

Introduction

Holger Gzella

During its genesis over about a thousand years, the Hebrew Bible has always been part of a multilingual world. Already in the second millennium BCE, centuries before the earliest direct attestations of Hebrew, several languages were regularly in use in Syria-Palestine: besides local forms of Akkadian, which belongs to the Semitic family and was chiefly employed for international correspondence and administration, scribes also wrote, depending on the purpose, Hurrian, Hittite, and, less frequently, Egyptian. The dominant script was Mesopotamian syllabic cuneiform. While these idioms were not mutually intelligible, structurally very different, and members of distinct language families, they left at least some traces, such as individual loanwords, in the lexicon of the various Semitic tongues which dominated the region thereafter. Their influence on pronunciation and syntax is more difficult to pinpoint but should not be excluded at the outset. In addition, it seems quite feasible to assume that some vernaculars current in other social strata than scribal circles were also common yet perhaps never made their way into the chanceries whose products constitute the written evidence. Even though they have long been forgotten and defy reconstruction, they may have had an impact as substrates in the formative period of idioms whose textual record began only several centuries later.

Except for Ugaritic, which was promoted to an official language of some local prestige; written in a special form of the alphabetic script by a self-conscious scribal elite already in the fourteenth century BCE; and served as an official means of expression for local letter-writing, record-keeping, technical documentation, incantations, and epic poetry, the ancestors of the Syro-Palestinian dialects remained in the shadow of Akkadian scribal culture: some of them appear, if at all, as Canaanite substrates or adstrates in what basically seems to be an Akkadian code, the best example being a corpus of several hundred letters sent by Syro-Palestinian vassal rulers to their lord, the Egyptian pharaoh, and discovered at Tell el-Amarna.¹

1 See William L. Moran, "The Hebrew Language in its Northwest Semitic Background," in: G. Ernest Wright (ed.), *The Bible and the Ancient Near East: Essays in Honor of William*

Further lexical items of local provenance crop up in other, contemporaneous, Akkadian and Egyptian texts, but their relation with the known members of the Semitic family is often hard to determine.² The controversial existence of spoken forms of, e.g., Hurrian only adds to the uncertainty.

Consequently, the age and origin of the local Semitic languages remain obscure. It is, however, clear that speakers of Semitic had settled in the area long before this time – perhaps they arrived in waves from ca. 3000 BCE on.³ The “Northwest Semitic” family,⁴ under which the related historical idioms of Syria-Palestine (now usually subdivided into the three branches Ugaritic, Canaanite, and Aramaic) are subsumed, then gradually took on its shape and gave rise to several distinct varieties. Its first identifiable traces can be observed, albeit again indirectly, in names and stray words surviving in cuneiform and Egyptian texts dating from the late third and the early second millennia BCE. The onomasticon of the “Amorites,” nomadic groups infiltrating the Levant, constitutes the principal set of data for the most archaic stage of Northwest Semitic.⁵ By and large, however, this indirect evidence defies any straightforward connection with the later, historical, languages of the area. Its position within Northwest Semitic thus remains unknown, although it may be possible to observe at least one distinctive trait of later Phoenician verbal syntax in a Ugaritic letter dispatched from Tyre.⁶ The “biblical world” of the first millennium BCE, at any rate, evolved against a background of considerable linguistic and cultural diversity.

Foxwell Albright (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961), 53–72; Agustinus Gianto, “Akkadian as a Contact Language,” in: Karel Van Lerberghe and Gabriella Voet (eds.), *Languages and Cultures in Contact* (Louvain: Peeters, 2000), 123–132.

