

ancient "holy" language even after it had ceased to be spoken. Esther, Ecclesiastes, and a few Psalms, which belong to the 3d and 2d centuries before our era, are indeed written in Hebrew, but are so strongly tinged by the Aramaic influence as to prove that the writers usually spoke Aramaic. We are not likely to be far wrong in saying that in the Maccabæan age Hebrew had died out among the Jews, and there is nothing to show that it survived longer amongst any of the neighbouring peoples.

But in the last period of the history of Jerusalem, and still more after the destruction of the city by Titus, the Jewish schools played so important a part that the life of the Hebrew language was in a manner prolonged. The lectures and discussions of the learned were carried on in that tongue. We have very extensive specimens of this more modern Hebrew in the Mishnah and other works, and scattered pieces throughout both Talmuds. But, just as the "classical" Sanskrit, which has been spoken and written by the Brahmans during the last twenty-five centuries, differs considerably from the language which was once in use among the people, so this "language of the learned" diverges in many respects from the "holy language"; and this distinction is one of which the rabbis were perfectly conscious. The "language of the learned" borrows a great part of its vocabulary from Aramaic,¹ and this exercises a strong influence upon the grammatical forms. The grammar is perceptibly modified by the peculiar style of these writings, which for the most part treat of legal and ritual questions in a strangely laconic and pointed manner. But, large as is the proportion of foreign words and artificial as this language is, it contains a considerable number of purely Hebrew elements which do not appear in the Old Testament. Although we may generally assume, in the case of a word occurring in the Mishnah but not found in the Old Testament, that it is borrowed from Aramaic, there are several words of this class which, by their radical consonants, prove themselves to be genuine Hebrew. And even some grammatical phenomena of this language are to be regarded as a genuine development of Hebrew, though they are unknown to earlier Hebrew speech.

Medieval Hebrew.

From the beginning of the Middle Ages down to our own times the Jews have produced an enormous mass of writings in Hebrew, sometimes closely following the language of the Bible, sometimes that of the Mishnah, sometimes introducing in a perfectly inorganic manner a great quantity of Aramaic forms, and occasionally imitating the Arabic style. The study of these variations has but little interest for the linguist, since they are nothing but a purely artificial imitation, dependent upon the greater or less skill of the individual. The language of the Mishnah stands in much closer connexion with real life, and has a definite *raison d'être*; all later Hebrew is to be classed with mediæval and modern Latin. Much Hebrew also was written in the Middle Ages by the hostile brethren of the Jews, the Samaritans; but for the student of language these productions have, at the most, the charm attaching to curiosities.

The ancient Hebrew language, especially in the matter of syntax, has an essentially primitive character. Parataxis of sentences prevails over hypotaxis to a greater extent than in any other literary Semitic language with which we are well acquainted. The favourite method is to link sentences together by means of a simple "and." There is a great lack of particles to express with clearness the more subtle connexion of ideas. The use of the verbal tenses is in a great measure determined by the imagination,

¹ It is a characteristic feature that "my father" and "my mother" are here expressed by purely Aramaic forms. Even the learned did not wish to call their "papas" and "mamas" by any other names than those to which they had been accustomed in infancy.

which regards things unaccomplished as accomplished and the past as still present. There are but few words or inflexions to indicate slight modifications of meaning, though in ancient times the language may perhaps have distinguished certain moods of the verb somewhat more plainly than the present punctuation does. But in any case this language was far less suited for the definite expression of studied thought, and less suited still for the treatment of abstract subjects, than for poetry. We must remember, however, that as long as Hebrew was a living language it never had to be used for the expression of the abstract. Had it lived somewhat longer it might very possibly have learnt to adapt itself better to the formulating of systematic conceptions. The only book in the Old Testament which attempts to grapple with an abstract subject in plain prose—namely, Ecclesiastes—dates from a time when Hebrew was dying out or was already dead. That the gifted author does not always succeed in giving clear expression to his ideas is partly due to the fact that the language had never been employed for any scientific purposes whatsoever. With regard to grammatical forms, Hebrew has lost much that is still preserved in Arabic; but the greater richness of Arabic is in part the result of later development.

The vocabulary of the Hebrew language is, as we have said, known but imperfectly. The Old Testament is no very large work; it contains, moreover, many repetitions, and a great number of pieces which are of little use to the lexicographer. On the other hand, much may be derived from certain poetical books, such as Job. The numerous ἀραξ λεγόμενα are a sufficient proof that many more words existed than appear in the Old Testament, the writers of which never had occasion to use them. Were we in possession of the whole Hebrew vocabulary in the time of Jeremiah, for example, we should be far better able to determine the relation in which Hebrew stands to the other Semitic languages, the Old Testament would be far more intelligible to us, and it would be very much easier to detect the numerous corrupt passages in our text.

