
A
DISSERTATION
CONCERNING THE
HEBREW LANGUAGE,
LETTERS, VOWEL-POINTS, and ACCENTS.

C H A P. I.

Of the Antiquity of the Hebrew Language.

ACCORDING to the *Targum* of *Onkelos*, on *Gen. ii. 7.* when GOD breathed into man the breath of life, that became in man רוח ממלא a *speaking spirit*, or soul; or, as *Jonathan* paraphrases it, the soul in the body of man became a *speaking spirit*; that is, man was endued with a natural faculty of speech; so that he may be defined as well *ab oratione*, a speaking animal, as *a ratione*,

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a reasonable one ; for speech is proper and peculiar to men : when it is said, man is endued, as all men are, with a natural faculty of speaking, it is not to be understood, as if he was endued with a faculty of speaking some particular language ; but with a power and capacity of speaking any language he hears, or is taught ; I say hears, because unless a man has the sense of hearing, he cannot express any articulate sounds, or words : hence such persons as are totally deaf from their birth, are always dumb, and can never speak any language. *Adam* first heard the LORD GOD speaking, before he uttered a word himself, as it seems from the sacred history. The language *Adam* spake, and which, perhaps, he received not the whole instantaneously, but gradually ; in which he improved, as circumstances, and the necessity of things required, and which was continued in his posterity : this very probably is that which remained to the confusion of the tongues at *Babel*, and the dispersion of the people from thence. But of this more hereafter.

SOME

SOME have fancied, that if children, as soon as born, were brought up in a solitary place, where they could not hear any language spoken, that at the usual time children begin to speak, they would speak the first and primitive language that was spoken in the world. *Psammitichus*, king of *Egypt*, made trial of this by putting two children, newly born, under the care of a shepherd; charging him, that not a word should be uttered in their presence; and that they should be brought up in a cottage by themselves; and that goats should be had to them at proper times to suckle them; and commanded him to observe the first word spoken by them, when they left off their inarticulate sounds. Accordingly, at two years end, the shepherd opening the door of the cottage, both the children with their hands stretched out cried *bec, bec*. This he took no notice of at first, but it being frequently repeated, he told his lord of it, who ordered the children to be brought to him; and when *Psammitichus* heard them pronounce the word, he enquired what people used it, and upon enquiry found that the *Phrygians*

called bread by that name; upon this it was allowed that the *Phrygians* were a more ancient people than the *Egyptians*, between whom there had been a long contest about antiquity. This is the account given by *Herodotus*^a; but the *Scholiast* of *Aristophanes*^b says, that it was at three year's end the king ordered a man to go in filently to them, when he heard them pronounce the above word. And so *Suidas*^c relates, that at the same term of time, the king ordered one of his friends to go in filently, who heard and reported the same; and all of them observe, that the story is differently related by others; as that the children were delivered to a nurse or nurses, who had their tongues cut out, that they might not speak before them; and so says *Tertullian*^d: yet they all agree in the word spoken by the childre. But, as *Suidas* observes, if the former account is true, as it seems most probable, that they were nourished by goats, and not women; it is no wonder, that often hearing the bleating of the goats, *be-ec, be-ec*, they should imitate

^a Euterpe five, l. 2. c. 2, 3.
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 l. 1. c. 8.

^c VOCE ΒΕΚΚΕΣΕΛΗΥΕ.

^b In Nubes, p.
^d Ad Nationes,

imitate the sound, and say after them *bec*, which in the *Phrygian* language signified *bread*; and so food is expressed in *Hebrew* by a word of a similar sound בֶּג *beg*, *Ezek.* xxv. 7. *Dan.* i. 8. and xi. 26. and might as well be urged in favour of the antiquity of that language; but this proves nothing.

