b g h w z ʔ ʕ y k l m n s ʔ p ʔ q r s š t.

In keeping with the accepted practice of Semiticists, I have used the symbol š for the IPA ʃ, and I have used ʔ for the voiceless glottal stop.

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