Phœnician.—This dialect closely resembles Hebrew, and is known to us from only one authentic source, namely, inscriptions, some of which date from about 600 B.C. or earlier; but the great mass of them begin with the 4th century before our era. These inscriptions² we owe to the Phœnicians of the mother-country and the neighbouring regions (Cyprus, Egypt, and Greece), as well as to the Phœnicians of Africa, especially Carthage. Inscriptions are, however, a very insufficient means for obtaining the knowledge of a language. The number of subjects treated in them is not large; many of the most important grammatical forms and many of the words most used in ordinary life do not occur. Moreover, the "lapidary style" is often very hard to understand. The repetition of obscure phrases, in the same connexion, in several inscriptions does not help to make them more intelligible. Of what use is it to us that, for instance, thousands of Carthaginian inscriptions begin with the very same incomprehensible dedication to two divinities? The difficulty of interpretation is greatly increased by the fact that single words are very seldom separated from one another, and that vowel-letters are used extremely sparingly. We therefore come but too often upon very ambiguous groups of letters. In spite of this, our knowledge of Phœnician has made considerable progress of late. Some assistance is also got from Greek and Latin writers, who cite not only many Phœnician proper names but single Phœnician words: Plautus in particular inserts in the *Penulus* whole passages in Punic, some of which are accompanied by a Latin

² The scattered materials are being collected in the *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum* of the Paris Academy.

translation. This source of information must, however, be used with great caution. It was not the object of Plautus to exhibit the Punic language with precision, a task for which the Latin alphabet is but ill adapted, but only to make the populace laugh at the jargon of the hated Carthaginians. Moreover, he had to force the Punic words into Latin *senarii*; and finally the text, being unintelligible to copyists, is terribly corrupt. Much ingenuity has been wasted on the Punic of Plautus; but the passage yields valuable results to cautious investigation which does not try to explain too much.¹ In its grammar Phœnician closely resembles Hebrew. In both dialects the consonants are the same, often in contrast to Aramaic and other cognate languages.² As to vowels, Phœnician seems to diverge rather more from Hebrew. The connecting of clauses is scarcely carried further in the former language than in the latter. A slight attempt to define the tenses more sharply appears once at least in the joining of *kân* (fruit) with a perfect, to express complete accomplishment (or the pluperfect).³ One important difference is that the use of *wâw* conversive with the imperfect—so common in Hebrew and in the inscription of Mesha—is wanting in Phœnician. The vocabulary of the language is very like that of Hebrew, but words rare in Hebrew are often common in Phœnician. For instance, "to do" is in Phœnician not *asâ* but *pa'al* (the Arabic *fa'ala*), which in Hebrew occurs only in poetry and elevated language. "Gold" is not *zahab* (as in most Semitic languages) but *harûç* (Assyrian *hurâç*), which is used occasionally in Hebrew poetry. Traces of dialectal distinctions have been found in the great inscription of Byblus, the inhabitants of which seem to be distinguished from the rest of the Phœnicians in Josh. xiii. 5 (and 1 Kings v. 32 [A.V. v. 18]): It is probable that various differences between the language of the mother-country and that of the African colonies arose at an early date, but our materials do not enable us to come to any definite conclusion on this point. In the later African inscriptions there appear certain phonetic changes, especially in consequence of the softening of the gutturals, --changes which show themselves yet more plainly in the so-called Neo-Punic inscriptions (beginning with the 1st, if not the 2d, century before our era). In these the gutturals, which had lost their real sound, are frequently interchanged in writing; and other modifications may also be perceived. Unfortunately the Neo-Punic inscriptions are written in such a debased indistinct character that it is often impossible to discover with certainty the real form of the words. This dialect was still spoken about 400, and perhaps long afterwards, in those districts of North Africa which had once belonged to Carthage. It would seem that in the mother-country the Phœnician language withstood the encroachment of Greek on the one hand and of Aramaic on the other somewhat longer than Hebrew did.

Aramaic.—Aramaic is nearly related to Hebrew-Phœnician; but there is nevertheless a sharp line of demarcation between the two groups. Of its original home nothing certain is known. In the Old Testament "Aram" appears at an early period as a designation of certain districts in Syria ("Aram of Damascus," &c.) and in Mesopotamia ("Aram of the Two Rivers"). The language of the

¹ See Gildemeister, in Ritschl's *Plautus* (vol. ii. fasc. v., Leipzig, 1884).

² At an early period the Phœnician pronunciation may have distinguished a greater number of original consonants than are distinguished in writing. It is at least remarkable that the Greeks render the name of the city of Çur (Hebrew *Çôr*), which must originally have been pronounced *Thuri*, with a τ (*Tópos*), and the name of Çidón, where the ç runs through all the Semitic languages, with a σ (*Σιδών*). Distinctions of this kind, justified by etymology, have perhaps been obscured in Hebrew by the imperfection of the alphabet. In the case of *sin* and *šin* this can be positively proved.

