

**THE HEBREW LANGUAGE
VIEWED IN THE LIGHT OF
ASSYRIAN RESEARCH**

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The Hebrew Language Viewed in the Light of Assyrian Research by Frederic Delitzsch

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BY

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PREFACE.

The substance of the present treatise is a reprint, in a revised and augmented form, of a series of articles which appeared in Nos. 2897, 2898, 2900, 2902, 2908, 2909, 2913 of the *Athenaeum*.¹ In reissuing these articles in the shape of a separate publication I have in view the double object of making them accessible to a larger circle of readers and of eliciting the opinions of scholars competent to judge of the soundness or otherwise of the principles here advocated. My esteemed teacher, Professor Dillmann, in his discussion on the site of Paradise, ironically refers to my own solution of that difficult question as having been effected by "the well known wand of cuneiform research."² I am prepared to hear the same remark applied to the present work, which endeavours to apply the results of Assyriology to the lexicographical treatment of the Hebrew language. I reject from the very outset the reproach that I am trying to explain "everything" by Assyrian. It is true I have explained Assyrian itself by its own help and it is no small satis-

¹ The importance of Assyriology to Hebrew lexicography; see *Athenaeum*, May 5. 12. 26; June 9; July 21. 28; August 25. 1863.

² *Genesis*, 4th edition, p. 61.

faction to me that I have arrived at results which have already met with the approval of scholars not biased in favour of Assyriology.

When I commenced the study of Assyrian, Assyriology was in a state of slavish dependency on Arabic lexicography. People were happy to compare the Assyrian *takātu*, "to trust," now recognised to mean originally "to be strong," with the eighth form of the Arabic *وَكَلَّ* (اَتَكَلَّ), and felt only secure under the sheltering roof of Arabic lexicography. I soon became convinced that Arabic was less important to the study of Assyrian than the North Semitic languages, the Hebrew and the Aramaic dialects, a conviction which I regard as the fundamental principle of Assyrian research. When I undertook the compilation of my Assyrian dictionary and, in obedience to the first principle of lexicography, began to explain Assyrian by the rich and various stores of its own literature, I was first taught by the instructive instances of the verbs *רגל* and *נהל* that Assyrian assigns to these and other stems a meaning far different from that based on the comparison of Arabic, a meaning which not only admirably suits the context, but is also directly confirmed by the *parallelismus membrorum*. Thus the Assyrian dictionary, which embodies a world of ancient Semitic thought and speech, disclosed an entirely new foundation for the understanding of the sacred language of the Old Testament and created a new line of interpretation directly opposed to the old system of Assyrian as well as of Hebrew lexicography.

Lest it should be supposed that I am guided in this little work by a principle of unjust warfare against the ninth edition of Gesenius's dictionary, I would remark that

my censure is limited to those cases where the editors have erroneously deviated from the correct views of Gesenius himself, or have failed to recognise what Fürst and Levy had already anticipated. It is also to be deplored that in a book intended to introduce young beginners to the study of the Semitic languages the boundary of hypothesis and certainty is not marked with sufficient clearness. On the other hand, I cheerfully acknowledge that the ninth edition contains a good many improvements in matters of detail. In opposing my own views to those expressed in the ninth edition nothing is more remote from my intention than personal controversy. The warm interest which my revered teacher, Professor Fleischer, has taken in the preparation of the two last editions of the dictionary excludes controversy, in the common sense of the word, on the part of an attached pupil. Nor am I so unreasonable as to charge the editors with having taken no notice of results which they could not have known. I oppose my own view to that of the ninth edition, because Gesenius's dictionary occupies the first and foremost place in Hebrew lexicography, and claims to represent the mental labour which men of different shades of theological opinion have devoted to the exegesis of the Old Testament. I have myself experienced the greatest difficulty in breaking through the spell of ideas imbibed at an early age. The disputes here raised are only concerned with facts, and for them I am not responsible, unless I be reproached for having recognised and proclaimed them before the world. If, in spite of these assertions to the contrary, this treatise should still be considered too controversial, I shall derive comfort from the thought, that this very character may induce the advocates of the old system to oppose their own views to my statements, and

thus to bring about the establishment of truth which is the desired end of all our efforts.

The facts here brought forward are of such fundamental importance, that I shall be grateful for any well-founded objections which may be urged against them. They materially change our views of the different degrees of affinity between the Semitic languages, and assign chiefly to Arabic a position quite different from that which it has hitherto occupied. If we take a single Arabic verb like *عَدَلَ* as compared with the North Semitic *עָדַל*, and consider the loss sustained by Arabic of so many ancient Semitic words (see Dillmann, *Ethiopic Grammar*, p. 5, note), and the numerous inflections of late origin, we are compelled to admit that Arabic cannot be the prototype of the other Semitic languages, least of all of Hebrew. This opinion receives the fullest confirmation from Assyrian research. It is, therefore, time to abandon the ordinary practice of forcing the peculiar, often late, meanings of the Arabic words upon the much older Hebrew sister. The editors of the last editions of Gesenius's dictionary will perhaps now agree with me that in future it will no longer be sufficient to patch some new Assyrian pieces upon an old cloth, but that a thorough revision of every Hebrew stem and of every Hebrew word must be effected. This salutary reformation of the Hebrew dictionary by means of Assyrian, so far from increasing the bulk of the lexicon¹, will save much useful space by the removal of a mass of erroneous statements and worthless speculations.

The transfer of the leading part in Hebrew lexicography from Arabic to Assyrian is, however, only one point

¹ See Preface of the ninth edition of Gesenius's dictionary, p. I.