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The Case for Early Arabia and Arabic Language: A Reply to the New Arabia Theory by Ahmad al-Jallad

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The key aspect of my readings of the texts of ancient Near East languages stems from my evidence-backed conclusion that these languages should be classified and read as early Arabic. I will explore here this central point by replying to a new theory with an opposite understanding of early Arabia and the Arabic language, put forth by Ahmad al-Jallad, a scholar of ancient Near East languages and scripts. In a recent debate with al-Jallad, a self-described Semitic linguist, he proclaimed that exchanging the term 'Semitic' for 'early Arabic' or 'early *fuṣḥā*' is "simply a matter of nomenclature."[1] While his interpretation of the term Semitic sounds far more moderate than that of most Western philologists and epigraphists, it is not only fundamentally flawed and misleading, but also counterproductive. Most scholars, unfortunately, continue to misinform their students and the scholarly community by alluding to a so-called Semitic mother language, as a scientific fact. In a recent article, al-Jallad complained that most Arab scholars "rely almost exclusively on classical-Arabic dictionaries" to decipher ancient Arabic inscriptions written in Musnad and other scripts, but he neglects to see how relying exclusively on modern inscriptions-driven, limited-in-scope linguistic tools have produced erroneous and distorted translations, as we shall demonstrate later on.[2]

To put the above claim by al-Jallad in context, it is important to point out his overall views regarding the history of the Arabic language. He believes "various ancient forms of Arabic were present many centuries before the rise of Classical Arabic, in places such as Syria and Jordan," and that "the language may have originated there and then migrated south—suggesting that the 'corrupt' forms of Arabic spoken around the region may, in fact, have lineages older than classical Arabic." His key assertion that Arabic was born in the south Levant and spread southward is the latest of a barrage of current Western scholarly theories aimed at smearing and dismantling the brilliant scholarly work of numerous Islamic Arab linguists and historians, over more than a thousand years. Luckily, al-Jallad's speculative theory is only shared by a small group of Western scholars, including his colleague and mentor MacDonald, an accomplished Oxford scholar who, himself, has been working for years on exaggerated, questionable linguistic classifications of old Arabic. It is not surprising therefore why MacDonald rushed to accuse potential critics of al-Jallad's new theory of hidden motives by claiming "his theory will inevitably meet a lot of opposition, mainly for non-academic reasons."[3]

Ironically, while al-Jallad believes that using the coined, never-attested term Semitic, as a classification basis, is a matter of flexible terminology, he and most Western scholars demand strict, attested terminology use as a prerequisite for the classifications of early Arabs and Arabic language. Accordingly to them, one can only classify various ancient populations of the Arabian Peninsula and the Fertile Crescent as Arabs if they were explicitly identified as such in inscriptions. The earliest Arabs, we are told, should be traced to around 853 BCE, the date of the oldest Assyrian inscription found mentioning the word 'arab'. Presumably, these Arabs occupied the desert area extending from Mesopotamia in the East to the Sinai Peninsula in the west (i.e. mainly the southern Levant desert). Many repeatedly cite this inscription to support their absurd classification of the Arabs as merely the nomads of the vast Arabian deserts.

Citing his readings of a cache of Musnad Safaitic inscriptions from the Jordanian desert, al-Jallad, with a small group of scholars, wants to take the above absurdity a bit further. His belief that the Arabs originated in the southern Levant then migrated south to arabize the rest of the Arabian Peninsula would reverse the

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[1] In a debate with al-Jallad via academia.edu on Sept 17th 2019.
[2] A New History of Arabia, Written in Stone. Muhanna, Elias. *The New Yorker*. May 23, 2018
[3] ibid

