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# DISCOVER ARAMAIC

THE BIBLE'S SECOND  
HOLY LANGUAGE



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The Bible's  
SECOND Holy Language

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# Introduction

**T**HANK YOU for your interest in Aramaic, and for being interested enough to read this book. Before you get started, however, please take a few minutes to read this Introduction. It may help to put a few things into context.

From a great deal of experience in talking to people about Aramaic, I invariably find that nearly everyone falls into one of two camps:

- Some people are reasonably open to, and interested in, the idea that Aramaic forms such a central part of the Holy Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments. Whether atheists or Bible believers of one sort or another, they have little resistance to Aramaic, and are eager to learn more.
- I have learned from bitter first-hand experience, however, that other people are incredibly hostile against Aramaic, with attacks becoming very personal, very malicious, very illogical, very unpredictable and rather surprising.

How so? Why the stark contrast? Why should it be such a divisive subject? Why are some people so vehemently against Aramaic? Well, I am well placed to answer that, because I used to be one of those people!

I was (and still am) extremely pro-Hebrew. I believed (and still do) that Hebrew is the Holy Language. I was aware, of course, that portions of the Old Testament were written in Aramaic (Biblical Aramaic). But when I started to hear that Aramaic should be central to Bible studies and was the source of the New Testament, I initially attacked that idea. My resistance came, I suppose, because I felt that emphasizing Aramaic somehow detracted from the importance of Hebrew. Similarly, I often find that those who are pro-Hebrew are often very anti-Aramaic.

That's a great pity. If you love Hebrew, you should love Aramaic for exactly the same reasons. There should be no resistance to another Semitic, Jewish, Biblical language being important. And Aramaic *is* important – it already forms part of the Hebrew Bible! It has been used down through Bible times for thousands of years!

Therefore, if you feel some resistance to Aramaic because you are pro-Hebrew, please just respectfully read this book and understand that Aramaic is *also* important. There really is no reason why you should be anti-Aramaic. The two languages are both important. They are friends. They are on the same side.

On the other hand, many people (especially Christians) feel that the concept of an Aramaic New Testament is completely new to them. You may never have heard of this idea before, you may have no framework in your mind to interpret that idea, you believe that the New Testament was originally written (only) in Greek, and that any claim of Aramaic being the 'original' is an insult, an outrage, a blasphemy, a heresy, and such a person should be hounded, persecuted, and ex-communicated. I know many people have treated me this way.

But a Bible believer once said:

“Men who will not investigate, yet denounce, are either fools or knaves. There are multitudes of this sort of people in all parts of the world. Their unwillingness to investigate what they denounce arises from a diversity of causes: pride, avarice, love of ease, dullness of intellect, indifference to truth and error, to right and wrong, etc. are among the conditions that involve men in such folly and wickedness.”

In other words, truth should have nothing to fear from error.

So, if you are currently anti-Aramaic, why don't you gird up the loins of your mind, temporarily set aside your enmity, and honestly investigate the evidence presented in this book? If it turns out that you were wrong, then the sooner you correct that error, the better. But if you are right, investigation into the matter can only help your spiritual journey. We always instinctively resist new ideas. I know I did. But investigating new ideas is the only way to learn.

Or maybe you feel that, if there is an Aramaic New Testament, this

fact somehow implies that the Greek New Testament has no value. You recoil at such a thought. But why does there have to be a conflict? Does one have to be a winner, and the other a loser? Can we not use *both* Greek *and* Aramaic to help us understand the Bible better? The apostles were inspired, and they had the Holy Spirit gift of tongues. So why would you assume that if there is an Aramaic New Testament, then the Greek New Testament must not be inspired, that it is a duel to the death between one or the other?

Instead of forcing sides and artificially pitting Aramaic and Greek against each other as an either/or choice, is it not more honest and resourceful to get what we can from each language, and benefit from both where appropriate?

So, if you are currently very pro-Greek and very anti-Aramaic, I would respectfully ask you to put aside your hostility, be honest, and simply look at the evidence presented in this book. Give the evidence a fair hearing. Probably, in your search for Truth, you will find that you have gained a friend (Aramaic) to help you in your Bible studies, and that you have not really lost a friend (Greek). It is better to have more friends, especially faithful ones.

On the other hand, if you already know and understand how Aramaic can benefit you as you study the Bible, you are going to love this book! It goes into lines of evidence that you might never even have thought of. Enjoy!

