from Shem, son of Noah.@@1 But the classification of nations in Genesis x. is founded neither upon linguistic nor upon ethnographical principles: it is determined rather by geographical and political considerations. For this reason Elam and Lud are also included among the children of Shem; but neither the Elamites (in Susiana) nor the Lydians appear to have spoken a language connçcted with Hebrew. On the other hand, the Phoenicians (Canaanites), whose dialect closely resembled that of Israel, are not counted as children of Shem. Moreover, the compiler of the list in Genesis x. had no clear conceptions about the peoples of south Arabia and Ethiopia. Nevertheless it would be undesirable to give up the universally received terms “ Semites ” and “ Semitic.”

The connexion of the Semitic languages with one another is somewhat close, in any case closer than that of the Indo- European languages. The more ancient Semitic tongues differ from one another scarcely more than do the various Teutonic dialects. Hence even in the 17th century such learned Orientalists as Hottinger,

Bochart, Castell and Ludolf had a tolerably clear notion of the relationship between the different Semitic languages with which they were acquainted; indeed the same may be said of some Jewish scholars who lived many centuries earlier, as, for instance, Jehuda ben Koreish. It is not difficult to point out a series of characteristic marks common to these languages,—the pre­dominance of triconsonantal roots, or of roots formed after the analogy of such, similarity in the formation of nominal and verbal stems, a great resemblance in the forms of the personal pronouns and in their use for the purpose of verbal inflection, the two principal tenses, the importance attached to the change of vowels in the interior of words, and lastly, considerable agreement with regard to order and the construction of sentences. Yet even so ancient a Semitic language as the Assyrian appears to lack some of these features, and in certain modern dialects, such as New Syriac, Mahri and more particularly Amharic, many of the characteristics of older Semitic speech have disappeared. And the resemblance in vocabulary generally diminishes in proportion to the modernness of the dialects. Still we can trace the connexion between the modem and the ancient dialects, and show, at least approximately, how the former were developed out of the latter. Where a development of this kind can be proved to have taken place, there a relationship must exist, however much the individual features may have been effaced. The question here is not of logical categories but of organic groups.

All these languages are descendants of a primitive Semitic language which has long been extinct. Of course this should not be taken literally as implying an absolute unity. If, in the strictest sense of the words, no two men ever speak the same language, it must apply with still greater force to any considerable mass of men not living in the closest conjunction; and as such we must conceive the ancient Semites, so soon as they had severed themselves from other races. As long as the primitive Semitic people occupied no great extent of territory, many linguistic differences existent in their midst might still be recon­ciled. Other differences, however, might even then have formed the germs of the subsequent dialectical distinction. Thus, if the gradual, or sudden, separation of individual sections of the people led to alienation on a large scale, their dialects must necessarily have developed decided lines of cleavage and become finally distinct languages. With all this, it is still possible that, even in that pre-historic era, peaceful or warlike intercourse may have exercised an influence tending to assimilate these languages once again. Within the limitations which we have intimated rather than discussed, the expression “ proto-Semitic language ” is thoroughly justifiable.

Many of its most important features may be reconstructed with at least tolerable certainty, but we must beware of attempt­ing too much in this respect. When the various cognate languages of a group diverge in essential points, it is by no

means always possible to determine which of them has retained the more primitive form. The history of the development of these tongues during the period anterior to the documents which we possess is often extremely obscure in its details. Even when several Semitic languages agree in important points of grammar we cannot always be sure that in these particulars we have what is primitive, since in many cases analogous changes may have taken place independently. To one who should assert the complete reconstruction of the primitive Semitic language to be possible, we might put the question, Would the man who is best acquainted with all the Romance languages be in a position to reconstruct their common mother, Latin, if the knowledge of it were lost ? And yet there are but few Semitic languages which we can know as accurately as the Romance languages are known. As far as the vocabulary is concerned, we may indeed maintain with certainty that a considerable number of words which have in various Semitic languages the form proper to each were a part of primitive Semitic speech. Nevertheless even then we are apt to be misled by independent but analogous formations and by words borrowed at a very remote period.@@2 Each Semitic lan­guage or group of languages has, however, many words which we cannot point out in the others. Of such words a great number no doubt belonged to primitive Semitic speech, and either disappeared in some of these languages or else remained in use, but not so as to be recognizable by us. In the case of certain proto-Semitic words, we can even yet observe how they gradually recede from the foreground. So, for instance, in Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic, the common designation of the lion, *laith,* has disappeared, almost before our eyes, in order to make room for other expressions. Yet many isolated words and roots may in very early times have been borrowed by the Hebrew, the Aramaic, the Ethiopie, &c., perhaps from wholly different languages, of which no trace is left. To what extent the separate languages created new roots is an extremely obscure problem.

The question which of the known Semitic dialects most resembles the primitive Semitic language is less important than one might at first suppose, since the question is one not of absolute but only of relative priority. After scholars had given up the notion (which, however, was not the fruit of scientific research) that all Semitic languages, and indeed all the languages in the world, were descendants of Hebrew or of Aramaic, it was long the fashion to maintain that Arabic bore a close resemblance to the primitive Semitic language.@@3 But, just as it is now re­cognized with ever-increasing clearness that Sanskrit is far from having retained in such a degree as was even lately supposed the characteristics of primitive Indo-European speech, so in the domain of the Semitic tongues we can assign to Arabic only a relative antiquity. It is true that in Arabic very many features are preserved more faithfully than in the cognate languages,—for instance, nearly all the original abundance of consonants, the short vowels in open syllables, particularly in the interior of words, and many grammatical distinctions which in the other languages are more or less obscured. On the other hand, Arabic has coined, simply from analogy, a great number of forms which, owing to their extreme simplicity, seem at the first glance to be primitive, but which nevertheless are only modifications of the primitive forms; whilst perhaps the other Semitic languages exhibit modifications of a different kind. In spite of its great wealth, Arabic is characterized by a certain monotony, which can scarcely have existed from the beginning. Both Hebrew and even Aramaic are in many respects more ancient than Arabic. This would no doubt be far more apparent if we knew Hebrew more completely and according to the original pro­nunciation of its vowels, and if we could discover how Aramaic was pronounced about the 13th century before our era. It must always be borne in mind that we are far more fully and accurately

@@@1 In Eiehhorn's *Repertorium,* viii. 161 (1781). Universally accepted from Eichhorn’s *Einleitung in das Alte Testament,* 2nd ed., i. 15 (Leipzig, 1787).

@@@2 The more alike two languages are the more difficult it usually is to detect, as borrowed elements, those words which have passed from one language into the other.

@@@3 This theory is carried to its extreme limit in Olshausen’s very valuable *Hebrew Grammar* (Brunswick, 1861).