During the Enlightenment, some thinkers pondered the original language of humanity, and decided that it must have been Hebrew. With the advent of historical linguistics in the 19th century, Hebrew was, in a way, dethroned by Arabic. On the one hand, the simple vowel system of classical Arabic, on the other hand, its rich consonantal inventory, huge vocabulary, complex system of tenses and moods, and seemingly complete system of derived verbs made Arabic seem, to 19th-century European scholars, to be the most archaic and conservative of all Semitic languages; indeed, the earliest comparative studies almost treat Arabic as though it were, in fact, Proto-Semitic.

But of course Arabic is not Proto-Semitic. The phonology of classical Arabic is indeed very conservative, but there are other, more conservative Semitic
phonologies, such as the consonantal inventory of the Ancient South Arabian languages. And Arabic has undergone any number of developments that distinguish it not only from other Semitic languages but, in a great many ways, from the common ancestor of the Semitic languages as well.

This paper has several goals: to offer a view of what Arabic is as a Semitic language; to review where Arabic stands within the Semitic family, what its closest relatives are; and to review some of the features that uniquely characterize Arabic. These goals will also, of necessity, involve the ongoing discussion of the relationship between the modern forms of Arabic, the classical language, and the various preclassical forms of the language.

That comparative Semitic philology could illuminate and explain aspects of both classical and colloquial Arabic has of course long been known. Even in the nineteenth century, no one really thought classical Arabic was identical with Proto-Semitic. For example, it was recognized that Proto-Semitic had three voiceless sibilants, as in Biblical Hebrew, and that Arabic had merged two of those (*s̱ or *ṣ̱ and *š or *ṣ̱; see further below). It was also realized that the classical Arabic relative allaḏī had to be a secondary development. More recent comparative Semitic study has provided other examples, such as the following:

1. The preformative s of Arabic Form X, (i)ṣṭaʕala, makes sense when we posit that s was the original—and only—causative marker in Semitic. But an early sound rule that changed pre-vocalic s to h spread throughout much of Semitic; thus the simple causative *yusapʿil became first *yuḥapʿil and then, with the further loss of the h in Arabic, yuʃīl. In the st form *yuṣṭapʿil, however, the s was not pre-vocalic, and so it did not undergo the sound change. Arabic yastafʿil thus reflects a very old Semitic form.

2. The original function of the preformative n in Form VII yanfaṣil is seen in Akkadian *(y)ippaṣil, where the base of the form, *paṣil, is the verbal adjective of the basic stem of the root, as is still the case for a few verbs in Arabic, such as fariḥ ‘glad’. For transitive verbs in Akkadian, the verbal adjective is passive resultative, so *paṣil would mean ‘done, made’. The n preformative originally marked a form as ingressive or incohesive: *ya-n-paṣil meant ‘become, get done, made’.

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3 E.g., Brockelmann 1908: 128.
4 Wright 1890: 117.