If you read through this book sequentially (chapter after chapter), you will probably notice that there is some repetition, where important points are often repeatedly brought out in multiple lessons. There is intentional, and there are two reasons for doing it. First, repetition will instill those ideas deeper in your mind. Second, some readers will cherry-pick the chapters that are of most interest to them, and by mentioning important points in several chapters, it makes it more likely that you will learn those key points.

Finally, unless otherwise stated, all Bible passages are taken from the King James Version.

# The Importance of Aramaic

**W**ELCOME TO this book, *Discover Aramaic – the Bible's SECOND Holy Language!* Hebrew, of course, is the Bible's *FIRST* Holy Language. And, as we shall see, Hebrew and Aramaic are *very* closely related.

Everyone interested in the Bible should study this book – there are no exceptions! These chapters are designed to take you step-by-step through the history of Aramaic down through the centuries, starting from the early chapters of Genesis, through all the major empires of the Biblical world, showing you how Aramaic was used at the time of Jesus in Israel in the first century, and progressing onwards from that time right through to the Crusades and beyond. Did you know that Aramaic was used continuously throughout all that time? And yet, Aramaic is still spoken today! It's amazing, isn't it? Along with Hebrew, Aramaic is the language with the oldest recorded history.

It is highly recommended that you go through every chapter in this book carefully, because each chapter provides a wealth of background material that you will almost certainly find both fascinating and useful. All the questions that people typically ask about Aramaic are covered somewhere in these chapters.

Experience has shown that most people coming to the JesusSpokeAramaic.com website typically have a good knowledge of some aspects of Aramaic, but might know very little about other aspects. By going through all these chapters systematically, you will have the best possible understanding of the context of Aramaic and how Aramaic relates to the Bible, Old Testament history – and especially the background of the New Testament.

It is more than likely that, if you have a question about Aramaic, it will be answered here, in the chapters of this book.

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It is also likely that, if you are coming to this book or JesusSpokeAramaic.com for the first time, some of the history presented here, and some of the ideas covered, might be completely new to you. Or you might have been aware of certain facts before, but not really thought about the full importance of them. That is why going through all these chapters will be of great benefit to you. You will understand the importance of Aramaic for the study of the Bible more than ever before. And it will be a fun experience! The chapters are all in digestible chunks, so they should not be too long or overwhelming.

These chapters are carefully designed to build upon each other, step by step. There is some overlap and repetition, but this is intentional and designed to reinforce the material covered.

If you look down the list of chapters available, you will most likely find some that jump out at you as being particularly interesting. If you want to go ahead and jump to the individual chapters that you find most interesting, feel free to do that. Equally, if you want to start from the very beginning and systematically work your way through the chapters and read each one in turn, that approach will also work well.

But it is very important that you do read ALL the chapters of this book. These chapters are essential material for everyone interested in the Bible and Aramaic. You will learn many concepts discussed here that make other ideas presented in the JesusSpokeAramaic.com website much more obvious.

So I sincerely hope you enjoy this book on the rich cultural heritage that Aramaic holds in the Scriptures of Truth, and do make sure you read through each chapter individually!

# A Brief History of Aramaic

**I**N THE FOLLOWING chapters on Aramaic – the Bible's Second Holy Language – we are going to take a look at Aramaic down through the centuries. These chapters will steadily build on each other, and will provide a good introduction to much of the background of the Bible itself, as well as introducing many ideas that are more fully discussed on the JesusSpokeAramaic.com website. We strongly recommend that you go through these chapters thoroughly, especially if some of this history is new to you. These chapters will give you a correct cultural understanding of Aramaic and its deep, intimate connection with the Holy Scriptures.

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You can get free access to an entire video lesson about the history of Aramaic, entitled *A Brief History of Aramaic*, by following the link below:

<http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com/Lessons/History-of-Aramaic/History-of-Aramaic>

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Before we introduce Aramaic, however, let's think about a language you already know very well – English. The chances are that you come from an English-speaking country, or from a country where many of the citizens speak English. It's hard to imagine a world without English, because English has become a common language, for a number of reasons. Aramaic, too, was once like English is today. Aramaic was spoken across a massive portion of the world's land mass, just as English is today.

