

## **Stephen Sewall's Lecture Notes**<sup>1</sup>

Stephen Sewall (1734-1804), Hancock Professor of Hebrew and Other Oriental Languages, delivered these lectures at Harvard about the history of Arabic and its value in Biblical studies. In Lecture XXXVIII,

Sewall discusses his understanding of the origins of Arabic, its preservation, and the history and character of the Arabs. In Lecture XXXIX, he describes some aspects of Arabic script and grammar and compares Arabic with Hebrew and other languages.

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Read Nov. 28. 1768

- Aug. 31. 1772
- Nov. 11. 1776
- Sept. 18. 1780

### Lecture XXXVIII: On the Arabic

So long as the Mosaic economy continued in force, the whole gentile world were "strangers from the covenants of promise" continued in the scriptures of the Old Testament: But since by the coming of the Messiah, "the middle wall of partition" which separated the Jews from the gentiles "hath been broken down;" and the latter are become "fellow-heirs" with the former to the good thing promised; gentile Christians claim an equal property, with the Jews, in that invaluable treasure of divine truth. And besides its intrinsic value, Christians considering, as they ought, that the authority of the New Testament is rested in great part on the truth of the Old, have held this as sacred, and been as careful to preserve it pure and entire, as the Jews themselves. They have employed equal diligence and assiduity too in the study of it; and it will be no arrogance to say, they have been far more successful in ascertaining its true meaning. For while the Jews in general content themselves with traditionary comments, for the most part but idle tales, tending rather to make void the law, than to define its sense; Christians, especially those of the later ages, have pursued the most effectual methods to investigate the mind of the Holy Ghost, who spoke by the prophets in the Hebrew language. Among the many helps which Christians have adopted and employed with good success in this important inquiry, the knowledge of the Oriental languages nearly related to the Hebrew, is not the least considerable. Of the

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<sup>1</sup> **Persistent Link** <https://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.ARCH:11148290?n=61>

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Oriental languages, the Arabic, which method requires we should next consider, throws the most light upon the Hebrew. Not because it is the nearest akin, though indeed its relation is very close, but from its being more generally extant, a very great variety of treatises on different subjects being written in that language, which treatises, many of them at least, are handed down to the present day. The utility of the Arabic in explaining the Hebrew further appears from the copiousness of the language. It affords a multiplicity of words and phrases to express the very same thing: Among which you may be almost sure to find the very words and phrases you want illustrated in the Hebrew. Everyone has heard that a lion may be denominated in the Arabic language by 500 different words. It affords almost as many to express a sword and many other things; and a sword is said to have more than a thousand different names in that language.

The Arabic has been aptly compared to the ocean which is replenished by the numerous streams flowing into it. The Arabians, ever attentive to the enriching of their own language, have adopted into it everything that could contribute to this purpose. So that everything excellent in the other oriental languages, which as so many streams supplied the Arabian ocean, is happily preserved in that, while the streams themselves are almost dried up.

The Arabic language being then so admirably well adapted to the purposes, to which all the oriental languages may in some degree be applied, that is, to illustrate the oracles of God, I shall think the time well spent in endeavoring to give you some idea of this excellent language. I shall pursue the same method, which hath been observed in the other languages already treated of.

The origin of the Arabic hath been already traced. It was concluded that the Ethiopic and Arabic were branches of the same flock; or rather shoots of the same branch that is the dialect of Cush, being one of those which took rise at Babel. For the Ethiopians of Abyssinia and the Arabians appear to me to be equally descended from Cush. For this reason, as well as from the similarity of the two languages, I conclude that they once united in the dialect of Cush. This supposition is perhaps as probable as any: though I am sensible the uncertainty attending everything of so high antiquity leaves room for the advancement of other hypotheses.

