

# Early development of the West-Semitic languages

## Linguistic history according to science and the Bible

André H. Roosma

TENTATIVE 1<sup>st</sup> DRAFT Working Document

2014-11-18

last updated: 2014-11-18

### Summary and introduction

In my extensive study of the old West-Semitic script<sup>1</sup> I show the following diagram on the genealogy of the Semitic languages according to the majority view with some variants.

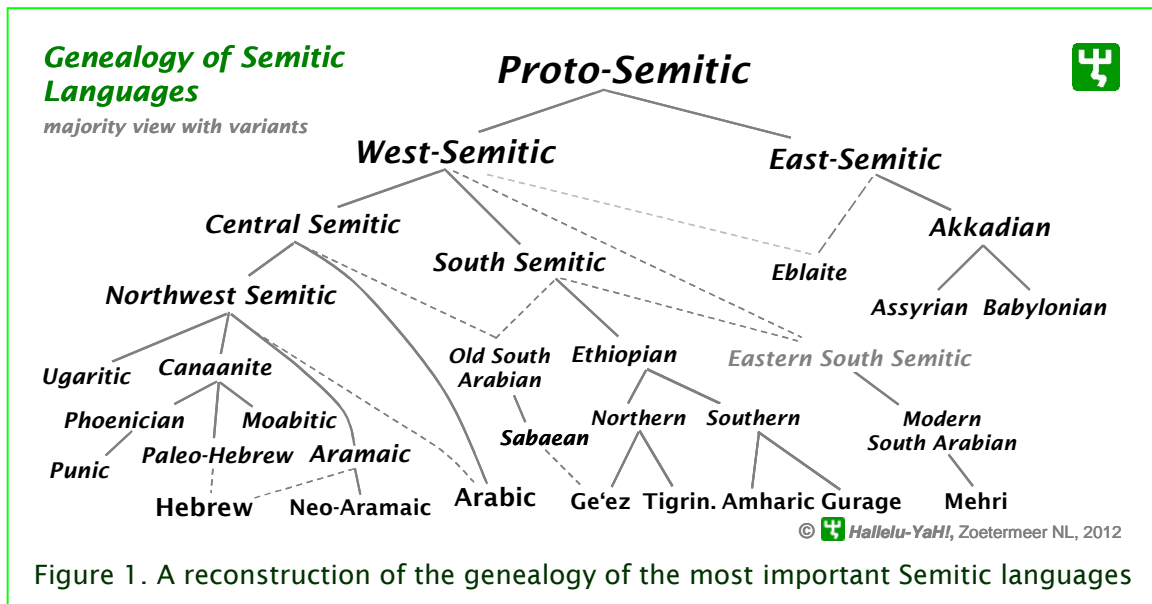



Figure 1. A reconstruction of the genealogy of the most important Semitic languages

Here, I dig a little deeper into the Western branch and see what archeology, linguistics and the Bible say about it. I will present some tentative ideas about the phasing of this genealogical tree in time, relating it to major historical events.

What appears from this, is that archeology, the Bible and linguistic philogenetic research align very well with each other. The findings also demonstrate that besides Aramaic, Arabic and Akkadian should be considered as important cues for finding the meanings of early Biblical vocabulary.

<sup>1</sup> For more on this study, see: André H. Roosma, '[The Written Language of Abraham, Moses and David - A study of the pictographic roots and basic notions in the underlying fabric of the earliest Biblical script](#)' , Hallelu-YaH Draft living Working Document, 1<sup>st</sup> English version: 18 April 2011; Dutch original: January 2011; updated regularly.

## Main points of division, from the Biblical and archeological records

Language development is usually marked by big events in society that led to the splits as depicted in the graph above. So, when we want to add dates to this graph, we have to find the big societal events that were so formative in this development. My focus in this investigation is on the early line of development that led to the language of Israel in the first two millennia BC, and ultimately to what is known as the Biblical Hebrew of the Masoretic Text. So, there are three sources from which to draw information regarding the driving societal events: the Biblical record, archeological findings, and linguistic information. An additional source may be that of genetics.

Asshur, the capital of the early Assyrian empire, is archeologically dated to 2600 BC, the beginning of the [early Assyrian era](#), that lasted till about 2335 BC. Lingually, this was a flourishing period for East-Semitic Akkadian and an early founding period for West-Semitic.

Major early events in the Bible narratives are the Flood and the Tower of Babel, generally dated to around 2500 and 2400 BC, respectively. These provide a lower bound for the division between the East- and West-Semitic branches.

