Chapter 1
Semitic Monotheism¹ (1860)

A work such as M. Renan's *Histoire Générale et Système Comparé des Langues Sémitiques* can only be reviewed chapter by chapter. It contains a survey not only, as its title would lead us to suppose, of the Semitic languages, but of the Semitic languages and nations; and considering that the whole history of the civilised world has hitherto been acted by two races only, the Semitic and the Aryan, with occasional interruptions produced by the inroads of the Turanian race, M. Renan's work comprehends in reality half of the history of the ancient world. We have received as yet the first volume only of this important work, and before the author had time to finish the second, he was called upon to publish a second edition of the first, which appeared in 1858, with important additions and alterations.

In writing the history of the Semitic race it is necessary to lay down certain general characteristics common to all the members of that race, before we can speak of nations so widely separated from each other as the Jews, the Babylonians, Phœnicians, Carthaginians, and Arabs, as one race or family. The most important bond that binds these scattered tribes together into one ideal whole is to be found in their language. There can be as little doubt that the dialects of all the Semitic nations are derived from one common type as there is about the derivation of French, Spanish, and Italian from Latin, or of Latin, Greek, German, Celtic, Slavonic, and Sanskrit from the primitive idiom of the ancestors of the Aryan race. The evidence of language would by itself be quite sufficient to establish the fact that the Semitic nations descended from common ancestors, and constitute what, in the science of language, may be called a distinct race. But M. Renan was not satisfied with the single criterion of the relationship of the Semitic tribes, and he has endeavoured to draw, partly from his own observations, partly from the suggestions of other scholars, such as Ewald and Lassen, a more complete portrait of the Semitic man. This was no easy task. It was like drawing the portrait of a whole family, omitting all that is peculiar to each individual member, and yet preserving the features that constitute the general family likeness. The result has been what might be expected. Critics most familiar with one or the other branch of the Semitic family have each and all protested that they can see no likeness in the portrait. It seems to some to contain features which it ought not to contain, whereas others miss the very expression which appears to them most striking.

The following is a short abstract of what M. Renan considers the salient points in the Semitic character: “Their character,” he says,

is religious rather than political, and the mainspring of their religion is the conception of the unity of God. Their religious phraseology is simple, and free from mythological
elements. Their religious feelings are strong, exclusive, intolerant, and sustained by a fervour which finds its peculiar expression in prophetic visions. Compared to the Aryan nations, they are found deficient in scientific and philosophical originality. Their poetry is chiefly subjective or lyrical, and we look in vain among their poets for excellence in epic and dramatic compositions. Painting and the plastic arts have never arrived at a higher than the decorative stage. Their political life has remained patriarchal and despotic, and their inability to organise on a large scale has deprived them of the means of military success. Perhaps the most general feature of their character is a negative one—their inability to perceive the general and the abstract, whether in thought, language, religion, poetry, or politics; and, on the other hand, a strong attraction towards the individual and personal, which makes them monotheistic in religion, lyrical in poetry, monarchical in politics, abrupt in style, and useless for speculation.

One cannot look at this bold and rapid outline of the Semitic character without perceiving how many points it contains which are open to doubt and discussion. We shall confine our remarks to one point, which, in our mind, and, as far as we can see, in M. Renan's mind likewise, is the most important of all, namely, the supposed monotheistic tendency of the Semitic race. M. Renan asserts that this tendency belongs to the race by instinct—that it forms the rule, not the exception; and he seems to imply that without it the human race would never have arrived at the knowledge or worship of the One God.

If such a remark had been made fifty years ago, it would have roused little or no opposition. "Semitic" was then used in a more restricted sense, and hardly comprehended more than the Jews and Arabs. Of this small group of people it might well have been said, with such limitations as are tacitly implied in every general proposition on the character of individuals or nations, that the work set apart for them by a Divine providence in the history of the world was the preaching of a belief in one God. Three religions have been founded by members of that more circumscribed Semitic family—the Jewish, the Christian, the Mohammedan; and all three proclaim, with the strongest accent, the doctrine that there is but one God.

Of late, however, not only have the limits of the Semitic family been considerably extended, so as to embrace several nations notorious for their idolatrous worship, but the history of the Jewish and Arab tribes has been explored so much more fully, that even there traces of a wide-spread tendency to polytheism have come to light.

The Semitic family is divided by M. Renan into two great branches, differing from each other in the form of their monotheistic belief, yet both, according to their historian, imbued from the beginning with the instinctive faith in one God:

1. The nomad branch, consisting of Arabs, Hebrews, and the neighbouring tribes of Palestine, commonly called the descendants of Terah; and
2. The political branch, including the nations of Phoenicia, of Syria, Mesopotamia, and Yemen.

Can it be said that all these nations, comprising the worshippers of Elohim, Jehovah, Sabaoth, Moloch, Nisroch, Rimmon, Nebo, Dagon, Ashteroth, Baal or Bel, Baal-peor, Baal-zebub, Chemosh, Milcom, Adrammelech, Annamelech, Nibhaz and Tartak, Ashima, Nergal, Succoth-benoth, the Sun, Moon, planets, and all the host of