- 2 Daniel Sivan, *Grammatical Analysis and Glossary of the Northwest Semitic Vocables in Akkadian Texts of the 15th–13th c. bc from Canaan and Syria* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1984); James E. Hoch, *Semitic Words in Egyptian Texts of the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994); and Anson F. Rainey, “Egyptian Evidence for Semitic Linguistics,” *Israel Oriental Studies* 18 (1998): 431–453.
- 3 See Masao Sekine, “The Subdivisions of the North-West Semitic Languages,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 18 (1973): 205–221.
- 4 For a summary, see Rebecca Hasselbach and John Huehnergard, “Northwest Semitic Languages,” in: Kees Versteegh (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 3: 409–422; Holger Gzella, “Northwest Semitic in General,” in: Michael P. Streck and Stefan Weninger (eds.), *Semitic Languages: An International Handbook* (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, in press).
- 5 Michael P. Streck, *Das amurritische Onomastikon der altbabylonischen Zeit*, vol. 1 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2000).
- 6 Cf. Holger Gzella, “Linguistic Variation in the Ugaritic Letters and some Implications Thereof,” in: Wilfred H. van Soldt (ed.), *Society and Administration in Ancient Ugarit* (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 2010), 58–70, esp. 67–68.

After ca. 1200 BCE (the exact chronology remains a matter of debate), the sociopolitical circumstances, and hence the language situation as well, changed dramatically. Many Bronze Age city-states under Egyptian and Hittite rule gave way to more extensive territorial chiefdoms with often unclear boundaries.⁷ Others, like the ancient Phoenician metropoleis, fell into the hands of new dynasties. The modalities of this process and its underlying causes, such as population movements and the possible exhaustion of economic resources, are not yet well understood. As cuneiform writing and the social institutions that upheld it had disappeared during the power vacuum of the Early Iron Age, a new scribal culture could emerge and was quickly adopted by these nascent civilizations, although the degree of centralization and organizational complexity of these chiefdoms on their way to turning into monarchic states remains highly debated. When administration became more demanding some time after about 1000 BCE, the need for record-keeping appeared once again, and the quest for local prestige resulted in new forms of public display. Local dialects with partly ancient roots then eventually crystallized into chancery languages. This is the time when Phoenician, Hebrew, Aramaic in its various forms, and the small-corpus idioms of Transjordan first appear in written documents.

The rise of the Iron Age languages in Syria-Palestine coincides with the spread of the Phoenician variant of the alphabet. Presumably, the old Phoenician city of Byblos had succeeded Ugarit after the latter's downfall as the leading center of alphabetic writing. While early forms of this type of script were already known in the second millennium, syllabic cuneiform largely eclipsed its distribution and use in society; low-profile purposes, such as property marks for everyday objects, constitute the lion's share of the meager evidence for early alphabetic writing outside Ugarit. Exercise texts with the letters of the alphabet in a conventional order were discovered at sites that feature no significant urban infrastructure; they say something about the distribution of this script, as do personal names in alphabetic letters inscribed on arrowheads during the transition period 1200–1000 BCE. Presumably, then, it was considerably less dependent on deeply entrenched institutions and a high degree of formal training than was syllabic cuneiform. As a consequence, it could exist outside major city centers and thus better resist the transformation of the socio-economic conditions between the Late Bronze and the Early

7 See, e.g., Ann E. Killebrew, *Biblical Peoples and Ethnicity: An Archaeological Study of Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, and Early Israel 1300–1100 B.C.E.* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

Iron Ages. It was the medium most readily available when new forms of administration required the skill of writing.

Letter-forms, their relative stance, the direction of writing, and spelling practice then underwent a gradual process of standardization in the chanceries of the various Canaanite- and Aramaic-speaking civilizations. Eventually, local types of the script, like the Ancient Hebrew and the Aramaic variants, and particular orthographic conventions, such as the use of vowel letters in certain cases, evolved. This process coincided with the emergence of a new linguistic register, narrative prose, employed for a novel literary genre in which self-conscious rulers commemorated their deeds. The same literary form, together with similar linguistic means, occurs in various textual witnesses discovered in Syria and Canaan, in Phoenicia and Transjordan. It also underlies the historical accounts in the Hebrew Bible (even if their final redaction dates to a much later period) but was still unknown in the area during the second millennium.⁸ Some scholars suppose that older epic traditions, which may have permeated the area in the form of a supra-regional, artificial, poetic language, transmitted orally by itinerant bards, have been partially absorbed into the rising literary prose style.⁹