remarkable scholarly conclusions by numerous historians and linguists, past and present, who believed the Arabs originated in southern Arabia and migrated North. At least, other scholars who cite the Assyrian inscription do not imply the geographical territory of the early Arabs was limited to the Levant-Mesopotamian dessert area. This new theory by al-Jallad contradicts the overwhelming facts of history, geography, anthropology, and linguistics. Unlike al-Jallad's unsubstantiated assumptions, the early prominent historians who lived during a much closer time era have documented the clear trend of prior migration north. They backed their work by plenty of details, some of which can easily be verified by modern discoveries. The facts of geography confirm the past, gradual desertification of the Arabian Peninsula leading to northward migrations. There is nothing significantly unique to the Levant desert, geographically or otherwise, to separate it from the vast Arabian deserts of the peninsula. Nomads roamed this area as one in the past, and they even do today. Even the anthropological discoveries of the earliest human bones in the African Horn area suggest close-by Yemen was likely the original source of early migrations. Most importantly, the inscriptional, linguistic evidence from ancient Mesopotamia and the Levant revealed that the languages of northern Arabia were substantially similar to those of the rest of the peninsula, including ancient Yemen.

To be sure, neither the new Safaitic inscriptions cited by al-Jallad, nor his readings of them are remarkable enough to necessitate a reversal of the established scholarly conclusions. In the past century, scholars have read plenty of Safaitic Musnad inscriptions, without finding their language to be significantly distinct from the languages of other Musnad inscriptions found throughout Arabia, including Yemen. The Safaitic script was a relatively young script, confined to a smaller geographic area, compared to the rest of the Musnad family of scripts. It was used for writing north-western Arabic regional dialects' texts, at a much later Arabic linguistic evolution stage. Inscriptional evidence of the early languages of southern Arabian Peninsula indicated that theses languages have shared most of their words' roots and general meanings with the languages of the northern Arabian Peninsula and the Fertile Crescent. Sharing a substantial number of attested, common words *is* the key factor in determining Arabic linguistic classifications and origins. Pointing out a few unique grammatical features shared with modern Arabic, as al-Jallad does, *is not* the key factor.

Listening to a very interesting and informative lecture by al-Jallad, I could not help but to observe how torn and conflicted he was, on the topic of the Arabic language history.[4] Discussing the early languages of Yemen, he claimed they are "as distantly related to Arabic as Hebrew and Aramaic are related to Arabic". One should ask what Arabic was he referring to. If he meant the Arabic of the Safaitic inscriptions then he is clearly wrong. If he meant the modern standard Arabic, then quoting Ibn Khaldūn would be a more accurate way to describe the differences between the old Yemen language, the pre-Islamic Arabic language of central Hijaz, and the modern standard Arabic of his time during the 14th century CE. Ibn Khaldūn wrote *".. the Muḍar tongue and Ḥimīr tongue were in a similar situation before the changes that occurred to many of the words of Ḥimīr tongue among the people of Muḍar. This is evident through available historical quotes, in contradiction with those who assume through ignorance that the two were one language and attempt to measure the Ḥimīr language based on the measurements of the Muḍar language and its grammar rules ..... The language of Ḥimīr is another language that differs from the language of Muḍar in many of its conditions, words' roots, and vowels, as the language of the Arabs in our time differs from the language of Muḍar."*[5] He clearly believed the three languages were all substantially Arabic languages but in different developmental stages, with the Yemen language being the oldest, original one.

The contradictions of al-Jallad's hypothesis that Arabic was originated in the southern Levant, not Yemen, are quite clear. To support his valid point that invoking "nomenclature is often (always?) ideological" and can therefore be bias, he gave an example to demonstrate how most scholars would observe the "developmental trajectory" of old English into modern English, but deny that for modern Arabic. He correctly stated that while "*modern English does not even resemble the West Saxon dialect of English*", we would not "*look at modern English and say, English just appeared out of nowhere*". However, shortly after, to justify his theory that the Arabic

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[4] The Rise of Arabic: From an Epic Past to an Evidence-Based History. A lecture by Dr. Ahmad Al-Jallad, Sofia Chair of Arabic at Ohio State University. Dār al-ʾĀthār al-ʾIslāmiyyah, Kuwait, December 16, 2019.
[5] Ibn Khaldūn. Taʾrīkh Ibn Khaldūn. Part I, Chapter 47.

language was not originated in Yemen, he read a couple brief sentences from ancient Yemen inscriptions and complained that their language *does not even resemble* modern Arabic! It seems that al-Jallad wants to play both sides of the argument; contradicting his own linguistic evolution example, he denied the Arabic language its own "developmental trajectory" and implied it appeared "out of nowhere". He is yet to tell us where did his original Levant Arabic come from.