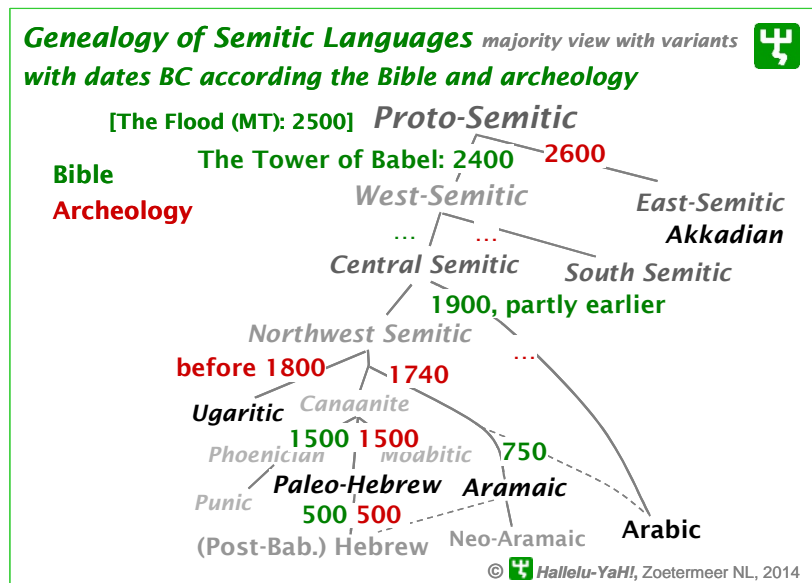
Another remarkable Biblical event is the calling of Abram, later Abraham, which is dated to around 2000 BC. From Abraham and his cousin Lot, many of the early Arabian tribes came forth. So Abraham must be placed at the point of divergence of Arabic from the main western line.

The next big Biblical event was the liberation of the people of Israel from Egypt. Though estimates vary, the most reliable ones date this close to 1500 BC.<sup>2</sup> From this point on, we can expect the (Paleo-)Hebrew of Israel to diverge substantially from its relatives.

Archeology has shown that after being under [Babylonian dominion around 1740 BC](#), the [Middle Assyrian Empire](#), 1392–1056 BC, flourished and saw a great expansion. Linguistically, we can expect this to be a period when its language – Aramaic – was expanded and transformed in the process as well. The 8<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century BC (esp. the last half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC) saw the very brutal [Neo-Assyrian](#) expansion, conquering various states such as Northern Israel and subjecting Judea to a status of [client state](#). Many people fled the area during this period, amongst others to Arabia.

After that we arrive at another huge event in the history of Judea and many of its surrounding countries: the conquering and following [exile](#) by the Babylonian king [Nebuchadnezzar](#). Both from the Biblical record and from the archeological and linguistic records, it is clear that there was a marked discontinuity in the line of development around the time of the [Babylonian exile](#) (roughly: the sixth century BC). It marked the end of Paleo-Hebrew, as generally acknowledged by linguists. Post-Babylonian Hebrew, of which the Hebrew of the Masoretic Text was a later development, was highly influenced by Aramaic, especially in its script and grammar (the oldest finds of parts of the Masoretic Text – Qumran scrolls, still without *Masorah* – date from the last centuries BC). The major part of the *Tanakh* or First Testament of the Bible was originally written in the Paleo-Hebrew or an even earlier (North-)West-Semitic script, and has been translated into Post-Babylonian Hebrew later (thus bearing linguistic signs of that later date). After the Persian king Cyrus conquered Babylon, the Jews were allowed to return to their country and rebuild their temple, but remained sort of a vassal state.

When I fill in the above-mentioned dates into the genealogical tree for the West-Semitic languages, we arrive at figure 2, here to the right. As far as I know the Bible does not give any clue to the divergence of the South Semitic branch, and I did not search for it in the archeological records.



<sup>2</sup> Gerard Gertoux has made an extensive study of the dating of major Biblical events, as corroborated by archeology. See e.g. '[Dating the Biblical Chronology](#)', '[Dating the Five Books of Moses](#)', '[Dating the war of the Hyksos](#)', and '[Dating the Birth of Israel: ca. 1500 or 1200 BCE ?](#)', all available on [Academia.edu](#).