Certain stylistic innovations seem to have spread because of local cultural prestige: the “imperfect consecutive” and the relative marker underlying Biblical Hebrew ^ʾšer, for instance, which belong to the characteristic hallmarks of Hebrew narrative, are also attested in the long Moabite royal inscription, and the former even in some Aramaic inscriptions verging on the Canaanite speech area, despite the fact that Judah and Moab were only relatively minor political powers. This suggests that close cultural contacts between ancient Israel and Transjordanian civilizations existed already at the beginning of the first millennium. Nonstandard Hebrew forms that could well be Aramaic, or stem from a dialect that was linguistically close to Aramaic, occur already in pre-Exilic biblical texts. Even if the exact historical context remains unclear, the patriarchal stories in Genesis also establish a clear link of the lineage

8 Cf. John A. Emerton, “The Kingdoms of Judah and Israel and Ancient Hebrew History Writing,” in: Steven E. Fassberg and Avi Hurvitz (eds.), *Biblical Hebrew in Its Northwest Semitic Setting: Typological and Historical Perspectives* (Jerusalem: Magnes and Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 33–49.

9 See, e.g., Chaim Rabin, “The Emergence of Classical Hebrew,” in: Abraham Malamat (ed.), *The Age of the Monarchies: Culture and Society* (Jerusalem: Jewish History Publications, 1979), 71–78. More recent works emphasize Mesopotamian influences, cf. Mark S. Smith, “Recent Study of Israelite Religion in Light of the Ugaritic Texts,” in: K. Lawson Younger, Jr. (ed.), *Ugarit at Seventy-Five* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 1–25, esp. 2–11.

of Israel with the Arameans (Gen 28:5; 31:20, 24). The dialects of the Phoenician cities along the coast, on the other hand, appear to have been less prone to borrowings from other Canaanite or Aramaic languages, and the pride for which these cities are remembered by the prophets (Ezek 26–28) may have resulted in another form of linguistic prestige. Yet Phoenician influences have been suggested for some aspects of ancient Israelite literature and culture;¹⁰ the Tyrian king Hiram is said to have maintained friendly relations with the Davidic dynasty and even contributed to the building of Solomon's Temple (1 Kgs 5:15–32). Linguistic prestige, however, depends on political loyalties and cultural preferences; hence it is bound to change in the course of time and can affect the language policy of a ruling dynasty within a comparatively short while. The kingdom of Sam'al in Northwestern Syria provides an interesting case in point:¹¹ after the ninth century BCE, Phoenician as an official medium for royal inscriptions was succeeded by a local variety, Sam'alian, which is generally quite close to Aramaic with a number of nonstandard (often archaic) features but which soon thereafter gave way to what seems to be a form of Aramaic that was at the time current in Central Syria.

Indeed, notwithstanding the fragmented geography of the area, the development of the various Semitic languages of Syria-Palestine during the Iron Age reflects many instances of contact, natural and controlled alike, due to trade, political alliances, and personal networks. This is shown not only by individual loanwords, which can travel easily, but also by parallel developments of important structural features of the nominal and verbal systems, which presuppose a higher degree of interaction between speakers. While the original situation in the ancestors of these idioms presumably resembled the same, more archaic, type of Northwest Semitic reflected by Ugaritic, their evolution exhibits certain common tendencies across the entire speech area, even if the particular results differ. Three features are especially noteworthy: the breakdown of a morphological case system in which specific endings marked the grammatical roles of subject and object and indicated possessive relations; the restructuring of the verbal system after the loss or the

10 Cf. the articles in Markus Witte and Johannes F. Diehl (eds.), *Israeliten und Phönizier: Ihre Beziehungen im Spiegel der Archäologie und der Literatur des Alten Testaments und seiner Umwelt* (Fribourg: Academic Press and Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008).