³ *Kân nadar*, "had vowed," *Lal.* 5 (*C.I.S.*, Phœn., No. 93).

Aramæans gradually spread far and wide, and occupied all Syria, both those regions which were before in the possession of the Kheta, probably a non-Semitic people, and those which were most likely inhabited by Canaanite tribes; last of all, Palestine became Aramaized. Towards the east this language was spoken on the Euphrates, and throughout the districts of the Tigris south and west of the Armenian and Kurdish mountains; the province in which the capitals of the Arsacides and the Sásánians were situated was called "the country of the Aramaeans." In Babylonia and Assyria a large, or perhaps the larger, portion of the population were most probably Aramaeans, even at a very early date, whilst Assyrian was the language of the Government.

The oldest extant Aramaic documents consist of inscriptions on monuments and on seals and gems. In the Persian period Aramaic was the official language of the provinces west of the Euphrates; and this explains the fact that coins which were struck by governors and vassal princes in Asia Minor, and of which the stamp was in some cases the work of skilled Greek artists, bear Aramaic inscriptions, whilst those of other coins are Greek. This, of course, does not prove that Aramaic was ever spoken in Asia Minor and as far north as Sinope and the Hellespont. In Egypt Aramaic inscriptions have been found of the Persian period, one bearing the date of the fourth year of Xerxes (482 B.C.);⁴ we have also official documents on papyrus, unfortunately in a very tattered condition for the most part, which prove that the Persians preferred using this convenient language to mastering the difficulties of the Egyptian systems of writing. It is, further, very possible that at that time there were considerable numbers of Aramaeans in Egypt, just as there were of Phœnicians, Greeks, and Jews. But probably this preference for Aramaic originated under the Assyrian empire, in which a very large proportion of the population spoke Aramaic, and in which this language would naturally occupy a more important position than it did under the Persians. We therefore understand why it was taken for granted that a great Assyrian official could speak Aramaic (2 Kings xviii. 26; Isa. xxxvi. 11), and for the same reason the dignitaries of Judah appear to have learned the language (*ibid.*); namely, in order to communicate with the Assyrians.⁵ The short dominion of the Chaldeans very probably strengthened this preponderance of Aramaic. A few ancient Aramaic inscriptions have lately been discovered far within the limits of Arabia, in the palm oasis of Teimâ (in the north of the Hijâz); the oldest and by far the most important of these was very likely made before the Persian period. We may presume that Aramaic was introduced into the district by a mercantile colony, which settled in this ancient seat of commerce, and in consequence of which Aramaic may have remained for some time the literary language of the neighbouring Arabs. All these older Aramaic monuments exhibit a language which is almost absolutely identical. One peculiarity which distinguishes it from later Aramaic is that in the relative and demonstrative pronoun the sound originally pronounced *dh* is changed into *z*, as in Hebrew, not into *d*, as is required by a rule universal in the Aramaic dialects.⁶ The Egyptian monuments at least bear marks of Hebrew, or more correctly Phœnician, influence.

The Aramaic portions of the Old Testament show us the form of the language which was in use among the Jews of Palestine. Isolated passages in Ezra perhaps

⁴ See the Palæographical Society's *Oriental Series*, plate lxiii.

⁵ We possess certain small documents in Semitic writing which date from the Assyrian period, but of which the linguistic character is still very obscure; they contain Aramaic, Phœnician, and probably Assyrian forms. See *Z.D.M.G.*, xxxiii. 321.

⁶ Some traces of this phenomenon are found later.