Advocating objectivity, al-Jallad said "*I want to be neutral, I don't want to make assumptions about what people may have called their languages".* This is a good point. Speakers of the original Italian called it "vulgar" Latin, but this should not prevent us from classifying it Early Italian. Even today, we call most Arabian Peninsula people 'Saudis', but this is irrelevant for their actual classification. It does not matter if the Akkadians never called their language Arabic. If it is substantially Arabic, then it is ancient Arabic; "if it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it probably *is* a duck." However, while al-Jallad rightfully pointed out that ancient classifications should not be based on what people have called their languages, he had endorsed previously the notion that the Arabs (and therefore their language) are as old as the oldest inscription explicitly *calling* them with that name.[6] Continuing with his objectivity claim, al-Jallad said "*let's just talk in linguistic terms. We are looking for packages of linguistic features, like 'lam yaʿud'; that is an Arabic feature, it only occurs in Arabic, we don't find it in any other Semitic language*". Once again, after he rightfully dismissed the notion that "*if the inscription does not have 'al', it is not Arabic*", and observed that the definitions of the Arabic language in the twentieth century "*are anchored in ideology and nit-picking than they are in linguistic facts*", he nit-picked, himself, by complaining about the absence of the Arabic *lam*. Incidentally, it is not true that other Semitic Languages did not use the *lam* feature. The standard edition of the Epic of Gilgamesh in the Akkadian language, which I believe al-Jallad would classify as a non-Arabic, Semitic language, have used it in Tablet II, line 77, for example.

The hypocrisy of modern Western scholarship regarding Arabia and the Arabs is most apparent in its contradicting manipulation of the term Arabic language. While scholars hypothesize about the existence of an imaginary, unattested, mother language with the *invented name* 'Semitic', they demand that the existence of a real, ancient language with the *actual name* 'Arabic' must be attested first by inscriptional evidence, throughout its developmental stages. It gets even worse! While the invented Semitic language was sub-classified into many imaginary languages: Proto-Semitic, West-Semitic, East Semitic, .. etc, Arabic was denied any such meaningful classifications or sub-classifications. According to al-Jallad's Semitic tree, Arabic was a lonely "child" of Central Semitic, which in turn was branched from West Semitic.[7] Other scholars think Arabic branched from a presumed Arabic-Safaitic language, which in turn was branched from a vaguely-termed, West Semitic entity named "North Arabian", not even "North Arabic".[8]

Even with the emergence of Arabic as an established, fully-documented and explicitly-defined literary language after the introduction of the Quran, it was miss-classified into ambiguous and confusing sub-classifications. Western scholars classified the Arabic language of literary texts into: Classical Arabic (CA), Standard Classical Arabic (SCA), and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). Accordingly, CA was the language of the Umayyad and Abbasid literary texts between the 7th and 9th centuries, and SCA was a standardized form of CA originating from the orthography of the Quraysh tribe of Macca, with MSA, the widely used language for formal Arabic communications today, being its direct descendant. Notice, we are not told where did CA come from. Also notice, the language of the Quran, the most important linguistic reference of the Arabic language, and pre-Islamic poetry were left out of the above classifications, possibly to open it up to scholarly interpretations! Clearly, the above coined classifications are not only meaningless and arbitrarily, but also designed to question the historical integrity and continuity of the Arabic language. It is quite misleading to claim CA was originated from the orthography of the Quraysh.

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[6] Early Arabic Linguistic Classification. Chapter 16: *The Earliest Stages of Arabic and its Linguistic Classification*. Ahmad al-Jallad. 2018.

[7] ibid

[8] The Semitic Languages. Edited by John Huehnergard and Naʿama Pat-El. Chapter 1: Introduction to the Semitic Languages and their History. Routledge Family Language Series. Oxon & New York, 2019.

