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## Formations of the Semitic: Race, Religion and Language in Modern European Scholarship

*Islam Dayeh*

Freie Universität Berlin

[islam.dayeh@fu-berlin.de](mailto:islam.dayeh@fu-berlin.de)

*Ya'ar Hever*

Freie Universität Berlin

[yhever@gmail.com](mailto:yhever@gmail.com)

*Elizabeth Eva Johnston*

Kingsborough Community College

[eliz.eva@gmail.com](mailto:eliz.eva@gmail.com)

*Markus Messling*

Centre Marc Bloch/Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

[messling@cmb.hu-berlin.de](mailto:messling@cmb.hu-berlin.de)

The contributions assembled in this special issue were originally presented at a conference entitled *Semitic Philology within European Intellectual History: Constructions of Race, Religion and Language in Scholarly Practice*, which was dedicated to examining the constructions, contestations, genealogies and workings of discourses about Semites, Semitic languages, religions and literatures in European scholarship.

Held in Berlin at the Freie Universität Berlin and Forum Transregionale Studien on 19-21 June 2013, the conference was the outcome of a year-long seminar devoted to revisiting the histories and politics of discourses on race, religion and language in European scholarship. The academic field of Semitic philology developed out of European Christian Biblical studies. The term Semitic first appears in the 18th century as a designation for a family of cognate languages including Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic, as well as for the peoples who spoke them. The conceptual leap from language to people and from people to language informs the ways in which language, race and religion

were conceptualised over the nineteenth-century. Such essentialisations have played, and continue to play, a decisive role in European and world history.

Our discussions were guided by close readings of the seminal works of Edward Said, Talal Asad, Maurice Olender, Gil Anidjar, Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, Susannah Heschel, Daniel Boyarin, Tomoko Masuzawa, among others. The seminar involved scholars from religious studies, historians, linguists and literary scholars, whose training and research may not belong to "Semitic studies" in the strict sense, but whose disciplines have to a large extent been shaped by concepts, discourses and scholarly practices that have their origins in Semitic studies and adjacent fields. The contributions thus engage in an examination of "the Semitic" not in the narrow sense of disciplinary history but with a view to the humanities more broadly. Since most of these discourses are European in their origin, it is to be expected that the articles focus generally on Europe. Obviously, the relevance and relation of these discourses to colonial and global histories is equally significant, and we hope to address some of these entangled histories and their continuing effects in future issues of *Philological Encounters*.

It goes without saying that the title we have chosen, *Formations of the Semitic*, is a gesture to Talal Asad's seminal work *Formations of the Secular*. Inspired by his work, we suggest that the *Semitic* (often figured as the antonym of the *Secular*) is also in need of an anthropology of its discursive dynamics. What has remained from the 18th century through Semitic philology and adjacent fields? In what ways have peoples once identified as "Semites" come to view themselves as Semites? How are Orientalist discourses, Semitic philology, and the history of anti-Semitism entangled? Our hope is that this collection of articles about the recent past of philological scholarship will stimulate and advance the discussion of philology today and the futures it may have.

The contributions of Maurice Olender and Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin have been translated by Ya'ar Hever from the French and Hebrew, respectively. Maurice Olender's article was originally delivered as the keynote lecture at the conference and thus retains some of its original oratory style. We wish to thank Sam Wilder for his meticulous copy-editing.

The Editors



## Between Sciences of Origins and Religions of the Future: Questions of Philology

*Maurice Olender*

École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales

*olender@ehess.fr*

### Abstract

The antique Christian “appropriation” of Hebrew by the Early Church Fathers was succeeded historically by a kind of scholarly appropriation that resulted in the emergence of a “ready-made India” founded on a new discourse about Sanskrit. In a world governed by romanticist visions undergirded with colonial aspirations, in a historical period between a Christianity weakened by Enlightenment philosophers and the advancement of scientific secularism, certain scholarly fables about a primordial India came to resemble the fables about Hebrew. In this race toward the discovery of human origins, the new “Aryan Bible” required a new language of paradise: Sanskrit. Can one then say that India was appropriated within a scholarly environment that was being pulled between Christianity, secularism and scientism? Since our investigations have allowed us to demonstrate that this hypothesis is plausible, it is necessary to test this hypothesis through the clarification of the historical contexts, intellectual dynamics, and theological and political fields of action in which myth and reason mutually reinforce one another. While underlining the political stakes of the comparative method of anthropology, this article also recalls that not so long ago, knowledge of ancient and modern humanities often bore the mark of racial sciences that influenced all university disciplines from the early 19th century to the late 1940s.

\* This essay was first delivered in French as the keynote lecture of the conference on “Semitic Philology within European Intellectual History. Constructions of Race, Religion and Language in Scholarly Practice” on the 19th of June 2013 at Freie Universität Berlin. The conference was organised by Islam Dayeh, Elizabeth Eva Johnston, Ya’ar Hever and Markus Messling. I wish to thank Ya’ar Hever for his translation of this essay.

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