It may seem needless to enquire what was the first language that was spoken, and indeed it must be so, if what some say is true, that it is not now in being, but was blended with other languages, and lost in the confusion at *Babel*; and also if the *Oriental* languages, the *Hebrew*, *Samaritan*, *Chaldee*, *Syriac*, *Arabic*, and *Ethiopic*, are but one language; which is more probable, as *Ravius* * thinks, and so may go under the general name of the *Eastern* language; and it must be acknowledged there is a very great similarity between them, as not only appears from *Ravius*, but from the *Pentaglot* Lexicon of *Schindler*, and especially from the *Harmonic* Grammars and Lexicons of *Hottinger* and *Castell*; and yet I cannot but be of opinion, that the *Hebrew* language stands di-

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* A Discourse of the Oriental Tongues, p. 38. 39.

stinguished by its simplicity and dignity. The celebrated *Albert Schultens*^f reckons the *Hebrew*, *Chaldee*, *Syriac*, and *Arabic* languages, as sister-dialects of the primæval language; which I am content they should be accounted, allowing the *Hebrew* to be the pure dialect, which the others are a deviation from, and not so pure: though I should rather chuse to call them daughters, than sisters of the *Hebrew* tongue; since, as *Jerom* says^g, the *Hebrew* tongue is the mother of all languages, at least of the oriental ones. And these daughters are very helpful and assisting to her their mother in her declining state, and now reduced as to purity to the narrow limits of the sacred scriptures; for I cannot prevail upon myself to agree that she should be stripped of her maternal title, dignity, and honour; since she has the best claim to be the primitive language, as will be seen hereafter. Dr. *Hunt*^h, though he is of the same mind with *Schultens*, that the above languages are sisters, having

^f Præfat. ad Comment. in Job. & in Prov. & Orat. de Ling. Arab. Franeker. 1729 & altera Lugd. Batav. 1732.
^g Comment. in Soph. c. 3. fol. 100. A. ^h Orat. de Antiqu. &c. Ling. Arabic. p. 3. 49. 53. Oxon. 1738. & Orat. de usu Dialect. Orient. p. 2. Oxon. 1748.

having the same parent, the *Eastern* language, yet seems to allow the *Hebrew* to be the elder sister. And *Schultens*¹ himself asserts, that the primæval language, which was from the beginning of the world spoken by our first parents, and the antediluvian patriarchs, and after the flood to the dispersion, is the same which was afterwards called *Hebrew*, from *Heber*; from whom it passed through *Peleg* and *Abraham* to the nation of the *Hebrews*, and so the mother-language; but how it could be both mother and sister, is not easy to say.

THAT there was but one language spoken by men, from *Adam* to the flood in the times of *Noah*, and from thence to the confusion and dispersion at *Babel*, seems manifest from *Gen. xi. 1. and the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech*; and which is confirmed by the testimonies of several heathen writers, as by *Sibylla* in *Josephus*^k, by *Abydenus*¹, and others; and which continued in that interval without any, or little variation: the longevity of the
patriarchs

¹ Vid. Orationes supradictas, p. 6, 41. ^k Antiqu.
l. 1. c. 4. §. 3. ¹ Apud Euseb. Evangel. Præpar.
l. 9. c. 14. p. 416.

patriarchs much contributed to this, for *Adam* himself lived to the 10th century, and the flood was in the 17th. *Metbuselah*, who died a little before the flood, lived upwards of two hundred years in the days of *Adam*, and 600 years cotemporary with *Noah*, and who doubtless spoke the same language that *Adam* did; yea *Lamech*, the father of *Noah*, was born 50 years or more before the death of *Adam*; so that the language of *Adam* to the days of *Noah* is easily accounted for as the same: if any variation, it must be in the offspring of those of the patriarchs who removed from them, and settled in different parts of the world, but of this there is no proof; the separation of *Cain* and his posterity on account of religion, does not appear to have produced any alteration in language; but the same language was spoken by one as another, as is evident by the names of persons in the line of *Cain*, and of places inhabited by them to the time of the flood; when, no doubt, the same language was spoken by *Noah*, from whom his sons received it, and was continued unto the dispersion, which before that was but one; and it is the

the opinion of the *Persian* priests or *Magi*, that the time will come when the earth will be of one language again §; and if so, it is probable it will be the primitive one, but what that was, is the thing to be enquired into. The *Targums* of *Jonathan* and *Onkelos* on the place, add, by way of explanation, “and they spoke in the holy tongue, “ in which the world was created at the “ beginning,” meaning the *Hebrew* language, usually called the holy tongue; and this is the sense of *Jarchi*, *Aben Ezra*, and the Jewish writers in general, and of many Christians. But most nations have put in a claim for the superior antiquity of their nation and language, the *Europeans* not excepted. *Goropius Becanus* pleaded for the *Teutonic* language, or that which is spoken in lower *Germany* and *Brabant*, to be the original one, and attempted to derive the *Hebrew* from it; but it has been thought he was not serious in it, only did it to shew his *acumen*, and the luxuriancy of his fancy and imagination; the eastern nations have a much better pretext to antiquity, and most, if not all of them, have put