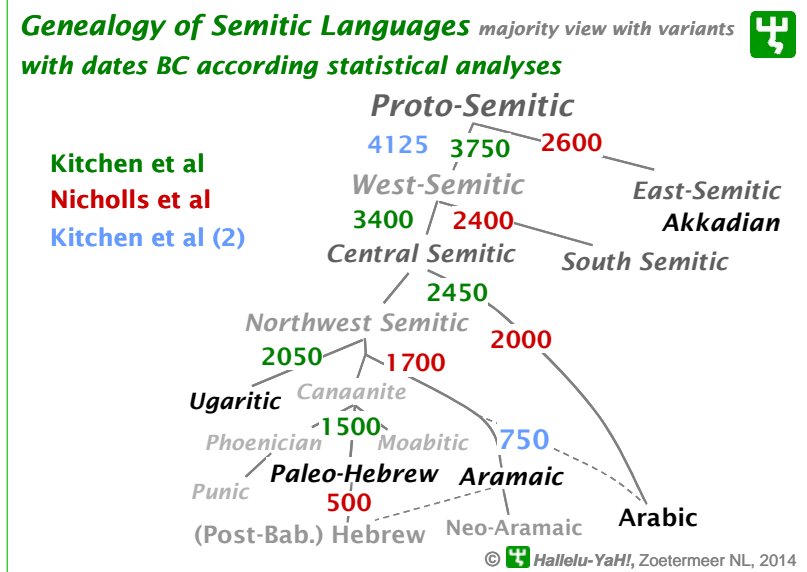
## Statistical phylogenetic analysis

In the last decade, statistical (Bayesian) analysis of language developments has become a valuable tool to study genealogical trees such as the above. It would be interesting to see what dates such an analysis would yield for the branchings of the West-Semitic tree. Concerning the development of the Semitic languages, I came across two of such phylogenetic analyses:

- Andrew Kitchen, Christopher Ehret, Shiferaw Assefa and Connie J. Mulligan, '[Bayesian phylogenetic analysis of Semitic languages identifies an Early Bronze Age origin of Semitic in the Near East](#)', *Proc. Royal Soc. B* 2009, 276, p.2703-2710 (doi:10.1098/rspb.2009.0408; first published online: 29 April 2009). (In the background material, Kitchen et al provide an alternative, though rejected view, where Arabic branches off much later from Aramaic; this has consequences for some earlier dates in the tree as well; see [the resulting scheme](#).)
- Geoff K. Nicholls & Robin J. Ryder, '[Phylogenetic models for Semitic vocabulary](#)', in: D. Conesa, A. Forte, A. Lopez-Quilez (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 26th International Workshop on Statistical Modelling*, Valencia, Spain, 2011. In a way, this study can be seen as an update of the former.

From these two (three, including Kitchen et al's alternative) studies, a tree with dates emerges for the West-Semitic branch as depicted in Figure 3, here to the right:

All dates have a 95% confidence interval associated to them. The further in the past, the larger these intervals naturally are. For example, the interval for the split between West- and East-Semitic given by Kitchen et al's alternative view (point estimate: 4125 BC) is 2400-5400 BC, Nichols et al have 1800-3100 BC here (point estimate: 2600 BC). When we combine these distributions, we arrive at an interval of around 2350-3150 BC and a point estimate around 2850 BC.



## Discussion and conclusion

The correspondence between the dates yielded by the different approaches is striking! (In this I see also a strong testimony about the trustworthiness of the Bible.)

The period of the Paleo-Hebrew language - 1500 to 500 BC - coincides with the main period in which most of the books of the *Tanakh* were written originally. As we see, Arabic branched off from the Northwest Semitic line just before this, at the time of the sons of Abraham, with a later influence from this main line into Arabic at the time of the very brutal Neo-Assyrian conquests, when many fugitives from Israel and surrounding states found refuge among the Arabians.

Often, Aramaic is used as a source for attesting the meaning of vocabulary used in the *Torah* and throughout the *Tanakh*. Since linguistic research has found out that classical Arabic has remained relatively rather unchanged since those days, we may well look to Arabic as a viable source when seeking the meanings of words used in the *Torah*, given its short distance to the Early Hebrew of Moses as demonstrated here. And since the time-distance between the split from Akkadian and the time of Moses is definitely shorter than the time between Moses and the later Jewish writings (such as the *Talmuds*), we should not neglect Akkadian either. So, I would like to emphasize the relevance of **Arabic** and **Akkadian** for **explaining Torah vocabulary**



[to the Hallelu-YaH news- or articles index](#)

*Thanks for your interest!*