On the other hand, the early scholars and linguists of Arabic simply classified the language of the Quran as a formal, clear language (i.e. Fuṣḥā) representing the collective tongues or orthography of the entire people of the Arabian Peninsula, with Quraysh orthography chosen in the few instances when there was orthographic disagreements. According to these scholars, the Fuṣḥā language of the Quran, then, was rooted in the Ancient Arabic Language, and was fully linked to the rich Fuṣḥā language of its time, like the pre-Islamic Arabic poetry. Their solid linguistic classification makes it clear that at the time of the Quran, the Arabic language comprised of slightly varied formal languages (i.e. Fuṣḥā) spoken only by literate elite minorities, side-by-side a wide variety of locally-spoken dialects, exactly like it is today. It is logically-impossible to assume that the sophisticated Fuṣḥā language of the Quran was evolved overnight. Claiming this language was used for a few centuries and must be defined by such a short time period implies that. It is also logically impossible to assume that this complex language was used by any certain local population for their day-to-day conversations. In a way, Fuṣḥā for the Arabic language is like Hochdeutsch for the German language!

Given how inaccurate and groundless the current definition of CA is, it is often ignored and many would use the term 'Classical Arabic' to simply denote Fuṣḥā. I will do exactly that. To reiterate, Fuṣḥā (past and present) represented the collective orthographic experience of the Arabic speaking people, transcending geographic and historical boundaries. It did not represent a specific language in the sense of a daily spoken language by a specific group or region. It is rather a linguistic methodology used by the literate elite to document the Arabic language text in a clear, undisputed, verified, and inclusive manner, consistent with what is accepted as a so-called pure or formal language, at a certain time period and location. Fuṣḥā had no fixed grammar rules (as Ibn Khaldūn noted!) but rather an evolving grammar influenced by styles, scripts, mediums, and the writing systems utilized, geographically and historically. The great work of the Abbasid grammarians was extremely useful, but it was only intended to document and control the evolution of Fuṣḥā. With the above understanding of CA as a formal documentation language, not linked to a historical time period or geographical locality, it would be natural to assume the existence of earlier, substantially similar languages, and to identify them as early CA languages.

Fortunately, modern inscriptional discoveries have clearly revealed that earlier forms of the Classic Arabic language of the Quran and the pre-Islamic poetry have existed for at least a millennium and a half before. The Akkadians recorded their literary work and formal communications using a language with undisputed Arabic words and slightly similar grammar. A lot of the archaic grammar used by the written Akkadian language can even be seen in the pre-Islamic poetry and the Quran. The fact that it was not identical to the modern Arabic grammar is completely irrelevant. This is the essence of linguistic evolution. Ancient languages, spoken or formal, are not supposed to exactly resemble their modern corresponding ones. The key point here is that the Akkadians have invented a grammar methodology to formally record text, effectively creating a formal, reference language (i.e. early Fuṣḥā), which was not used as a day-to-day spoken language by various Mesopotamian localities, then. To support the above, I ask the reader to examine the following early classical Arabic poem from Tablet 10, Line 62 & 63, of the standard edition of the Epic pf Gilgamesh (~1000 BCE):[9]

<div dir="rtl">ذا سغبا لغب ليِعدِل كاءَ ذا   إنَ عسِر خيا وعسِر ليِفْحُ كاءَ ذا</div>

The script developed by the early Akkadian Arabs, whether it was originally borrowed or invented, was undoubtedly the most elaborate script used by the Arabs to record their language, until the emergence of the modern, soft vowels enhanced Arabic script in the 8th century. This Cuneiform script integrated detailed vowels information to allow for precise pronunciations, making it a far better script to facilitate any early Arabic linguistic research than al-Jallad's "favourite", ill-equipped Greek script.[10] In fact, the Greek script would surely distort the pronunciations of Arabic words, just as the Latin script, Western scholar's favourite script to transliterate historical Arabic texts, would. For example, scholars translated the text of the *Umm al_Jimāl*

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[9] Saad D. Abulhab. *The Epic of Gilgamesh: Selected Readings from its Original Early Arabic Language: Including a New Translation of the Flood Story.* New York: Blautopf. 2016.

[10] The Rise of Arabic: From an Epic Past to an Evidence-Based History. A lecture by Dr. Ahmad Al-Jallad, Sofia Chair of Arabic at Ohio State University. Dār al-ʾĀthār al-ʾIslāmiyyah, Kuwait, December 16, 2019.