The Arabians were perhaps the most independent nation upon the earth. For which reason the changes their language hath undergone must have been chiefly voluntary, such as they would make themselves for its improvement. Further, as nations, independent of others, have commonly an high opinion of their own abilities and importance, they are the less likely to alter their manners and way of living, which they imagine has given them the superiority they now hold. Now where the customs and commerce of a people remain the same, the genius and idiom of their language commonly continues uniform. Agreeably to this observation, the genius and idiom of the Arabic could suffer but little mutation. This however does not hinder but that the Arabic might in the meantime receive many improvements. For the improvement of a language, and the sameness of genius and idiom are perfectly consistent. From the present appearance of the Arabic language, it seems to have been more cultivated than any of the other oriental languages. And, as appears from what has been said above, these cultivations must have been made chiefly by the Arabians themselves, their literary history, if we had it complete, would show us the causes, and the steps, of almost every mutation. I shall now mention some of the most considerable which history has preserved.

The dialect of Cush I suppose was as simple, at first, as any that originated at Babel. And it might continue pretty much in that state while the family of Cush remained together as one people. But when

the family was grown numerous, they separated into distinct kingdoms under some aspiring chieftains. These separate kingdoms, derived from one and the same family, would be emulous to outshine each other. Everyone, according to his capacity and turn of mind, would endeavour to contribute something to the honour of his own society. Among these there could not fail to be some, who devoted themselves to the study of the belles lettres, and particularly to the cultivation of their own language. And as each of these distinct communities would probably pursue a different method to effectuate the same purpose, i.e. to improve its own language, different dialects would arise. And this we find to be the case in fact: though other causes also might contribute to it.

In this literary contest, however they might succeed in others, the Arabians have certainly carried off the palm.

For a long time before the rise of Mahomedanism, there had been two different dialects among the Arabians themselves, the one called the dialect of the Hamyarides, or family of Hamyar; the other, the dialect of the Koreshides, or the family of Koreish. The latter is the most elegant. The reason seems to be, that the family, or tribe of Koreish, was situated more favorably for the improvement of their language, than that of the Hamyar. The Arabians refer the origin of their nation, and the foundation of their civil government, to Yarab [يعرب] whose name is perpetuated in the appellation of the country and people of Arabia. The descendants of Yarab, and the posterity of those under his immediate government, were esteemed genuine natives of Arabia, and their language purely Arabic. From Yarab was descended Hamyar, who gave name to the tribe and dialect before mentioned.

Yarab is said to have had a brother, whose name was Jorham [جرهم], who, in capacity of viceroy, governed a considerable territory of Arabia. Ishmael, the son of Abraham is said by the Arabians to have married the daughter of Modad, who was descended from Jorham. Ishmael by marrying into this Arabian family, learned indeed the Arabic language, but at the same time mixed with it considerable of his own, which was Hebrew. The family with which Ishmael now became connected, was an illustrious one; and the language used there was esteemed the court-language. On this account, the innovations were readily adopted by the whole province. This is the origin of the Koreishic dialect: For Koreish, who gave name to it, was descended from Ishmael. This is the sum of the Arabian account of the matter; and there is doubtless some truth in it. But there are some things in it contradictory and others, in my opinion, not perfectly agreeable to the sacred history. And whenever any inconsistency arises between sacred and prophane history, the latter must always give place to the former.

It is not indeed anywhere in the Holy Scriptures expressly mentioned upon what account the Arabians are called by the name they are. But it is certain from the same Scriptures, that the nations inhabiting the countries east of the Tygris, and sometimes of the Euphrates too, are styled children of the east. Now [ערב] translated Arabia, as an appellative may signify the west. It seems therefore more probable to me, that the Arabians were so denominated from their situation, in respect to the children of the East, than from the name of their founder. But notwithstanding this error, and conjecture, in the name of their founder, what the Arabians have otherwise said of him may in general be admitted for true.

Again, Ishmael is said by the Arabian historians to have married a lady of distinction of their nation. But it is expressly said Gen. 21. 21. that "his mother took him a wife out of the land of Egypt." He might indeed have two wives which was common in his day. 'Tis true however, what the same historians observe, that his family was incorporated with the Arabians, and made a figure amongst them. And it is

not unlikely, that Ishmael occasioned some alterations for the better in the Arabic language, in that part of Arabia where he and his family settled themselves.