But despite its popularity, English (as we know it today) is actually quite a young language. If you read popular books written in Victorian times, just 150 years ago, let's say books written by the famous author Charles Dickens, English has changed enough so that most people would find those books difficult to read today. If we go back maybe 400 years, to William Shakespeare's day, most native

English speakers today actually struggle to read and understand Shakespeare. A lot of native English speakers, even educated people, say they do not understand the King James Bible, for example, except for people who have grown up in a home where the Bible has been read for years. And the King James Bible was written only about 400 years ago.

If we go back to the 1500s, to the time when William Tyndale was translating the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into English (just 500 years ago), we find that English is dramatically different from modern English today. Modern native English speakers would have a really hard time understanding an old printed Tyndale Bible today, at least without some training and a lot of practice.

And if we go back about 700 years – not that long ago really – to the time when Wycliffe translated the Bible from Latin into English, the situation only gets worse. Most native English speakers, if they looked at an old facsimile edition of a Wycliffe Bible, would say they just didn't understand it, and that it looked like a foreign language. If they made *a little* more effort, they would see that it was still recognisably English, but just a very, very different form of English.

We are now in the time period known as Middle English, roughly between the late 12th and late 15th centuries. English is, at this time, so different from modern English, that it actually needs a dictionary to cover the time period! There are actually dictionaries of Middle English available!

If we go back a further couple of centuries, we come to Old English, say from about the 11th century to the late 12th centuries, to the time when the Normans invaded England. English, now, is so different from modern English that it really does need a separate dictionary – a Dictionary of Old English. Several are available. Even with a lot of experience, understanding written documents in Old English is a real struggle, even for native English speakers.

If we go back any further than that, English is so different from today, that it is almost unrecognisable. It starts to become Anglo-Saxon, and for that you really do need a dictionary and some specialist training. Without training, almost no native English speaker today would understand any Anglo-Saxon, except for maybe the occasional word here and there. Anglo-Saxon is a very

different animal from modern English.

So, we have seen that English has a time frame of about 1000 years, about a millennium. In that time the language has been completely transformed, from a language that is barely recognisable, to the modern form of English we have today. That shows how much English has changed. Century after century, it has mutated and changed and transformed itself.

The same story could be repeated for nearly every language on this planet – for French, for German, for Italian, for Spanish – for them all.

But there are two notable exceptions – one is Hebrew, and the other is Aramaic...

While Hebrew is not the focus of this book, Aramaic is. And when we look at the history of Aramaic, we find a most remarkable history indeed. A story unlike every other modern language.

We find that Aramaic has been around (as the same recognisable language) for more than 4000 years, probably much longer than that, although that becomes difficult to prove. In that time, there has obviously been change. Nothing remains static for 4000 years or more. Words have changed their meaning, maybe. Idioms have perhaps been introduced. But Aramaic has remained a single, recognisable language, one which would be mutually understandable century after century, and showing a remarkable consistency never experienced by English. Unlike the examples of English which we gave earlier, Aramaic has remained remarkably consistent over time.

There are dialects, certainly, there are changes of scripts over the centuries, but the same basic language remains in a form that people down through time would still recognise. Compare that with what we saw in English earlier, where even going back a few hundred years means that modern speakers struggle to understand what they read.

Let's look at a quick example. In the chapter about *Biblical Aramaic*, we will see that Laban spoke an Aramaic phrase, *Jegar Sahadutha*, in Genesis, approximately 4000 years ago. We saw that *Jegar*, a *heap* or *pile*, is a word which is used throughout the Targums and the

Aramaic Old Testament. When we come to the New Testament, we find that *Sahadutha* is used constantly, and is translated *testimony* or *witness*, over and over again.

So over a period of 2000 years, let alone a few hundred, Aramaic has remained relatively intact. Still recognisable. Still understandable. Unlike English. It is truly amazing.

And so, in these chapters on the rich Biblical heritage of Aramaic, we will trace the use of Aramaic from the very beginning, down through the pages of the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament), until we get to Aramaic today. We will find that Aramaic has a long and distinguished history, already a recognisable language in Ur of the Chaldees, in Mesopotamia, at the time of Abraham.

We will find that Aramaic was the language of the Assyrian Empire, one of the most interesting and important empires of the ancient world. The Assyrian Empire is discussed extensively in the Bible, as Israel had a great deal of contact with the Assyrians. We will also see the interaction that Israel had with Aramaic, and how the situation transformed from Aramaic being a foreign language to Israel, to being the primary language spoken by the Jews as the centuries rolled on.