belong to the Persian period, but have certainly been remodelled by a later writer.¹ Yet in Ezra we find a few antique forms which do not occur in Daniel. The Aramaic pieces contained in the Bible have the great advantage of being furnished with vowels and other orthographical signs, though these were not inserted until long after the composition of the books, and are sometimes at variance with the text itself. But, since Aramaic was still a living language when the punctuation came into existence, and since the lapse of time was not so very great, the tradition ran less risk of corruption than in the case of Hebrew. Its general correctness is further attested by the innumerable points of resemblance between this language and Syriac, with which we are accurately acquainted. The Aramaic of the Bible exhibits various antique features which afterwards disappeared,—for example, the formation of the passive by means of internal vowel-change, and the causative with *ha* instead of with *a*,—phenomena which have been falsely explained as Hebraisms. Biblical Aramaic agrees in all essential points with the language used in the numerous inscriptions of Palmyra (beginning soon before the Christian era and extending to about the end of the 3d century) and on the Nabatean coins and stone monuments (concluding about the year 100). Aramaic was the language of Palmyra, the aristocracy of which were to a great extent of Arabian extraction. In the northern portion of the Nabatean kingdom (not far from Damascus) there was probably a large Aramaic population, but farther south Arabic was spoken. At that time, however, Aramaic was highly esteemed as a cultivated language, for which reason the Arabs in question made use of it, as their own language was not reduced to writing, just as in those ages Greek inscriptions were set up in many districts where no one spoke Greek. That the Nabateans were Arabs is sufficiently proved by the fact that, with the exception of a few Greek names, almost all the numerous names which occur in the Nabatean inscriptions are Arabic, in many cases with distinctly Arabic terminations. A further proof of this is that in the great inscriptions over the tombs of Hejr (not far from Teima) the native Arabic continually shows through the foreign disguise,—for instance, in the use of Arabic words whenever the writer does not happen to remember the corresponding Aramaic terms, in the use of the Arabic particle *fa*, of the Arabic *ghair*, “other than,” and in several syntactic features. The great inscriptions cease with the overthrow of the Nabatean kingdom by Trajan (105); but the Arabian nomads in those countries, especially in the Sinaitic peninsula, often scratched their names on the rocks down to a later period, adding some benedictory formula in Aramaic. The fact that several centuries afterwards, the name of “Nabatean” was used by the Arabs as synonymous with “Aramæan” was probably due to the gradual spread of Aramaic over a great part of what had once been the country of the Nabateans. In any case Aramaic then exercised an immense influence. This is also proved by the place which it occupies in the strange Pahlavi writing, various branches of which date from the time of the Parthian empire (see PAHLAVI). Biblical Aramaic, as also the language of the Palmyrene and Nabatean inscriptions, may be described as an older form of Western Aramaic. The opinion that the Palestinian Jews brought their Aramaic dialect direct from Babylon—whence the incorrect name “Chaldee”—is altogether untenable.

We may now trace somewhat further the development of Western Aramaic in Palestine; but unhappily few of

¹ The decree which is said to have been sent by Ezra is in its present form a comparatively late production.

the sources from which we derive our information can be thoroughly trusted. In the synagogues it was necessary that the reading of the Bible should be followed by an oral “targum” or translation into Aramaic, the language of the people. The Targum was at a later period fixed in writing, but the officially sanctioned form of the Targum to the Pentateuch (the so-called Targum of Onkelos) and of that to the prophets (the so-called Jonathan) was not finally settled till the 4th or 5th century, and not in Palestine but in Babylonia. The redactors of the Targum preserved on the whole the older Palestinian dialect; yet that of Babylon, which differed considerably from the former, exercised a vitiating influence. The punctuation, which was added later, first in Babylonia, is far less trustworthy than that of the Aramaic pieces in the Bible. The language of Onkelos and Jonathan differs but little from Biblical Aramaic. The language spoken some time afterwards by the Palestinian Jews, especially in Galilee, is exhibited in a series of rabbinical works, the so-called Jerusalem Targums (of which, however, those on the Hagiographa are in some cases of later date), a few Midrashic works, and the Jerusalem Talmud. Unfortunately all these books, of which the Midrashim and the Talmud contain much Hebrew as well as Aramaic, have not been handed down with care, and require to be used with great caution for linguistic purposes. Moreover, the influence of the older language and orthography has in part obscured the characteristics of these popular dialects; for example, various gutturals are still written, although they are no longer pronounced. The adaptation of the spelling to the real pronunciation is carried furthest in the Jerusalem Talmud, but not in a consistent manner. Besides, all these books are without vowel-points; but the frequent use of vowel-letters in the later Jewish works renders this defect less sensible.

Not only the Jews but also the Christians of Palestine retained their native dialect for some time as an ecclesiastical and literary language. We possess translations of the Gospels and fragments of other works in this dialect by the Palestinian Christians dating from about the 5th century, accompanied by a punctuation which was not added till some time later. This dialect closely resembles that of the Palestinian Jews, as was to be expected from the fact that those who spoke it were of Jewish origin.

Finally, the Samaritans, among the inhabitants of Palestine, translated their only sacred book, the Pentateuch, into their own dialect. The critical study of this translation proves that the language which lies at its base was very much the same as that of the neighbouring Jews. Perhaps, indeed, the Samaritans may have carried the softening of the gutturals a little further than the Jews of Galilee. Their absurd attempt to embellish the language of the translation by arbitrarily introducing forms borrowed from the Hebrew original has given rise to the false notion that Samaritan is a mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic. The introduction of Hebrew and even of Arabic words and forms was practised in Samaria on a still larger scale by copyists who lived after Aramaic had become extinct. The later works written in the Samaritan dialect are, from a linguistic point of view, as worthless as the compositions of Samaritans in Hebrew; the writers, who spoke Arabic, endeavoured to write in languages with which they were but half acquainted.

All these Western Aramaic dialects, including that of the oldest inscriptions, have this feature among others in common, that they form the third person singular masculine and the third person plural masculine and feminine in the imperfect by prefixing *y*, as do the other Semitic languages. And in these dialects the termination *á* (the so-called “status emphaticus”) still retained

the meaning of a definite article down to a tolerably late period.