Another thing mentioned, which contributed greatly to the improvement of the Koreishic dialect, is this: Mecca was within the territories of the Koreishites: and that city it seems had been famous for religion, before it was consecrated to the Mahomedan superstition. Hither, for the sake of paying their devotions in the sacred oratory at Mecca, resorted all the most learned and civilized inhabitants of the different parts of Arabia. This gave the Koreishites an opportunity to become acquainted with all the ornaments of speech, used in any part of Arabia, and to make them their own. In this way the Koreishic dialect was enriched with all the elegances of the Arabic language, besides those peculiar to itself. But however the Koreishites might excel the other Arabians, the taste for polite literature was not confined to them. The Arabians in general were an ingenious and inquisitive people. Not content with their own productions of genius and art, which however were numerous and great, they travelled into other countries in search of further knowledge; and returned richly laden with the most valuable commodities. A remarkable instance of the inquisitive turn of the Arabians we have recorded in the Holy Scriptures. The queen of Sheba, called in the New Testament the “queen of the south, hearing of Solomon’s fame for wisdom, took a journey to Jerusalem to be resolved by him in some difficult and abstruse points of science, which she could gain no satisfaction about, from her own subjects and countrymen. By Sheba, and the South, many judicious interpreters understand Arabia felix. And I have no doubt but that is the very country intended. For this queen of the South is said to have come from the uttermost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon. Now Arabia felix lies south of Judea, and is also bounded on the south by the main ocean. This country might therefore with the greatest propriety be called, in respect of Judea, the South, and the uttermost parts of the earth too, it being the Southern extreme of the Arabian peninsula.

As the journey of the queen of Sheba, being at least 12 hundred miles, might have taken up much time and be attended with prodigious expense, it discovers the great curiosity of the nation she belonged to; and affords a strong presumption that many other peregrinations, for the like purposes, were undertaken by the same people; and that the Arabians, in this way, made themselves masters of everything excellent in the languages and learning of all the neighboring nations.

We shall the more easily believe this to have been the case, when we see by their own discoveries how indefatigable they have been in the study of the arts and sciences. To the Arabians we are obliged for some of the most useful and curious discoveries in the whole circle of science. The ten numerical cyphers, and the method of computing by them is generally allowed to be an invention of the Arabians. And truly it is an invention, for its simplicity, and its extensive utility, worthy of admiration, next to that of letters themselves. Algebra, a higher branch of the same, excellent art, refers us, by its very name, to the same ingenious people for its origin.

The Arabians also made many curious discoveries in astronomy, which brought that science to greater perfection, than it had ever arrived at before. The same discoveries they had the sagacity to apply very successfully to geography, to determine the longitude and latitude of places on the globe, a thing scarce attempted by any other nation before them. The Grecian astronomers had pretended to determine the inclination of the ecliptic to the equator but they made the angle much greater than the truth. But the Arabians, by means of quadrants and sextants, instruments all of their own invention reduced it to its just measure. By means of the same instruments, they determined with considerable

accuracy the situation of the fixed stars, and the motions of the planets. Furnished with these observations, and an easy method of computation, the Arabians made greater improvements in astronomical calculations than had ever been made before or have been perhaps since made. It is to the Arabians also that we are indebted for the first discoveries of the refrangibility of light by means of the atmosphere, and the parallaxes of the heavenly bodies, things of great importance in the science of astronomy.

The mention of these things is not foreign to the present subject, as they discover the sagacity, penetration, and close application of the Arabians: And a people so remarkable for these qualities, could not be inattentive to the cultivation of their own language. These things afford an argument *a priori* of the excellency of their language. And whoever studies the Arabic language will find the argument confirmed by fact.

I have already mentioned the Koreishites, as carrying the Arabic language to the greatest pitch of perfection. Among this tribe, if he was not of it, lived the famous impostor Mahomet; and in the Koreishic dialect the Koran, otherwise called the Alcoran, was written. This Bible of the Mussulmen, or believers in Mahomet, being composed by a masterly hand in the most elegant dialect, hath ever since been esteemed by Mahometans as the standard, not only of orthodox sentiments in their religion; but of fine writing in the Arabic language. Here then the Arabic language came to a stand. By means of the Alcoran it was neither suffered to be debated, not permitted to receive any further improvements. For whoever did not imitate the style of the Alcoran, was held in contempt; while those who copied it the most nearly, received the highest commendations.

