

C. The Languages of the Old Testament

1. Hebrew

The basic materials relevant to Hebrew are presented in the major Hebrew courses at BTS. (Hebrew I--IV and Hebrew exegesis. They are not subject to review in this course. Some historical notes regarding Hebrew are as follow:

a. History

The Semitic Language Group designates a body of languages apparently derived from a common source. In our day a good example may be seen in the "romance" languages (French, Spanish, Italian, Romanian, and Portuguese) which are all descended from Latin. The term "semitic" denotes languages of the Semites, descendants of Shem as we think of it. We usually divide the Semitic group into northern and southern sections with Aramaic and Amorite in the north and Arabic and Ethiopic in the south. The western group includes Hebrew while the eastern features Babylonian, Assyrian, etc.

These designations may be artificial but they "work" as long as we do not become too restricted in our thinking. And you will note that our division is on the lines of the compass not just north and south.

The age of the language group is problematic and any intelligent guess may prove correct. In general the age of the Semitic group has been pushed steadily backwards and the latest findings, the Ebla material, suggest that an alphabetic semitic language was known centuries before it had been previously thought. The final analysis on this material is not confirmed, however, and may need considerable correction.

Whether there was a "proto-semitic" tongue is another question of debate. I am not sure what difference it makes save for this: if a parent tongue could be observed and its activities known, some of the unique features in the language that we do not understand now would presumably be made plainer.

But Hebrew, as a Semitic language, carries with it certain features of the "sister" tongues. Today we study it in the square orthographic characters of printing and this tends to make it look different from Arabic, etc. But when one reads or works with the older Hebrew script (or the modern cursive), one