We will work our way with Aramaic down through the next few centuries, looking at its use as the official language of the Babylonian Empire. This brings us to Biblical Aramaic, and Aramaic as it exists in the books of Daniel and Ezra. Exiled from Israel, Jews now had to learn Aramaic, and their history has never been the same since.

As the Greek Empire started to appear on the world scene, the Jewish nation was once again affected by a foreign power. Whereas with the onslaught of the Assyrians and Babylonians, Jews had succumbed to Aramaic as a companion language to Hebrew, we find that with Greek it was different. The Greeks, under the Seleucids, persecuted Jews heavily. They desecrated the Temple, set up statues of Zeus, and forced Jews to sacrifice to foreign gods, and to eat swine's flesh. While some Jews inevitably adopted the Greek language and customs rather than face death, we find that the Hasmoneans revolted against the mighty Greek army. Against apparently impossible and insurmountable odds, Jews overcame and managed to cleanse the Temple and reinstate Jewish worship

again.

This is such an interesting time for Aramaic, and in particular the complicated interaction between Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic, that we devote several chapters to different aspects of this fascinating time. There are chapters on the Maccabees, on Aramaic in the New Testament, on what language was spoken in Egypt, and on the testimony of Josephus.

As we continue our journey into Aramaic, we find that Aramaic was spoken all throughout New Testament times, and well into the next few centuries. Gradually, as Islam started to spread through the Middle East, Arabic slowly started to supplant Aramaic. We have a chapter looking into this interesting transition.

But since Aramaic had already been used and spoken for at least 3000 years by this time, it was not easy to replace it entirely by this time. Arabic slowly start to supplant Aramaic in the Middle East, but the transition took centuries.

Undaunted by the passage of time and world empires, Aramaic continued its journey down through the centuries. Next we come to Crusader times, where a number of historians at the time recorded their histories in Aramaic. We look into this fascinating period too.

But Aramaic did not end there. It continued in use, although clearly diminishing in importance as Arabic (and English!) vied for dominance in the Middle East and the rest of the world generally. The churches of the East continued to use Aramaic in liturgy, using the Aramaic New Testament ever since the first century, as well as the Aramaic Old Testament. The Greek New Testament and the Greek Septuagint simply passed them by.

Today, as we shall see, Aramaic is still spoken in small communities in the Middle East and throughout the world.

Together, Hebrew and Aramaic have defied all the odds of world languages. Whereas just about every other language in the world has either died out completely, or (like English) changed unrecognisably over a few centuries, Hebrew and Aramaic have been preserved down through at least 4000 years of human history, to remain still recognisably the same languages. It is an amazing fact, quite unlike all other world languages.

Why should Hebrew and Aramaic be so different from other languages? Why should they have been preserved so miraculously, for centuries, for upwards of four millennia?

The answer is not just an unusual quirk in human history. The answer is that both Hebrew and Aramaic are the languages of the Holy Scriptures. The two languages together have their place in the Holy Bible. Hebrew to the Jews, and Aramaic to the Gentiles, is the pattern of Scripture. That is why Aramaic is so important. Alongside Hebrew, it was the language that God chose to reveal His message to mankind.

As you read through these chapters on the rich Biblical heritage of Aramaic, you will see just how long and fascinating a history Aramaic has, how inextricably it is linked to the Holy Scriptures, and how it has been used to reveal God's Word for four thousand years.

Welcome to the world of Aramaic! And enjoy the journey!

## In the beginning... Aramaic!

**A**S WE SAW in our introductory chapter, *A Brief History of Aramaic*, Aramaic has a long and distinguished history, going back at least 4000 years. But there is one language with an even longer history than that – Hebrew.

Hebrew is the world's oldest language, and goes right back to the creation of the world, when God said, "Let there be light!" And there was light (Genesis 1:3). At the beginning of the Creation, we are told that:

"And the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech."  
(Genesis 11:1)

Linguists might disagree, and claim that the origins of language go back to an Indo-European root such as Sanskrit or a Germanic language. Some might disagree with that, and say that the origins of language go back even further, to cavemen making primitive grunts to each other.

But the Holy Scriptures are clear that language did not evolve from primitive grunts, and did not derive from an Indo-European language, but rather Hebrew was spoken from the very beginning. Several fascinating and detailed studies have confirmed this, such as:

1. *The Word: The Dictionary That Reveals The Hebrew Source of English*, by Isaac Mozeson.

This book painstakingly and carefully documents several thousand English words that are clearly of Hebrew origin, once some consistent pronunciation differences are uncovered. It means that Indo-European languages have come from Hebrew, not the other way round. Hebrew is older than Indo-European languages.