Nabatean inscription (~250 CE) *solely* on their reading of its inexact translation in a nearby Greek inscription. Misreading the Arabic Nabataean text, they translated it as "*This is the Stelle of Fihru, son of Shullai, teacher of Jadhimat, king of Tanūkh*" when in fact it said "*This is the soul and tomb of Frʾ, son of Shullai, teacher/commander of Jadhimat, the one who made Tanūkh reign (crowned it)*". The name *Fihru* did not exist in the Nabataean inscription. There was no letter *hā*. The word was actually *qbr* for *qabr*, meaning tomb. Together with the previous word *nafsu*, it formed the familiar phrase *nafs-u-qabr* seen on numerous tombs in north eastern Arabia, where the deceased was likely from. The name *Fihru* was *assumed* based on scholars' pronunciation of the word ΦΕΡΟΥ in the Greek inscription, because they neglected tracing the following slightly damaged word, which was the actual name. This word was *Frʾ*, for *Faraʾ*, or *Firuʾ*, or *Farā*. Similarly, the clear word *mmlk*, (i.e. *mumallik*) for "the one who established kingdom of" was simply read *mlk*, for *malik*, meaning king, because the Greek inscription translated it that way! Scholars ignored the second undisputedly clear letter *m*.

A correct transliteration of the *Umm al_Jimāl* inscription matters. It is one of only three Nabataean inscriptions from the early centuries of the first millennium with clear Classical Arabic passages. The three inscriptions also confirmed important historical and linguistic facts regarding Arabic and Arabs. Unfortunately, the other two inscriptions, *al-Namārah* (327 CE) and *ʿAyn Abdāt* (~88 CE) were also misread and misinterpreted. Some scholars like al-Jallad even questioned whether the language of *al-Namārah* is Classical Arabic, simply because it did not fit the arbitrary definition of CA. As for *ʿAyn Abdāt*, scholars continue to circulate false, mediocre translations of its two lines of vertical classical Arabic poem, and distort their rhyming verses. With an astonishing lack of a minimal linguistic understanding of how the eloquent and sophisticated Classical Arabic poetry work, they managed to translate its rather simple, philosophical two poetry lines, as three plain sentences without a slightest hint of Arabic poetic style.

The *ʿAyn Abdāt* inscription starts with three Aramaic dialect text lines inscribed by a man named *Jrm Ilhi*. In the first two he asked to praise those who would read a prayer to god. In the third, he informs readers that he gave an offering to god *Abdāt*. Then, he inscribes two lines of Classical Arabic poetry explaining how death is inevitable regardless of offering or status since it is here to get us, but he does not want death because it is like a wound that tortures you but does not let you perish. He was likely a reincarnation believer complaining that one would not perish after death, or possibly, he was complaining about the suffering caused by the death of a loved one. Most current translations, however, missed the point of this poem, which was clearly about death, not god. Here is one of these translations: *For he [Obodas -the god] acts [expecting] no reward nor predilection. Though death has often sought us out, he afforded it no occasion; though I have often encountered wounding, he has not let it be my destruction.*[11] For those who want to judge on their own, below are the two poetry lines:

فكـان هنـا يبـغنـا   فيفعـلُ لا فدا ولا أثرا

أدد جرحُ لا يردنـا   المـوتُ لا أبـغهُ من هنا

To reinforce his theory that the Arabic language originated in the Levant, al-Jalad reminded us that the early Arabic script was also originated there since it was simply an evolved Nabataean script, a familiar claim put forward by Western scholars in the past century. He claimed "all this rich Arabic written heritage (i.e. Musnad) was dead-end" and "everything died off" to conclude that "the way to write Arabic happened here in the Nabataean kingdom". The Nabataeans, he explained, were "Arabic speakers", "who did not write their language" and "they did all their business using the Aramaic language and the Aramaic script". This may sound convincing at first, but it contradicts inscriptional evidence, which revealed the Nabataeans used a distinct dialect of the Arabic language, in addition to Aramaic, and a distinct script that was possibly older than the Aramaic script. The Nabataean and Aramaic scripts were likely derived from Musnad or Phoenician, an ancient script closely related to Musnad, which itself was influenced by the cuneiform Ugaritic alphabet. Inscriptions also revealed Musnad coexisted for a long time, with the new, developing writing systems in northern Arabia, and at least one Musnad style, Sabaʾi of the Yemen, survived intact till Islam. The death of the Musnad script was decreed by the Muslim leaders who decided in favour of the newer Arabic script, to record the Quran. Like many Western scholars, al-Jallad overlooks how the early Arabs classified the Nabataeans. According to them,