§ Plutarch. de *Iside* & *Osir.* p. 370.

put in their claim for it. There was a long contest between the *Egyptians* and *Phrygians* about this matter, as before observed. The *Armenians* have urged in their favour, that the ark rested on one of the mountains in their country, where *Noah* and his posterity continued some time, and left their language there. The *Arabs* pretend, that their language was spoken by *Adam* before his fall, and then changed into *Syriac*, and was restored upon his repentance, but again degenerated, and was in danger of being lost, but was preserved by the elder *Jorham*, who escaped with *Noah* in the ark, and propagated it among his posterity. The *Chinese* make great pretensions to the primitive language, and many things are urged in their favour, as the antiquity of their nation, their early acquaintance with arts and sciences, the singularity, simplicity, and modesty of their tongue^k. A countryman of ours, in the last century, published a treatise, called “An historical essay, endeavouring a probability that the language of *Cbina* is the primitive language, by *J. Webb*, Esq; *London*, 1669, 8vo.”

^k See the Universal History, Vol. 1. p. 346, 347.

8vo." But as when many candidates put up for a place, they are generally reduced to a few, and, if possible to two; the same method must be taken here; for the contest lies between the *Syriac* or *Chaldee*, and the *Hebrew*.

The *Chaldee* or *Syriac* language has its patrons for the antiquity of it; not only *Theodoret*, who was by birth a *Syrian*, and *Amyra* the *Maronite*, who are not to be wondered at, and others who have made it their favourite study; but even the *Arabic* writers, the more judicious of them, give it not only the preference to their own language in point of antiquity, but even make it as early as *Adam*. *Elmacinus* says¹, there are historians (*Arabic* ones) who affirm, that *Adam* and his posterity spoke the *Syriac* language until the confusion of tongues; and so *Abulpharagius* says^m, "of our doctors, *Basilius* and *Ephraim* assert, that unto *Eber* the language of men was one, and that that was *Syriac*, and in which God spoke to *Adam*;" and it must be allowed, that there are many things plausibly said

¹ Apud Hottinger. Smegma l. 1. c. 8. p. 228. ^m Hist. Dynast. Dyn. 1. p. 16.

faid in favour of this language being primitive: it must be owned that the *Chaldean* nation was a very antient one, *Jen.* v. 15. and that the *Syriac* language was spoken very early, as by *Laban*; but not earlier than the *Hebrew*, which was spoken at the same time by *Jacob*; the one called the heap of stones which was a witness between them *Jegar-sabadutha* in the *Syro-Chaldean* language, and the other *Galeed* in *Hebrew*, which both signify the same thing: what is commonly urged is as follows:

I. THAT the names of a man and woman are as much alike, if not more so, in the *Chaldee* or *Syriac* language, as in the *Hebrew*; a man is called *Gabra* and a woman *Gabretha*, which is equally as near as *Ish* and *Ishah* produced to prove the antiquity of the *Hebrew*, *Gen.* ii. 23. But neither in the *Chaldee* of *Onkelos*, nor in the *Syriac* version of that place, is it *Gabretha*, but *Ittetha* in the one, and *Antetha* in the other. *Theodoret* * instances in the names *Adam*, *Cain*, *Abel*, *Noah*, as proper to the *Syriac* language; but the derivation

* In *Gen.* quæst. 59.

rivation of them from the *Hebrew* tongue is more clear and manifest.

2. THAT it is rather agreeable to truth, that the primæval and common language before the confusion should remain in the country where the tower was built and the confusion made, which was in *Chaldea*, and therefore the *Chaldee* language, must be that language^o; but rather the contrary seems more natural, that the language, confounded and corrupted, should continue in the place where the confusion was made, and that those possessed of the pure and primitive language should depart from thence, as in fact they afterwards did.