As early as the 7th century the conquests of the Moslems greatly circumscribed the domain of Aramaic and a few centuries later it was almost completely supplanted in the west by Arabic. For the Christians of those countries, who, like every one else, spoke Arabic, the Palestinian dialect was no longer of importance, and they adopted as their ecclesiastical language the dialect of the other Aramæan Christians, the Syriac (or Edessene). The only localities where a Western Aramaic dialect still survives are a few villages in Anti-Libanus. Our information upon this subject is but slight and fragmentary; but it is hoped that Professors Prym and Socin will soon be able to furnish more ample details.

The popular Aramaic dialect of Babylonia from the 4th to the 6th century of our era is exhibited in the Babylonian Talmud, in which, however, as in the Jerusalem Talmud, there is a constant mingling of Aramaic and Hebrew passages. To a somewhat later period, and probably not to exactly the same district of Babylonia, belong the writings of the MANDEANS (*q.v.*), a strange sect, half Christian and half heathen, who from a linguistic point of view possess the peculiar advantage of having remained almost entirely free from the influence of Hebrew, which is so perceptible in the Aramaic writings of Jews as well as of Christians. The orthography of the Mandæans comes nearer than that of the Talmud to the real pronunciation, and in it the softening of the gutturals is most clearly seen. In other respects there is a close resemblance between Mandæan and the language of the Babylonian Talmud. The forms of the imperfect which we have enumerated above take in these dialects *n* or *l*.¹ In Babylonia, as in Syria, the language of the Arabic conquerors rapidly drove out that of the country. The latter has long been totally extinct, unless possibly a few surviving Mandæans still speak among themselves a more modern form of their dialect.

At Edessa, in the west of Mesopotamia, the native dialect had already been used for some time as a literary language, and had been reduced to rule through the influence of the schools (as is proved by the fixity of the grammar and orthography) even before Christianity acquired power in the country in the 2d century. At an early period the Old and New Testaments were here translated, with the help of Jewish tradition. This version (the so-called Peshitta or Peshito) became the Bible of Aramæan Christendom, and Edessa became its capital. Thus the Aramæan Christians of the neighbouring countries, even those who were subjects of the Persian empire, adopted the Edessan dialect as the language of the church, of literature, and of cultivated intercourse. Since the ancient name of the inhabitants, “Aramæans,” just like that of “Ελληνες,” had acquired in the minds of Jews and Christians the unpleasant signification of “heathens,” it was generally avoided, and in its place the Greek terms “Syrians” and “Syriac” were used. But “Syriac” was also the name given by the Jews and Christians of Palestine to their own language, and both Greeks and Persians designated the Aramæans of Babylonia as “Syrians.” It is therefore, properly speaking, incorrect to employ the word “Syriac” as meaning the language of Edessa alone; but, since it was the most important of these dialects, it has the best claim to this generally received appellation. It has, as we have said, a shape very definitely fixed; and in it the above-mentioned forms of the imperfect take an *n*. As in the Babylonian dialects, the termination *á* has become so completely a part of the substantive to which it is added that it has wholly lost the meaning of the definite

¹ See Nöldeke, *Mandäische Grammatik* (Halle, 1875).

article, whereby the clearness of the language is perceptibly impaired. The influence exercised by Greek is very apparent in Syriac. From the 3d to the 7th century an extensive literature was produced in this language, consisting chiefly, but not entirely, of ecclesiastical works. In the development of this literature the Syrians of the Persian empire took an eager part. In the Eastern Roman empire Syriac was, after Greek, by far the most important language; and under the Persian kings it virtually occupied a more prominent position as an organ of culture than the Persian language itself. The conquests of the Arabs totally changed this state of things. But meanwhile, even in Edessa, a considerable difference had arisen between the written language and the popular speech, in which the process of modification was still going on. About the year 700 it became a matter of absolute necessity to systematize the grammar of the language and to introduce some means of clearly expressing the vowels. The principal object aimed at was that the text of the Syriac Bible should be recited in a correct manner. But, as it happened, the eastern pronunciation differed in many respects from that of the west. The local dialects had to some extent exercised an influence over the pronunciation of the literary tongue; and, on the other hand, the political separation between Rome and Persia, and yet more the ecclesiastical schism—since the Syrians of the east were mostly Nestorians, those of the west Monophysites and Catholics—had produced divergencies between the traditions of the various schools. Starting, therefore, from a common source, two distinct systems of punctuation were formed, of which the western is the more convenient, but the eastern the more exact and generally the more in accordance with the ancient pronunciation; it has, for example, *á* in place of the western *á*, and *ó* in many cases where the western Syrians pronounce *ú*. In later times the two systems have been intermingled in various ways.