Thus I have traced the changes of the Arabic language from its origin to the time it could receive no further alterations. It still continues to be the living language of many countries of the east: and where it is not vernacular it is universally taught in schools, wherever the Alcoran is received for the rule of religion. There is perhaps no living language upon earth, that can boast so long continuance, with so little variation of idiom. It hath continued from the dispersion of mankind to the present day.

Before I close the present lecture, I will obviate an objection, which may possibly arise in the minds of some. I have characterized the Arabians as a studious, inquisitive people. I am sensible a very different character is often given them. They are frequently described as a raving unlettered people, subsisting themselves not only by hunting, which is honest calling, but by theft and robbery too. Such a character is certainly incompatible with any literary improvements. The truth is, both characters are just, but neither of them universal. The Arabians are at this day distinguished into those who dwell in towns and cities, and those who live in the open fields and desert places. The proportion of the latter, I imagine, has been much greater in latter times, than formerly: Though the distinction I believe always subsisted. For so early as the time of the prophet Isaiah, the forlorn state of Babylon is foretold to be such, that "the Arabian shall not pitch tent there" which is equivalent to what is mentioned in the same text—utter desolation, such as happened to Sodom and Gomorrah. And in a still earlier period, in the time of Job, those robbers, called Sabeans, who made depredations upon his property, were probably of the Arabian nation.

But though there certainly were such vagrants among them, yet the Arabians in general cannot be characterized from them. Facts cannot be denied. And such productions of genius and art are handed down to us by the Arabians, that we cannot but ascribe to them the character, before given, of a learned and inquisitive people.

Read 20<sup>th</sup> Feb. 1769

- 14<sup>th</sup> Sep. 1772
- 25<sup>th</sup> Nov. 1776
- 13<sup>th</sup> Nov. 1780

## Lecture XXXIX

In the last discourse, I began with the Arabic language and pursued the subject so far as to point out its origin, changes and duration. Its genius and idiom still remain to be treated of. The Arabic, as I have hinted before, is so exceedingly useful in sacred philology, that I shall omit nothing, purposely, which may serve to give one the best idea of the language he can attain to without actually studying it. But I would not be understood to insinuate, that such a speculative knowledge of the Arabic will alone answer any valuable purposes in criticism. It is an intimate and, if I may be allowed the expression, an experiential acquaintance with it, can do this. And I wish the former kind of knowledge, which I shall now attempt to give, might excite the curiosity of some to gain the latter. [And this I wish not only for their own private benefit and satisfaction, but for the honour and reputation of this society. It is the oldest upon the continent, and the only one endowed with a professorship of this kind; and by the munificence of its benefactors, it is perhaps as well furnished with means, except of instructor, to attain the knowledge of the Arabic as any university in Europe. And there is no university, I believe, in all Europe, of equal note with this, where the Arabic is not more or less studied. What pity, not to say disgrace, is it then that we, who equal most, and perhaps some, of the universities of Europe, in the means, should fall short of them all in the application to attain this end?] What a satisfaction would it afford to the living friends and patrons of this society, to find their benefactors have had the effect they designed, that is, as some of them have expressed it, have produced some prime scholars in the Oriental languages. If any are emulous of glory and reputation, which in a degree are commendable, here is a fair opportunity of gaining them: For the same attainments in these studies in an American will, you may depend upon it, be looked upon as so much the more extraordinary than in others, by how much the further he is removed west, and so from the fountain of Oriental knowledge. Further, how much more solid satisfaction must this branch of study, whose ultimate end is to illustrate the Holy Scriptures, afford, than idle amusements which “profit not,” I will not say “in the day of wrath,” but not even in the day of enjoyment or any other period of life.