11 See Holger Gzella, "Languages and Script," in: Herbert Niehr (ed.), *The Arameans in Ancient Syria* (Leiden: Brill, in press).

functional mergers of several formerly independent conjugations; and the emergence of morphological means for marking definiteness.

It may be worthwhile to elaborate briefly on these examples to outline the interaction between a shared basic structure and its individual manifestations. Once the morphological distinction between the different cases had broken down, the members of the Northwest Semitic group developed special particles for marking a (mostly definite) direct object, thereby disambiguating it from the grammatical subject. Although the corresponding particles in the individual languages exhibit some variation, the principle as such remains the same.¹² This is how contact-induced convergence often works: a common pattern comes to the surface in discrete grammatical garbs. Likewise, the reduction of distinct types of the “imperfect” conjugation triggered particular reactions in the verbal systems of at least Hebrew, Phoenician, and Aramaic. Whereas the endings of the “short” variant of this conjugation were largely generalized in Hebrew, new functional differences appeared due to the rise of two novel conjugations (the “consecutive” forms) there. Consequently, the functional ranges of the verbal forms show a good deal of diversity within Northwest Semitic, even though the underlying structural blueprints have evolved from a common ancestor type.¹³ The forms of the definite article, finally, are based on discrete lexical or morphological items and occur either at the beginning or at the end of a word. In the course of time, however, their uses largely converged.¹⁴

These developments were essentially completed or at least in an advanced stage when the Northwest Semitic languages of Iron Age Syria-Palestine appeared on the stage of history shortly after ca. 1000 BCE. In light of phonological, morphological, syntactic, and lexical differences, they can be divided into a Canaanite (comprising Phoenician, Hebrew, and some Transjordanian idioms) and an Aramaic branch (which was

12 Cf. Rudolf Meyer, “Bemerkungen zur syntaktischen Funktion der sogenannten Nota Accusativi,” in: Hartmut Gese and Hans Peter Rüger (eds.), *Wort und Geschichte: Festschrift für Karl Elliger zum 70. Geburtstag* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1973), 137–142.

13 See Holger Gzella, *Tempus, Aspekt und Modalität im Reichsaramäischen* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2004), 310–326.

14 Compare the discussion in John Huehnergard, “Features of Central Semitic,” in: Agustinus Gianto (ed.), *Biblical and Oriental Essays in Memory of William L. Moran* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 2005), 155–203, esp. 184–186; Holger Gzella, “Die Entstehung des Artikels im Semitischen: Eine ‘phönizische’ Perspektive,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 51 (2006): 1–18; and Agustinus Gianto, “Lost and Found in the Grammar of First-Millennium Aramaic,” in: Holger Gzella and Margaretha L. Folmer (eds.), *Aramaic in Its Historical and Linguistic Setting* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008), 11–25, esp. 18–19.

also diversified from the outset, as the earliest witnesses indicate) according to the widespread genealogical model of historical-comparative linguistics. Important distinctions thus exist, despite far-reaching structural similarities. This implies that the respective idioms must have been in formation for some time during the “Dark Ages” of 1200–1000 BCE. Not all known facts can be integrated into such a “family tree,” though, because it is frequently debated whether a certain feature must count as characteristic of Canaanite or of Aramaic, or whether it has been inherited from a common ancestor: the evidence is often ambiguous. The inscriptions from Samʿal in Northwestern Syria (see above) and the plaster text from Deir ʿAlla in Transjordan provide numerous examples for the co-occurrence of Canaanite and Aramaic traits, although presumably for different reasons. Some developments in Northwest Semitic may even have occurred independently in the two branches.¹⁵

For approaches other than a straightforward historical-genealogical model, by contrast, the distinction between inherited linguistic traits and innovative, at times even contact-induced, phenomena is less crucial. One can also attempt to focus on the gradual transitions within a continuum of adjacent, mutually intelligible dialects across the speech area by plotting distinctive linguistic hallmarks of coexisting idioms on a map. As certain features cross dialect boundaries, the subclassification of Northwest Semitic has to incorporate some flexibility. This method, “dialect geography,” was developed for studying modern regional varieties, but it has also been successfully applied to Iron Age Northwest Semitic.¹⁶ The distinction between languages and dialects is usually based on sociopolitical criteria and is thus, to a certain extent, arbitrary from a linguistic point of view. Using a variant of the well-known dictum “A language is a dialect with an army and a navy,” ascribed to various linguists, one could say with regard to Syria-Palestine: “A language is a dialect with a palace and a temple.”