3. IT is observed^p, that both *Eber* and *Abraham* were originally *Chaldeans*, and were brought up in *Chaldea*, and so must speak the language of that country, which therefore must be prior to the *Hebrew*; but it should be considered, that not only *Eber* but *Abraham* lived before the confusion and dispersion; for if the confusion was in the latter end of *Peleg's* days^q, *Abraham*,

^o Myricæi Præfat. ad Gram. Syro-Chald. ^p Ibid.
^q So R. Jose in Seder Olam Rabba c. 1. p. 1. Abarbinel in Pentateuch. fol. 51. 3. Juchasin, fol. 8. 1. Shalshalet Hakabala, fol. 1. 2.

brabam, according to the *Jewish* chronology, must be 48 years of age †, and consequently possessed of the pure and primitive language, be it what it may; and since it does not appear that either he or any of his posterity, as *Isaac* and *Jacob*, used the *Chaldee* language, but the *Hebrew* only, it seems to follow, that not the *Chaldee*, but the *Hebrew*, must be the language spoken by him, and so the primitive one.

4. It is said †, the *Hebrews* sprung from the *Chaldeans*, *Judith* v. 5. and so their language must be later than theirs; this is founded on *Abraham's* being of *Ur* of the *Chaldees*, from whence he came; but it does not follow, that because he was born and lived in that country before the confusion of *Babel*, that therefore he spoke the language used in that country afterwards, since he was soon called out of it; and it appears that he spoke not the *Chaldee* or *Syriac* language, but the *Hebrew*, as before observed.

5. It is urged †, as highly probable, that the language the second *Adam* spake, the first

† Seder Olam, ib. † Myricæus, ut supra. † Ibid.

first *Adam* did ; now Christ and his Apostles, and the people of the *Jews* in their times, spoke in the *Syriac* language, as appears from *Matt.* xxvii. 46. *Mark* v. 41. and vii. 34. but according to some learned men, as *Masius*^t, and *Fabricius Boderianus*^v, this was not the ancient language of the *Syrians* and *Chaldeans*, but a new language, which had its first rise in the *Babylonish* captivity, and was a mixture of *Chaldee* and *Hebrew*; tho' rather the mixture began in the times of the *Seleucidæ*, the *Syrian* kings, who entered into and distressed *Judea*; and therefore no argument can be taken from it in favour of the *Syriac* being the primitive language. I proceed now to propose the arguments that are, or may be used in favour of the *Hebrew* language being the primitive one; and the

First, may be taken from the alphabet of the tongue itself, which appears to be the first alphabet of all the eastern languages. The *Chaldee* or *Syriac*, *Phœnician* or *Samaritan*, have their alphabets manifestly from it; the names, the number, and order of their letters, and even the form and ducts of them

^t Præfat. ad Gram. Syr. ^v Præfat. ad Diction. Syro-Chald.

them seem to be taken from thence, and to be corrupt deviations from it; and the *Arabic* language, tho' the order of its alphabet is somewhat disturbed, yet the names of most of the letters are plainly from the *Hebrew*; and so indeed is the greater part of the names of letters in the *Greek* alphabet, from whence the *Romans* have taken theirs, and other *European* nations. *Hermannus Hugo*^u observes, that it is agreed among all, that from the names of the *Hebrew* characters, the letters of all nations have their names; now that language, whose alphabet appears to be the first, and to give rise to the alphabets of other tongues, bids fairest to be the first and primitive language: let it be observed that the *Hebrew* alphabet, as it now is, is exactly the same as it was in the days of *David* and *Solomon*, so early it can be traced; for it is to be seen in the 119th *Psalms*, and in others, and in the last chapter of the book of *Proverbs*, as well as in the book of *Lamentations*, written before or at the beginning of the *Babylonish* captivity.

Secondly,

^u De prima scribendi orig. c. 7. p. 65.