Arabic everywhere put a speedy end to the predominance of Aramaic—a predominance which had lasted for more than a thousand years—and soon began to drive Syriac out of use. At the beginning of the 11th century the learned metropolitan of Nisibis, Elias bar Shinnaya, wrote his books intended for Christians either entirely in Arabic or in Arabic and Syriac arranged in parallel columns, that is, in the spoken and in the learned language. Thus, too, it became necessary to have Syriac-Arabic glossaries. Up to the present day Syriac has remained in use for literary and ecclesiastical purposes, and may perhaps be even spoken in some monasteries and schools; but it has long been a dead language. When Syriac became extinct in Edessa and its neighbourhood is not known with certainty.

This language, called Syriac *par excellence*, is not the immediate source whence are derived the Aramaic dialects still surviving in the northern districts. In the mountains known as the Túr ‘Abdin in Mesopotamia, in certain districts east and north of Mosul, in the neighbouring mountains of Kurdistan, and again beyond them on the western coast of Lake Urmia, Aramaic dialects are spoken by Christians and occasionally by Jews, and some of these dialects we know with tolerable precision. The dialect of Túr ‘Abdin seems to differ considerably from all the rest; the country beyond the Tigris is, however, divided, as regards language, amongst a multitude of local dialects. Among these, that of Urmia has become the most important, since American missionaries have formed a new literary language out of it. Moreover, the Roman Propaganda has printed books in two of the Neo-Syriac dialects. All these dialects exhibit a complete transformation of the ancient type, to a degree incomparably greater than is the case, for example, with Mandæan. In particular, the ancient

verbal tenses have almost entirely disappeared, but have been successfully replaced by new forms derived from participles. There are also other praiseworthy innovations. The dialect of Tūr 'Abdīn has, for instance, again coined a definite article. By means of violent contractions and phonetic changes some of these dialects, particularly that of Urmia, have acquired a euphony scarcely known in any other of the Semitic languages, with their "stridentia anhelantiaque verba" (Jerome). These Aramæans have all adopted a motley crowd of foreign words, from the Arabs, Kurds, and Turks, on whose borders they live and of whose languages they can often speak at least one.

Aramaic is frequently described as a *poor* language. This is an opinion which we are unable to share. It is quite possible, even now, to extract a very large vocabulary from the more ancient Aramaic writings, and yet in this predominantly theological literature a part only of the words that existed in the language have been preserved. It is true that Aramaic, having from the earliest times come into close contact with foreign languages, has borrowed many words from them, in particular from Persian and Greek; but, if we leave out of consideration the fact that many Syrian authors are in the habit of using, as ornaments or for convenience (especially in translations), a great number of Greek words, some of which were unintelligible to their readers, we shall find that the proportion of really foreign words in older Aramaic books is not larger, perhaps even smaller, than the proportion of Romance words in German or Dutch. The influence of Greek upon the syntax and phraseology of Syriac is not so great as that which it has exercised, through the medium of Latin, upon the literary languages of modern Europe. With regard to sounds, the most characteristic feature of Aramaic (besides its peculiar treatment of the dentals) is that it is poorer in vowels than Hebrew, not to speak of Arabic, since nearly all short vowels in open syllables either wholly disappear or leave but a slight trace behind them (the so-called *shēwā*). In this respect the punctuation of Biblical Aramaic agrees with Syriac, in which we are able to observe from very early times the number of vowels by examining the metrical pieces constructed according to the number of syllables, and with the Mandæan, which expresses every vowel by means of a vowel-letter. When several distinct dialects so agree, the phenomenon in question must be of great antiquity. There are nevertheless traces which prove that the language once possessed more vowels, and the Aramæans, for instance, with whom David fought may have pronounced many vowels which afterwards disappeared. Another peculiarity of Aramaic is that it lends itself far more readily to the linking together of sentences than Hebrew and Arabic. It possesses many conjunctions and adverbs to express slight modifications of meaning. It is also very free as regards the order of words. That this quality, which renders it suitable for a clear and limpid prose style, is not the result of Greek influence may be seen by the Mandæan, on which Greek has left no mark. In its attempts to express everything clearly Aramaic often becomes prolix,—for example, by using additional personal and demonstrative pronouns. The contrast between Aramaic as the language of prose and Hebrew as the language of poetry is one which naturally strikes us, but we must beware of carrying it too far. Even the Aramæans were not wholly destitute of poetical talent. Although the religious poetry of the Syrians has but little charm for us, yet real poetry occurs in the few extant fragments of Gnostic hymns. Moreover, in the modern dialects popular songs have been discovered which, though very simple, are fresh and full of feeling.¹ It is therefore by no

¹ See Socin, *Die neu-aramäischen Dialekte von Urmia bis Mosul*, Tübingen, 1882: comp. *Z.D.M.G.*, xxxvi. 679 sq.

means improvable that in ancient times Aramaic was used in poems which, being contrary to the theological tendency of Syrian civilization, were doomed to total oblivion.

