

Who are Semites?

Semites are a group of Near Eastern and African peoples descended from Shem. Called the father of the Semites, Shem was a son of Noah. He and seven other members of his family entered the ark, escaped the flood, and lived to repopulate the earth. Through Shem passed the line of descent to the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Shem's great-grandson Eber was the father of those who were eventually called "Hebrews," including Abram (see Genesis 10 and 11 for more on Shem's line).

Genesis 10:22 records the five sons of Shem: Elam, Ashur, Arphaxad, Lud, and Aram. Twenty-one other descendants of Shem follow: "The sons of Aram: Uz, Hul, Gether and Meshek. Arphaxad was the father of Shelah, and Shelah the father of Eber. Two sons were born to Eber: One was named Peleg, because in his time the earth was divided; his brother was named Joktan. Joktan was the father of Almodad, Sheleph, Hazarmaveth, Jerah, Hadoram, Uzal, Diklah, Obal, Abimael, Sheba, Ophir, Havilah and Jobab. All these were sons of Joktan. The region where they lived stretched from Mesha toward Sephar, in the eastern hill country. These are the sons of Shem by their clans and languages, in their territories and nations" (Genesis 10:23-31).

The Elamites, Assyrians, Lydians, Arameans, and several Arab tribes were known to be descendants of Shem. A number of these people groups spoke related languages in ancient times. These are the Semites.

The descendants of Shem spread geographically from Lydia to Syria, Assyria, and Persia. Armenia established the northern boundary while the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf created the southern boundary. Currently, members of the Semitic language groups are dispersed throughout North Africa and the Middle East.

Scholars of philology, the study of language, traditionally classify the Semitic family of languages into three topographical divisions. East Semitic (sometimes classified as Northeast) was used in ancient Babylon and Assyria and includes the Akkadian (or Accadian) language. The Northwest classification takes in Hebrew, Aramaic, Canaanite, Syrian, Phoenician, Samaritan, Palmyrene, Nabatean, Eblaite, and Ugaritic languages. South Semitic languages include Arabic, Sabean, Minean, and Ethiopic. Of the more than 70 different known forms of Semite languages, some contain vast libraries of literature; others have only a small collection, and some remain entirely unwritten. Modern Semitic languages in common use include Hebrew, Arabic, Neo-Aramaic, Amharic, and Maltese.

Today, anti-Semitism is a term that has come to mean “prejudice or hostility toward Jews as a religious, cultural, or racial group.” According to Encyclopedia Britannica, the word anti-Semitism was introduced in 1879 by Wilhelm Marr, a German agitator who used it to describe anti-Jewish campaigns that were taking place in central Europe at the time. The term is, in fact, a misnomer, as true anti-Semitism would imply discrimination against anyone of Semitic descent including Arabs, Ethiopians, and other Semites.