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[11] Hoyland, Robert G. *Arabia and the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam*. London: Routledge. 2001

they were the *settled* Arab farmers and dwellers of cities. Early scholars talked about the Nabataeans of Iraq (i.e Akkadians) and explained they were much older than the Nabataeans of the Levant. They even mentioned the Nabataeans of Uman and Bahrain!

In all likelihood, the early Arabic script, Jazm, was independently invented by Musnad, possibly Safaitic, scribes who were heavily influenced by the success of the prominent Nabataean script in the Northern Arabian region, and by other Aramaic-linked scripts in the area, including Mesopotamia. There is plenty of evidence to support this when examining the early Arabic inscriptional timelines, minimized shapes, reduced glyphs, expanded alphabetic mapping, and cursive style. The strict manner in which the glyphs of early Arabic styles connect across the horizontal line, is unique, indicating it was designed from scratch, not evolved. The name given by the early Arabs who used this style was *khaṭṭ al-Jazm*, literally meaning 'the horizontal line of cut or deducted shapes'. This name reinforces the claims put by early Arabic scholars that this script was invented, not evolved. The early Arabic script was not fully developed until it was adopted by the emerging Islamic state. Therefore, studying the early history of Arabic script should include the study of inscriptions and manuscripts of the early Islamic period.

Invoking nomenclature is often ideological, as al-Jallad noted, but the use of the term "Semitic" is *not* "simply a matter of nomenclature". Identifying the actual language of an ancient inscription is essential to deciphering it correctly. It is key to arriving at meaningful, more precise transliterations and translations. Classifying an inscription as an early Arabic inscription, rather than Semitic, leads us to use the old etymological Arabic references, which were based on past compilations of actual word roots and usages, as primary tools. The modern linguistic dictionaries created by compiling speculated words and meanings, based on limited number of inscriptions, can be useful as secondary tools. Relying solely on these modern dictionaries can produce distorted, erroneous, and weird readings, like the one we read above for the *ʿAyn Abdāt* inscription.

Western scholars claim relying solely on compiled lists of attested words' meanings, derivations, and grammatic usages from inscriptions is the only scholarly method to decipher ancient Near East texts, and produce verified language classifications. However, most data in these compiled lists are speculated (i.e. unattested and unverified). al-Jallad believes his searchable, limited-in-scope compiled list from the south Levant Safaitic inscriptions was key to the validity of his new theory; we are told his new Arabia history is "written on stone", after all! Certainly, the language of these inscriptions was undeniably Arabic as it can easily be verified through the Arabic etymological tools. Using his list can be helpful, but relying on it as an alternative to the historical references can be damaging. Examining one of his many Safaitic inscriptions' translations can illustrate this point, and would be the best way to conclude. Compare his translation below with the likely, coherent translation based on the Arabic references. Strangely, al-Jallad wants the readers to accept his notion that a wild female wolf was actually named *Mn*! Clearly, he speculated rather than consulting the root word *mnn* in the Arabic historical manuscripts.

ṭrd h-ḏʾb ẓlʿ m-mn ʿkd yglḥ   [طرد هذئب ضلع ممن عكد يجلح]
al-Jallad's translation: *He drove away the wolf, which was seeking to mate from Mn after it attacked.* [12]
Arabic-based translation: *The wolf chased around, he wanted to mate with the weak one, he kept on attacking [or: he then attacked]*

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[12] A Dictionary of the Safaitic Inscriptions. Ahmad Al-Jallad and Karolina Jaworska. Studies in Semitic Languages and Linguistics, Vol 98. 2019