

A Brief Introduction to the Semitic Languages



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A Brief Introduction to the Semitic Languages

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PREFACE

The contents of this book were originally intended to form a single chapter in a larger work on the Afroasiatic languages. When that project fell through, I decided that what I had written was worth publishing on its own. I had already been using it in seminars as an introduction to the Semitic family, and students found it useful. I expanded the original work, and this book is the result.

A comparative study of the Semitic languages is a very substantial undertaking, as the family comprises dozens of languages, spread out among the ancient, medieval, and modern periods. Numerous comprehensive studies have been made (see Chapter 6, below), and much more still needs to be written. But these larger works are much more than introductions to the Semitic family. There are also numerous brief sketches of the Semitic family, ranging from a few pages to a few dozen pages. These are more appropriate for the beginner or non-specialist, but they lack adequate detail to be very useful. This survey, therefore, is something of a middle ground between these two types. Its aim is to be both practical and manageable.

This brief introduction is intended to provide the student, general linguist, or amateur language enthusiast with an overview of the characteristic features of the Semitic languages, as well as some of the more interesting and unique developments that take place in the individual languages. Moreover, it is my goal to give the reader an idea of the diversity of the Semitic languages, as well as their similarities. All too often, sketches of this family focus mainly on the classical languages, and so in this book I have tried to incorporate at least as many examples from modern languages (particularly lesser known languages) as there are from ancient languages. I want the reader to know that

the Semitic family includes numerous vibrant and fascinating modern languages, worthy of all sorts of linguistic studies.

In order to make all of the examples as clear as possible, I have provided morpheme-by-morpheme glossing, following the Leipzig Glossing Rules. I assume that the reader is familiar with linguistic terminology, and has a basic understanding of historical linguistics. For those who do not have this background, I have provided some references to general linguistic works in the Guide to Further Reading (Chapter 6).

Given the length of this volume, many topics have necessarily been left unexplored (or underexplored), but I hope that the Guide to Further Reading (Chapter 6), as well as the many references scattered throughout the book, will encourage the reader to pursue the study of the Semitic languages further. With such a long attested history, such a diversity of languages—including languages that are important to several major religions and to some of history's most influential cultures—the study of the Semitic languages is exceptionally rewarding. And while I do not expect that everyone should choose a career devoted to the study of the Semitic languages, I do hope that everyone can appreciate their importance to both the past and present.

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My wife Kim has, once again, dedicated a large amount of time to editing this book in its various stages, and her assistance has been invaluable. I thank her, as always, with love and great appreciation.

ABBREVIATIONS

1	first person
2	second person
3	third person
ACC	accusative
ACT	active
ADJ	adjective
BCE	before the common era
C	common gender
C	consonant
<i>ca.</i>	<i>circa</i>
CE	common era
COLL	collective
COMPAR	comparative
CONJ	conjunction
CONSTR	construct
DAT	dative
Deut.	Deuteronomy
DN	Divine Name
DU	dual
Exod.	Exodus
EXIST	existential particle
F	feminine
FUT	future
Gen.	Genesis
GEN	genitive
GER	gerund
IMPER	imperative
INDEF	indefinite
INF	infinitive
INTERROG	interrogative
JUSS	jussive