Nonetheless, a sociolinguistic dimension must also come into play: the corpus of surviving extrabiblical sources from Iron Age Syria-Palestine consists mainly of royal inscriptions listing the deeds of kings

15 Joshua Blau, “Hebrew and North West Semitic: Reflections on the Classification of the Semitic Languages,” *Hebrew Annual Review* 1 (1978): 21–44.

16 Zellig S. Harris, *Development of the Canaanite Dialects* (New Haven, Conn.: American Oriental Society, 1939); Chaim Rabin, “The Origin of the Subdivision of Semitic,” in: D[avid] Winton Thomas and W[illiam] D[uff] McHardy (eds.), *Hebrew and Semitic Studies Presented to Godfrey Rolles Driver* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), 104–115; W. Randall Garr, *Dialect Geography of Syria-Palestine 1000–586 B.C.E.* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985; repr. Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2004).

in war and peace, composed for public display; dedicatory and funerary inscriptions for members of the elite; administrative and other documentary texts such as receipts, inventories, and a few school exercises; and letters mostly written by officials such as clerks. These linguistic witnesses are thus the result of scribal training and all correspond to very strict genre conventions, including the correct form of address, salutation formulas, and so forth. They reflect largely standardized language varieties geared toward official use and no doubt differ from the vernaculars.

The linguistic reality of daily-life interactions in other strata of society, on the other hand, cannot be fully reconstructed, although it may occasionally surface in certain deviations from the standard, including variation in biblical texts.¹⁷ Regional differences not only between Phoenician and Aramaean cities, but also in territorial states like Judah, Israel, and Moab, point to variation even within the same sphere of political influence. One might ask whether the official, standardized variants of the local languages which served as chancery idioms were not part and parcel of the system of codes in which the cultural self-awareness of the ruling elites was rooted, to a similar extent as national deities, capitals, and dynasties. Such core traditions of religion, customs, and language that differed from region to region within the boundaries of a common matrix culture – as can still be observed in subtle but significant differences of iconography, material culture, and the use of certain formulaic expressions – are likely to have played an important role in the processes of ethnogenesis of the Early Iron Age.¹⁸ That would at least explain the relatively high degree of language maintenance in a multilingual environment where important forms of structural convergence nonetheless maximized the efficiency of speech production.

Already before the age of the great international empires, the world reflected in the Hebrew Bible was not confined to the immediate cultural setting in Syria-Palestine: the ancient kingdoms of South Arabia also formed part of it. Passing references to long-distance trade and the exchange of gifts occur with a certain regularity in the Bible (Ezek 27:22; Isa 60:6; Ps 72:10), but the best-known literary reflex of such relations, however casual, is the story about the visit of the queen of Sheba to Solomon, who impressed her with his splendor and wisdom (1 Kgs 10:1–13). Additionally, proof exists for migrations of North Arabian tribes from the

17 Some examples for such creative use of linguistic variation in the Hebrew Bible can be found in Agustinus Gianto, "Variations in Biblical Hebrew," *Biblica* 77 (1996): 493–508.

