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, 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.@@1 The numerous *άπαξ ∖eybμ(va* 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.

*Phoenician.*

The Phoenician 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 end of the 5th century before our era. These inscriptions@@2 we owe to the Phoenicians of the mother-country and the neighbouring regions (Cyprus, Egypt and Greece), as well as to the Phoenicians 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 gram- matical 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 con- nexion, 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 Phoenician has made considerable progress of late. Some assistance is also got from Greek and Latin writers, who cite not only many Phoenician proper names, but single Phoenician words: Plautus in particular inserts in the *Poenulus* whole passages in Punic, some of which are accompanied by a Latin 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.@@3

In its grammar Phoenician closely resembles Hebrew. In both dialects the consonants are the same, often in contrast to Aramaic

and other cognate languages.@@4 As to vowels, Phoenician seems to diverge rather more from Hebrew. The connecting of clauses is scarcely carried farther 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 *kãn* (fuit) with a perfect, to express complete accomplishment (or the pluperfect).@@5 One important difference is that the use of *wāw* conversive with the imperfect—so common in Hebrew and in the inscription of Mesha—is wanting in Phoenician. The vocabulary of the language is very like that of Hebrew, but words rare in Hebrew are often common in Phoenician. For instance, "to do ” is in Phoenician not *'as ā* 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 *ḥarūṣ (*Assyrian *ḥurāṣ),* which is used occasionally in Hebrew poetry. Traces of dialectical distinctions have been found in the great inscription of Byblus, the inhabitants of which seem to be distinguished from the rest of the Phoenicians 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. It is tolerably certain that the language of Carthage possessed many dull vowels which were strange to Greek and Latin, so that the manner in which they are reproduced in proper names by the Greeks and Romans shows great diversity. 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 2nd, 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 im- possible 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 Phoenician 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 Hebraeo-Phoenician; 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 Aramaeans 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 Arsacids and the Sassanids 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, weights and gems. Latterly, a very remarkable inscription of a king of Hamāth@@6 belonging to the 8th century b.c. has been found in Central Syria, and a few years before excavations in the extreme north of Syria (Zengîrli and district; Nērab) brought to light some not less remarkable inscrip­tions which go back to the same century. The language of all these inscriptions is Aramaic, though in certain places it agrees with Hebrew. It is especially surprising that in the case of the Arabic sounds *th, dh, z,* they have not *t, d, t,*—as Aramaic generally has,— but *sh, z, ṣ,* as is the rule in Hebrew and Assyrian. It is extremely strange, however, that, in place of the Arabic *ḍ*, *'ain* does not appear, as elsewhere in Aramaic, nor yet *ṣ* as in Hebrew and Assyrian,—and, in isolated cases, even in Aramaic,—but *q.* These phenomena may be observed on several smaller monuments. We have no entirely satisfactory explanation at our disposal : perhaps Assyrian influence has been at work. Individual monuments prove, however, that the phonetic system of general Aramaic was already in existence

@@@1 The Siloam inscription affords us one new word, the original of Sirach some others. In the Gezer inscription there seem to be some new words of dubious interpretation..

@@@2 The scattered materials are being collected in the *Corpus in- scriptionum Semitiearum* of the Paris Academy.

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

@@@4 At an early period the Phoenician 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 Ṣur (Hebrew Ṣōr), which must origin­ally have been pronounced Thurr, with a τ (Tupos), and the name of Ṣīdōn (where the radical *ṣ* runs through all the Semitic languages, with a σ (∑ιδ<iψ)∙ Distinctions of this kind, justified by etymology, have perhaps been obscured in Hebrew by the imperfection of the alphabet. In the case of *sīn* and *shin* this can be positively proved.

*@@@5 Kān nadar,* “ had vowed,” Idal. 5 *(C.I.S.* Phoen. No. 93).

@@@6 The consonants of his name are ZKR; the pronunciation,

perhaps, was *Zakkür.*