Assyrian.—Long before Aramaic another Semitic language flourished in the regions of the Tigris and on the lower Euphrates which has been preserved to us in the cuneiform inscriptions. It is usually called the Assyrian, after the name of the country where the first and most important excavations were made; but the term "Babylonian" would be more correct, as Babylon was the birthplace of this language and of the civilization to which it belonged. Certain Babylonian inscriptions appear to go back to the fourth millennium before our era; but the great mass of these cuneiform inscriptions date from between 1000 and 500 B.C. Assyrian seems to be more nearly related to Hebrew than to Aramaic; we may cite, for example, the relative particle *sha*, which is also used as a sign of the genitive, and is identical with the Phœnician *ash* and the Hebrew *asher* (*she, sha*), also the similarity between Assyrian and Hebrew in the treatment of the aspirated dentals. On the other hand, Assyrian differs in many respects from all the cognate languages. The ancient perfect has wholly disappeared, or left but few traces, and the gutturals, with the exception of the hard *kh*, have been smoothed down to a degree which is only paralleled in the modern Aramaic dialects. So at least it would appear from the writing, or rather from the manner in which Assyriologists transcribe it. The Babylonian form *bēl* (occurring in Isa. xlv. 1; Jer. l. 2 and li. 44,—passages all belonging to the 6th century B.C.), the name of the god who was originally called *ba'l*, is a confirmation of this; but, on the other hand, the name of the country where Babylon was situated, viz., Shin'ar, and that of a Babylonian god, 'Anammelech (2 Kings xvii. 31), as well as those of the tribes Shō'a and Kō'a (Ezek. xxiii. 23) who inhabited the Assyrio-Babylonian territory, seem to militate against this theory, as they are spelt in the Old Testament with 'ain. The Assyrian system of writing is so complicated, and, in spite of its vast apparatus, is so imperfect an instrument for the accurate representation of sounds, that we are hardly yet bound to regard the transcriptions of contemporary Assyriologists as being in all points of detail the final dictum of science. It is, for example, very doubtful whether the vowels at the end of words and the appended *m* were really pronounced in all cases, as this would presuppose a complete confusion in the grammar of the language. However this may be, the present writer does not feel able to speak at greater length upon Assyrian, not being an Assyriologist himself nor yet capable of satisfactorily distinguishing the certain from the uncertain results of Assyriological inquiry.

The native cuneiform writing was used in Babylonia not only under the Persian empire but also in the Greek period, as the discovery of isolated specimens proves. It does not of course necessarily follow from this that Assyrian was still spoken at that time. Indeed, this language may possibly have been banished from ordinary life long before the destruction of Nineveh, surviving only as the official and sacerdotal tongue. These inscriptions, in any case, were intended for none but a narrow circle of learned persons.

Arabic.—The southern group of Semitic languages consists of Arabic and Ethiopic. Arabic, again, is subdivided into the dialects of the larger portion of Arabia and those of the extreme south (the Sabean, &c.). At a very much earlier time than we were but lately justified in supposing, some of the northern Arabs reduced their language to writing. For travellers have quite recently discovered in the northern parts of the Hijāz inscriptions in a strange character which seem to have been written long before our

era. The character resembles the Sabean, but perhaps represents an earlier stage of graphical development. These inscriptions have been called "Thamudic," because they were found in the country of the Thamūd; but this designation is scarcely a suitable one, because during the period when the power of the Thamūd was at its height, and when the buildings mentioned in the Koran were hewn in the rocks, the language of this country was Nabatæan (see above). Unfortunately the inscriptions hitherto discovered are all short¹ and for the most part fragmentary, and consequently furnish but little material to the student of languages. But there can be no doubt that they are written in an Arabic dialect. The treatment of the dentals, among other things, is a sufficient proof of this. At least in one point they bear a striking resemblance to Hebrew: they have the article *ha* (not *hal*, as we might expect). It is possible that the tribes living on Arabian soil which are regarded in the Old Testament as nearly related to Israel, that is, the Ishmaelites, the Midianites, and even the Edomites, may have spoken dialects occupying a middle position between Arabic and Hebrew. They are perhaps traces of some such intermediate link that have been preserved to us in these inscriptions.

The numerous inscriptions scattered over the north-west of Arabia, especially over the wild and rocky district of Safā, near Damascus, probably date from a later period. They are written in peculiar characters, which, it would seem, are likewise related to those used by the Sabeans. They are all of them short and indistinct, scratched hurriedly and irregularly upon unhewn stone. What we at present understand of them—they consist almost entirely of proper names—is owing in nearly every case to the ingenuity of Halévy.² In matters of detail, however, much still remains uncertain. To decipher them with absolute certainty will no doubt always be impossible on account of their careless execution. These inscriptions are probably the work of Arab emigrants from the south.