Secondly, Another argument for the antiquity of the *Hebrew* language, may be formed from the perfection and purity of it. *Abraham de Balmis* ^w says of it, that “ it is perfect in its letters and in its points. “ Our language, says he, is the most perfect language, and in its writing the most perfect of all writings of all languages ; “ there is nothing wanting, and there is “ nothing redundant in it, according to the “ laws and rules of things perfect and complete.” It consists of words which most fully and effectually express the nature of the things signified by ’em ; its roots, which are of a certain number, are, for the most part, of three letters only, and it has no exotic or strange words used in it. Whoever compares it with the *Syriac* or *Chaldee*, will easily perceive the difference as to the purity of ’em, and that the *Chaldee* is derived from the *Hebrew*, and is later than that ; for as *Scaliger* long ago observed * מלך *Melech* must be before מלכא *Malca*, the latter being derived from the former ; and the same may be observed in a multitude of other instances : now that

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which

^w Mikneh Abraham, p. 39. lin. 13, 14, 15.
ad Thompson. Ep. 242.

* Epist.

which is perfect, pure, and underived, must be before that which is imperfect, corrupt, and derived; or, as the philosopher^r expresses it, that which is vicious and corrupt must be later than that which is incorrupt.

Thirdly, The *Paronomasia* which *Adam* used when he called his wife *woman*, may be thought to be a good proof of the antiquity of the *Hebrew* language; since it will agree with that language only, *she shall be called Ishah, woman, because she was taken, meish, out of man, Gen. ii. 23.* which *paronomasia* does not appear neither in the *Syriac* version, nor in the *Chaldee* paraphrases of *Onkelos* and *Jonathan*, in which tho' *Gabra* is used of a man, yet never *Gabretba* of a woman, not even in places where men and women are spoken of together; see the *Syriac* version and *Chaldee* paraphrase of *Exod. xxxv. 22. Deut. ii. 34.* and many other places; and the reason for it is plain, the word is expressive of power and might, and so not so proper to be used of the weaker sex. The *Syriac* or *Chaldee* language will not admit of such an allusion
as

^r Aristot. de Republica, l. 3. c. 1.

as is in the text; for on the one hand, as *Gabra* is used for a man, and not *Gabretha* for a woman, so on the other hand, *Itta*, *Ittetha*, and *Intetha* or *Antetha*, are used for a woman, but never *Itt* for a man. Now as we prove that the additions to the book of *Daniel* were written in *Greek*, from the *paronomasia* in ch. xiii. 55. 59. so this seems to prove that the language *Adam* spoke in to his wife must be the *Hebrew* language, and consequently is the primitive one.*

Fourthly, The names of persons and places before the confusion at *Babel*, are in the *Hebrew* language, and are plainly derived from words in it; as *Adam* from אָדָם *Adamah*, earth, out of which he was formed, as is generally thought. *Eve*, from חַיָּה *Chayah*, to live, because the mother of all living; *Cain* from קָיָה to get, obtain, possess, being gotten from the Lord; *Abel*, from הֶבֶל *Hebel*, vanity, as his life was; and *Seth*, from שֵׁט *Seth*, put, appointed, because put, set, or appointed another seed in the room of *Abel*^a: and so all the names of the *Antediluvian* patri-

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archs

^z Vid. *Bereshit Rabba* f. 18. fol. 15. 2.
pher Cosri, par. 1. c. 68.

^a Vid. *Se-*

archs down to *Noah* and his sons, and their names also, with all those before the confusion and dispersion at *Babel*; and likewise the names of places, as of the garden of *Eden*, from נַחַד delight, pleasure, it being a very pleasant place; and the land of *Nod* from נָדַד to wander about; *Cain* being an exile and wanderer in it: now these being the names of persons and places before the confusion of tongues, clearly shew what language was spoken before that time, namely the *Hebrew*, which therefore seems to be the primitive one.

Fifthly, It is notorious that the law and the prophets, or the books of the old testament, were written in the *Hebrew* tongue. The law was written in it on two tables of stone by the finger of God himself, and the sacred books were written in the same language, under divine inspiration. Now it is reasonable to conclude, that the same language God wrote and inspired the prophets to write in, he himself spoke in to *Adam*, and inspired him with it, or however gave him a faculty of speaking it, and which he did speak, and therefore may be concluded to be the first and primitive tongue.

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