But to return from this digression. Whoever will take the pains to compare the Arabic alphabet with the Hebrew will find them essentially the same; almost the only difference being in the shape and order of the letters. There being so many marks of similarity now, it is not to be doubted they were originally the very same. And it is really matter of admiration, that two nations, who had little or no commerce with each other, should continue several thousand years so uniform in things, in themselves so mutable. Some indeed, and I am sensible would infer from hence, that the Arabians borrowed their letters from the Hebrews in some late period. But the great similarity also of the languages is a strong argument with me, that letters, the great preservative of the sameness of any language, were in use among the Arabians, as well as Hebrews, from the very infancy of the nation. [If Job was an Arabian, as is commonly thought, the art of writing and engraving was certainly in use among the Arabians in his time, which probably was prior to that of Moses. “Oh that my words,” says Job, “were not written, were

graven with an iron pen and lead, in the rock forever!”] The Arabians are indeed in doubt to whom to ascribe the origin of their letters; and no wonder, as they looked no farther than their own nation, where the origin of their letters is the same with that of the letters of all other nations who enjoy them, and is almost if not quite, coeval with mankind. The Arabians themselves confess, that one part of their nation, the tribes of Hamyar, had some rude kind of characters from earlier times: And these were probably the same with what they now use, only differing in shape; though the Arabians no where that know of speak of them as such. The furthest back the Arabians pretend to carry the origin of the letters they now use, is to Moramer, a native of Anbar, a town in Irac, the same with the ancient Babylonia. But this person seems, from what is said of them, to be only the author or inventor of a new and more commodious character, not of letters in the most comprehensive sense. What he did seems only an improvement of the rude character, before in use among the Arabians. This he probably made by the ancient characters of the Syrians, in whose neighborhood he lived. For the characters Moramer invented are supposed to be the same with the Kufic, so denominated from Kufa, which is also a town in Irac. And the Kufic characters, which are still preferred, bear considerable resemblance to the ancient Syriac. From Moramer the Arabians are able to point us to the several steps of improvement, through which their character has passed, till it arrived to the present degree of elegance and perfection in the year of the Hegira 640. i.e. AD 1262. Among all the variations the Arabic characters passed through, their direction was never altered. They are still adopted to writing from the right hand towards the left, which was the primitive practice.

Whoever is acquainted with the structure of the Hebrew language, will, from the slightest inspection, readily perceive the Arabic is formed upon the very same plan; and so the genius of both must, in this respect, coincide. Thus the themes or primitive words, in Arabic, generally consist, as they do in the Hebrew, of only three letters. Again, from the primitives are formed derivatives by the addition of certain appropriate letters; which derivations vary in signification, according to the letters which form them; though these formative letters have separately no significancy. Everyone acquainted with Hebrew knows that this is the very case in that language too. And it is remarkable that the Arabians appropriate to this purpose the very identical letters that the Hebrews do. Their inventive genius, indeed, to improve their own language, has added one or two more to the number.

Further, Arabic nouns, like the Hebrew, acknowledge no more genders than nature knows, the masculine and the feminine: And they are generally distinguished in the two languages exactly in the same manner. In the distinction of number, the Arabic sometimes very nearly agrees with the Hebrew, but oftener departs from it. The Arabians have a great variety of different ways to form the plural numer [sic] of both genders. These various methods, at least many of them, I imagine took rise at the confusion of language; and in them consisted in part the dialectical difference from the primitive language, in that family whence the Arabians were descended. One reason, among others, for this supposition is, that the Abyssinian Ethiopians, who were derived from the same family of Cush, agree precisely with the Arabians in many of these different forms of the plural number. Rabbinical grammarians, who acknowledge the authority of points, ascribe to the Hebrew language a dual number in nouns; but as this number, in masculine nouns, is distinguished from the plural only by points, if they are discarded, the distinction ceases of course: And in feminine nouns, though there is something more than points to countenance such a number, yet it is doubtful with me, whether it ought not rather to be reckoned a different form of the plural. It is certainly used as often, and perhaps oftener, to signify a greater number, than only two. If the dual number is unknown in the Hebrew, the Arabic will be the only one of

the Oriental languages which uses such a number. Here it is properly distinguished in both genders. This we must place to the account of the greater attention the Arabians paid to the cultivation of their own language. In this kind of study they may vie with the Greeks themselves.

The manner of constructing two nouns together, usually called Regimen, is common to all the eastern languages. The Arabic has nothing in this respect particular to itself. But the distinction of cases by different terminations which the Arabians have, they may challenge as their own. In this particular, the Arabians alone of all the eastern nations hold communion with the Greeks and Latins of the West.