The Arabs who inhabited the Nabatæan kingdom wrote in Aramaic, but, as has been remarked above, their native language, Arabic, often shows through the foreign disguise. We are thus able to satisfy ourselves that these Arabs, who lived a little before and a little after Christ, spoke a dialect closely resembling the later classical Arabic. The nominative of the so-called "triptote" nouns has, as in classical Arabic, the termination *u*; the genitive has *i* (the accusative therefore probably ended in *a*), but without the addition of *n*. Generally speaking, those proper names which in classical Arabic are "diptotes" are here devoid of any inflexional termination. The *u* of the nominative appears also in Arabic proper names belonging to more northern districts, as, for example, Palmyra and Edessa. All these Arabs were probably of the same race. It is possible that the two oldest known specimens of distinctively Arabic writing—namely, the Arabic portion of the trilingual inscription of Zabad, south-east of Haleb (Aleppo), written in Syriac, Greek, and Arabic, and dating from 512 or 513 A.D.,³ and that of the bilingual inscription of Harran, south of Damascus,⁴ written in Greek and Arabic, of 568—represent nothing but a somewhat more modern form of this dialect. In both these inscriptions proper names take in the genitive the termination *u*, which shows that the meaning of such inflexions was no longer felt. These two inscriptions, especially that of Zabad, which is badly

¹ The decipherment of these inscriptions was begun by Halévy, who followed the drawings of Doughty. The subject is now being further investigated by D. H. Müller of Vienna from Euting's copies.

² "Essai sur les Inscriptions du Safa," from the *Journal Asiatique* (Paris, 1882).

³ Sachau, *Monatsbericht der Berliner Akademie der Wissenschaften*, 10th February 1881, and *Z.D.M.G.*, xxxvi. 345 sq.

⁴ Le Bas and Waddington, No. 2464, and *Z.D.M.G.*, xxxviii. 530.

written, have not yet been satisfactorily interpreted in all their details.

During the whole period of the preponderance of Aramaic this language exercised a great influence upon the vocabulary of the Arabs. The more carefully we investigate the more clearly does it appear that numerous Arabic words, used for ideas or objects which presuppose a certain degree of civilization, are borrowed from the Aramæans. Hence the civilizing influence of their northern neighbours must have been very strongly felt by the Arabs, and contributed in no small measure to prepare them for playing so important a part in the history of the world.

In the 6th century the inhabitants of the greater part of Arabia proper spoke everywhere essentially the same language, which, as being by far the most important of all Arabic dialects, is known simply as the Arabic language. Arabic poetry, at that time cultivated throughout the whole of central and northern Arabia as far as the lower Euphrates and even beyond it, employed one language only. The extant Arabic poems belonging to the heathen period were not indeed written down till much later, and meanwhile underwent considerable alterations⁵; but the absolute regularity of the metre and rhyme is a sufficient proof that on the whole these poems all obeyed the same laws of language. It is indeed highly probable that the rhapsodists and the grammarians have effaced many slight dialectical peculiarities; in a great number of passages, for example, the poets may have used, in accordance with the fashion of their respective tribes, some other case than that prescribed by the grammarians, and a thing of this kind may afterwards have been altered, unless it happened to occur in rhyme; but such alterations cannot have extended very far. A dialect that diverged in any great measure from the Arabic of the grammarians could not possibly have been made to fit into the metres. Moreover, the Arabic philologists recognize the existence of various small distinctions between the dialects of individual tribes and of their poets, and the traditions of the more ancient schools of Koran readers exhibit very many dialectical *nuances*. It might indeed be conjectured that for the majority of the Arabs the language of poetry was an artificial one,—the speech of certain tribes having been adopted by all the rest as a *dialectus poetica*. And this might be possible in the case of wandering minstrels whose art gained them their livelihood, such as Nābigha and A'shā. But, when we find that the Bedouin goat-herds, for instance, in the mountainous district near Mecca composed poems in this very same language upon their insignificant feuds and personal quarrels, that in it the proud chiefs of the Taghlibites and the Bekrites addressed defiant verses to the king of Hira (on the Euphrates), that a Christian inhabitant of Hira, Adī b. Zaid, used this language in his serious poems,—when we reflect that, as far as the Arabic poetry of the heathen period extends, there is nowhere a trace of any important linguistic difference, it would surely be a paradox to assume that all these Arabs, who for the most part were quite illiterate and yet extremely jealous of the honour of their tribes, could have taken the trouble to clothe their ideas and feelings in a foreign, or even a perfectly artificial, language. The Arabic philologists also invariably regarded the language of the poets as being that of the Arabs in general. Even at the end of the 2d century after Mohammed the Bedouins of Arabia proper, with the exception of a few outlying districts, were considered as being in possession of this pure Arabic. The most learned grammarians were in the habit of appealing to any uneducated man who happened to have just arrived with his camels from the desert, though he did not know by heart twenty verses of the Koran, and had no conception of theo-

⁵ Comp. the article *MŪALLAFĀT*.