18 Cf. Seth L. Sanders, *The Invention of Hebrew* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 76–155.

ninth century BCE on.¹⁹ It is rather difficult to define these early Arabs in ethnic or sociocultural terms, but several personal names contain features characteristic of later Arabic. Israelite historiography mentions them as bearers of tribute (e.g. 1 Kgs 10:15; 2 Chr 17:11), and their wisdom was proverbial (cf. Jer 49:7). The lack of natural barriers rendered the infiltration of such groups from the Arabian desert into Syria-Palestine and enduring contact quite easy. Their languages, which are mostly subsumed under the generic term “Ancient North Arabian” (in fact the designation of a rather diverse cluster of dialects) and are distinct from the South Arabian branch,²⁰ can be traced from the eighth century BCE on. Some of the evidence may come from earlier times, though, since many of the very short and formulaic Ancient North Arabian inscriptions are hard to date. By the sixth century BCE, North Arabian tribes had settled in southern and eastern Palestine. Possible instances of early linguistic contact between Arabian and Northwest Semitic languages besides a few loanwords relating to cattle-herding still need to be investigated more thoroughly. At any rate, the symbiosis of speakers of Arabian and Aramaic languages in the Syrian desert seems to have lasted for centuries; Arabic names and words still surface in the textual record of Aramaic-speaking communities in the Roman Near East that combined nomadic and urban forms of life, such as Palmyra and Hatra.

Despite its much later attestation, Classical Arabic, which is often viewed as belonging to a sister-branch of Ancient North Arabian, reflects a structure similar to early Northwest Semitic in terms of, e.g., an inventory of phonemes closer to the original, morphological case marking, and the three different “imperfect” conjugations; hence it has played an important role in the traditional reconstruction of Ugaritic and pre-Tiberian Hebrew. In nineteenth-century biblical commentaries, references to Classical Arabic language and literature abound, since the epigraphic witnesses of Syria-Palestine were then still largely unknown and Arabic,

19 The classic study by James A. Montgomery, *Arabia and the Bible* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1934) is still a valuable resource for biblical references; for more modern accounts, see Israel Eph'al, *The Ancient Arabs: Nomads on the Borders of the Fertile Crescent, 9th–5th Centuries B.C.* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1982) (on historical evidence); Manfred Krebernik, “Von Gindibu bis Muḥammad: Stand, Probleme und Aufgaben altorientalisch-arabistischer Philologie,” in: Otto Jastrow, Shabo Talay, and Herta Hafenrichter (eds.), *Studien zur Semitistik und Arabistik: Festschrift für Hartmut Bobzin zum 60. Geburtstag* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008), 247–279 (on linguistic matters, with further bibliography).

20 Michael C. A. Macdonald, “Ancient North Arabian,” in: Roger D. Woodard (ed.), *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the World’s Ancient Languages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 488–533, provides a very complete and up-to-date survey.

together with Classical Syriac, thus constituted the most obvious point of comparison for Hebrew. This practice has long been abandoned, not least due to increasing interest in Egypt and Mesopotamia. Many of these references and their rationale (such as equating Iron Age nomads with the Bedouins of a much later period) must be considered anachronistic and are thus misleading in light of present scholarship. Some, however, can even now provide important clues to the life and internal organization of Canaanite and Aramaean tribal systems when they are integrated into a more modern framework.

Mesopotamian influence returned to the area from the ninth century BCE on, following the expansion of first the Neo-Assyrian, then the Neo-Babylonian empires. Conversely, the use of Aramaic and the alphabetic script spread in the Assyrian administration and was soon widely used throughout the Fertile Crescent between Egypt in the west and Lake Urmia in the east.²¹ According to biblical historiography, it was common among high officials in Jerusalem in 701 BCE (2 Kgs 18:26), and this may reflect the actual situation. Akkadian became increasingly confined to the domain of the prestigious royal inscriptions, while Aramaic replaced it for many purposes in daily life. Hence the impact of Akkadian, at least on the biblical texts, affects legal language, chronicle-writing, and literary motives rather than the grammar of Hebrew itself. Lexical loans that entered the language during this period were usually transmitted via Aramaic.²² The driving forces underlying the latter's success remain controversial: deportations from conquered territories, the influence of Aramaic-speaking traders and craftsmen, the versatility of the language and its script, and the more neutral character of this medium as opposed to the idiom of the conquerors have all been mentioned as possible causes. It should be pointed out, however, that the considerable linguistic diversity of the Aramaic material during the seventh and sixth centuries BCE, especially in terms of spelling, indicates a rather low degree of imperial language policy. Since most of the evidence would have been written on perishable materials, such as papyrus, leather, and wax-covered wooden boards, this period is not well documented at all.