From what has been said of nouns, it appears, the Arabic in that regard is very nearly allied to the Hebrew. The affinity is still closer in pronouns; the Arabic, in these, whether separate or suffixes, for it makes use of both just as that does, bearing a greater resemblance to the Hebrew than any of the other Oriental languages. Almost the only difference is this, that the Arabians vary them by a dual number, which the Hebrews do not. In this the Arabians agree with the Greeks, with this difference only, that the former never employ the dual in the first person.

It has been observed in all the Oriental languages, hitherto treated of, that conjugations mean different ways of declining or varying the same verb, in order to diversify its signification. They are to be understood in the same sense, when applied to the Arabic language, we are now speaking of. The Hebrew has but three of these conjugations; the Arabic has eleven. Some of them are similar to, and undoubtedly were derived from, the Hebrew as the primitive language: Others probably took their rise at the confusion of languages, as the Ethiopians have many conjugations in common with the Arabians: The rest are to be ascribed to the invention of the Arabians themselves. And it is observable in this as in most other particulars, in which the Arabians cultivated their own language, that they made no essential alterations in its genius and idiom. All their improvements were made upon the very same plan, upon which the language was originally constructed. All these numerous conjugations are of the same general nature with the few that belong to the primitive language. But though the Arabians so industriously occupied themselves in augmenting the number of conjugations, they left the moods and tenses untouched. And it is a little remarkable, that all the Oriental languages, except the Persic, agree in these to a tittle. None have more, nor less, than three moods, the indicative, imperative and infinitive; and two tenses, the Preter and the Future. The persons of Arabic verbs are formed in the same manner as those of the Hebrew, that is, by adding to the verb parts of the pronouns. And as pronouns, in Arabic, are distinguished into three numbers, singular, dual, and plural; and two genders, masculine and feminine; the same distinctions take place also in the persons of verbs. And further, as the Arabic pronouns, as was observed above bear a nearer resemblance to the Hebrew, than those of any other of the Oriental languages; it follows, that the Arabic is the most similar of any to the Hebrew, in the inflection of its verbs by persons.

The particles, in the Arabic language, comprehending adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections, are not only similar to those made use of in the Hebrew; but in most cases are identically the same, especially those that are prefixed to other words.

As little difference is there between the syntax or construction of sentences in the Arabic and the Hebrew, or indeed between the syntax of either, and that of the western languages. I will not conceal it, however, that there are some peculiarities in the Arabic syntax; and I shall mention one, without pretending to account for it. It is this: When a verb in the future tense precedes its nominative case plural, signifying rational beings, the verb is most commonly put in the feminine singular.



The phraseology of the Arabic too is very near akin to the Hebrew. The Arabic deals much in metaphors, proverbs, and wise sayings; and it is well known to everyone who reads his bible, that the Hebrew abounds with these forms of speech.

Thus I have given as particular account of the Arabic language as I thought consistent with the nature of a public lecture. I have all along endeavored to show its close affinity with the Hebrew: And this I did not only to prevent a repetition of what had been said before, when that language was treated of; but to evince at the same time the vast advantages of the Arabic, which is so generally extant, must afford to the explaining and illustrating of the Hebrew, which only exists in the Old Testament.

The relation, indeed, of the Arabic to the Hebrew, which I have endeavored to point out, respects chiefly the similarity of their formation, construction, and phraseology. These, 'tis true, may be very nearly the same for two distinct languages, and yet the one may afford but little light to the other, for want of a like affinity in the signification of words. For 'tis easy to conceive, that two languages may be formed upon the same general plan; and yet have no connection at all in the meaning of similar sounding words, if they should happen to have any such. An instance of this sort is ready at hand. The Greek and Latin bear a very near resemblance to each other in all the particulars mentioned above. But in the signification of words of similar sound the relation is but rarely visible. This is not the case between Arabic and Hebrew. These two languages have as close a connection in the signification of words, consisting of the same letters as in the other respects I have before pointed out. In this I am not afraid of being confuted, because it is a fact, which cannot be disproved.