21 Alan R. Millard, "Early Aramaic," in: J. Nicholas Postgate (ed.), *Languages of Iraq: Ancient and Modern* (London: British School of Archeology in Iraq, 2007), 85–94; Holger Gzella, "The Heritage of Imperial Aramaic in Eastern Aramaic," *Aramaic Studies* 6 (2008): 85–109.

22 See the discussion of many possible examples in Paul V. Mankowski, *Akkadian Loanwords in Biblical Hebrew* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2000).

Alphabetic writing appears to have influenced not only the use of Mesopotamian syllabic cuneiform,²³ but also the principles of the newly created Old Persian cuneiform script. Only under Achaemenid supremacy, in the sixth to fourth centuries BCE, did one of the existing varieties of Aramaic (presumably a Babylonian dialect) provide the common language of a highly centralized scribal culture. It thus advanced to the official idiom throughout the vast territory under Persian rule. As a consequence, the distribution of many other languages formerly used in the imperial provinces, including Hebrew, Phoenician, and presumably the Transjordanian dialects in Syria-Palestine, became more and more confined to specific functions or registers like literary texts in the case of Hebrew and public epigraphy in the Phoenician cities, or withdrew to remote pockets.²⁴ Some compositions in the tradition of the Achaemenid chancery language have become part of the biblical canon, which took shape in part during the Persian period, and Aramaic influences on Hebrew quickly increased.²⁵ Some Iranian loanwords in literary Hebrew (strikingly employed in, e.g., Dan 1 in order to create a foreign setting) may have entered the lexicon via Aramaic. The imperial language, too, was subject to contact, as lexical loans and grammatical constructions borrowed from Akkadian and Old Persian indicate.²⁶ Also, many important syntactic developments, such as the integration of the participle into the verbal system, had their onset in Achaemenid times.

Beneath the surface of the high degree of linguistic unity and standardization suggested by the Achaemenid Aramaic evidence, local Aramaic vernaculars continued to exist although they were, in all likelihood, influenced by the international chancery idiom. They remained in use among a considerable part of the population even after the collapse of

-
- 23 Michael P. Streck, "Keilschrift und Alphabet," in: Dörte Borchers, Frank Kammerzell, and Stefan Weninger (eds.), *Hieroglyphen, Alphabete, Schriftreformen: Studien zu Multiliteralismus, Schriftwechsel und Orthographieneuregelungen* (Göttingen: Seminar für Ägyptologie und Koptologie, 2001), 77–97.
- 24 A convenient survey of the evidence can be found in André Lemaire, "Hebrew and Aramaic in the First Millennium B.C.E. in the Light of Epigraphic Evidence (Socio-Historical Aspects)," in: Steven E. Fassberg and Avi Hurvitz (eds.), *Biblical Hebrew in Its Northwest Semitic Setting: Typological and Historical Perspectives* (Jerusalem: Magnes and Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 177–196.
- 25 Much relevant evidence has been assembled by Klaus Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte vom Toten Meer 2* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 34–36.
- 26 Stephen A. Kaufman, *The Akkadian Influences on Aramaic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974); H[arold] H. Rowley, *The Aramaic of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929), 136–141 (partly outdated); for the replication of the Persian resultative construction in Aramaic, cf. Gzella, *Tempus* [n. 13], 184–194, and "Heritage" [n. 21], 92–93.

the Persian empire at the hands of Alexander the Great (ca. 330 BCE), during the kingdoms of his successors, and throughout the Roman expansion into the Near East. Alexander's conquest corroborated and extended earlier contacts between the Levant and ancient Greece that had begun centuries before and were never severed. A short phase of relative political stability and new opportunities for trade, facilitated by imperial roads and commercial networks, led to the emergence of several wealthy civilizations in Arabia, Syria, and Mesopotamia, which proudly combined their Near Eastern heritage with Hellenistic culture. Such an interaction manifests itself in both the textual and the archeological record. Presumably, it was their increasing self-consciousness that made the elites of these civilizations elevate the local Aramaic dialects again to official languages when the Seleucid Empire became weaker.

They each developed their own variant of the Achaemenid type of the alphabetic script, in a certain sense similar to the evolution of the Syro-Palestinian languages at the beginning of the first millennium. The evidence consists mainly of honorific, dedicatory, and funerary inscriptions. Spelling and style were basically modeled according to Achaemenid conventions, but an evolution of all these languages can be observed to varying degrees:²⁷ Nabataean, Palmyrene, Hatran, and Edessan Aramaic (this last being the ancestor of Classical Syriac, later the *lingua franca* of the Christian Near East) entered the light of history. These idioms were exposed to ongoing contact with Arabic in the Nabataean kingdom, with Greek in Syria, and with Iranian languages near the border of the Parthian empire. Aramaic thus remained a dominant means of communication in large parts of the Near East until the spread of Islam. Also, the immediate roots of the ancestors of the Modern Aramaic languages may lie in this period.

The most extensive early document of Semitic–Greek interaction is no doubt the Septuagint, the oldest surviving translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek.²⁸ In this form, it served as the principal frame of reference for the New Testament writings and has thus become the Christian Old Testament. Some books like Tobit or the Wisdom of Solomon entered canonical traditions only in their Greek version. The authors of the New Testament thus consciously bridge the gap between the Hebrew

27 Holger Gzella, "Das Aramäische in den römischen Ostprovinzen. Sprachsituationen in Arabien, Syrien und Mesopotamien zur Kaiserzeit," *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 63 (2006): 15–39; John F. Healey, *Aramaic Inscriptions & Documents of the Roman Period. Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions, Volume IV* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1–25.

28 For this role of the Septuagint, see Tessa Rajak, *Translation and Survival: The Greek Bible of the Ancient Jewish Diaspora* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Bible and the Greco-Roman world; it has taken shape in the multilingual context of Roman Palestine (cf. Acts 2:8–11, even if this list reproduces a traditional model and does not have to be taken at face value), where Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek, Latin (no doubt to a more limited extent), and presumably several other languages were used for different purposes.²⁹ The Dead Sea Scrolls, which comprise texts in Hebrew, various forms of Aramaic, and Greek, reflect this diversity. Elements in Aramaic, being the pragmatically dominant language, occur frequently in the Gospels.³⁰ Palestine itself belonged to the broader cultural setting of the Hellenistic and Roman Near East; Nabataean contracts were discovered by the Dead Sea, and the Apostle Paul spent some time in Arabia (Gal 1:17), presumably in the Nabataean kingdom. The Syro-Palestinian environment thus also has great importance for adequately understanding the cultural underpinnings of the New Testament and the spread of Early Christianity.

Given the creative use of linguistic variation in many of its parts, an understanding of the complex language situation in which the Bible originated turns out to be essential for a deeper literary, historical, and theological appreciation of the texts. It is part of the intention of the present volume to encourage further study along such lines.³¹ This is not only a rewarding, but also a very enjoyable experience.

29 Hannah M. Cotton, "Language Gaps in Roman Palestine and the Roman Near East," in: Christian Frevel (ed.), *Medien im antiken Palästina* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 151–169.

30 See Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "The Study of the Aramaic Background of the New Testament," in: idem, *A Wandering Aramean: Collected Aramaic Essays* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1979), 1–27. The value of Aramaic for envisioning an alleged original form of the Gospels and the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus is at times grossly exaggerated, especially outside scholarship proper.

31 The most important methodological issues of comparative linguistics applied to Biblical Hebrew have been outlined by John Huehnergard, "Introduction," in: John Kaltner and Steven McKenzie (eds.), *Beyond Babel: A Handbook for Biblical Hebrew and Related Languages* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 1–18.