2. *The affinity between the Hebrew language and the Celtic*, by Thomas Stratton.

This is an even older book than Isaac Mozeson's. It explains in detail that Celtic languages, which are at least 1000 years older than Old English, already show clear signs that they were derived from Hebrew. There are a number of similar detailed books which explore the very clear connections between Hebrew and Celtic languages.

3. *How the Hebrew Language Grew*, by Edward Horowitz.

This book shows how Hebrew words derive from their roots, and how Hebrew roots are related to each other in a deliberate, logical, planned fashion. This rules out the idea that Hebrew evolved from other more primitive languages, or that modern languages evolved from cavemen communicating in primitive grunts.

And so, clear evidence shows that in the beginning, Hebrew was a recognisable spoken language. But the harmonious situation recorded in Genesis, where "The whole earth was of one language, and of one speech", was not to last. The above passage goes on to explain that the inhabitants of the earth started to build a great tower to reach up to heaven. But the LORD said, "Behold, the people is one and they have all one language." And so, about 4000 B.C. at the Tower of Babel, "the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth" and He "scattered them abroad from thence across the face of all the earth." (Genesis 11:6-10). This was the incident that led from Hebrew being a pure language spoken by all peoples, into just one of a number of languages in existence in the Ancient Lands of the Middle East.

After the Tower of Babel, the people of the earth began to speak in different languages. The most important of these was Aramaic. We have seen that Aramaic was already a known, established, recognisable and mature language by the time of Abraham, in Ur of the Chaldees, in Ancient Mesopotamia, around 2000 B.C.

We are told that, at the Tower of Babel, "the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth". The word "confound" means "to mix up, to confuse". "The language of all the earth" was

Hebrew, and Hebrew was mixed up, or confused, to form Aramaic.

And in fact, as we shall see in the lessons about leveraging Hebrew to learn Aramaic that are available at [JesusSpokeAramaic.com](http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com), Hebrew and Aramaic have a very great deal in common. They share a large amount of common vocabulary and have very similar grammar. While at first they appear as completely different languages (mutually unintelligible) once the veil is removed and you systematically uncover the differences, you find that the situation is exactly as it is described in Genesis. Without knowing what happened at the Tower of Babel, Hebrew and Aramaic would seem to contain a great deal of puzzling similarities which could not otherwise be explained. But God made certain systematic tweaks, or differences, to mix the languages together, making them difficult to understand unless you are aware of what changes have been made.

And so, as we have seen, Hebrew and Aramaic together are the world's oldest languages. Together they go right back to the early days of the Bible, to the book of Genesis. No other languages have been around for so long, and no other languages have been as recognisable for so long. Together, they are the languages in which God chose to reveal His Holy Scriptures.

As we have seen, then, Aramaic is a very special language. If God chose to reveal His Word through Aramaic, we would do well to learn this wonderful language.

Make sure to work your way through all the chapters of this book to find out more.

# Aramaic and the Old Testament

**I**N THE chapter, *In the beginning – Aramaic!*, we saw that prior to the Tower of Babel, the Scripture records that, “The whole earth was of one language, and of one speech”, and that one language and one speech was Hebrew. Hebrew became uniquely and identifiably associated with the Land of Israel and the people of Israel. We find many references throughout Bible times demonstrating this close connection between Hebrew and the Jewish people. Hebrew is referred to as:

“The language of Canaan” (Isaiah 19:18)

“The Jews’ language [Judean]” (Isaiah 36:11; 2 Kings 18:26,28)

“Hebrew”, under the Roman Empire.

“Hebrew Language”, Mishnah, Gittin 9:8

Hebrew has remained the Holy Language of the Jewish people ever since. But, as we will see in the chapter, *Aramaic – Judaism’s Second Holy Language*, the Jewish people also adopted Aramaic, and Judaism has a long and intimate connection with Aramaic too.

And so, whereas Hebrew was recognised as being a distinct language associated with the Land of Israel and the Jews, during all this time Aramaic was the language of the nations surrounding Israel. Let us demonstrate this by tracing the use of Aramaic in the pages of the Old Testament, as we follow Aramaic on its journey through the nations surrounding Israel.

The first mention of Aramaic in the Bible is in Genesis. In Genesis chapter 12, God calls Abraham out of Mesopotamia, from Ur of the

Chaldees, and commands him to go to a land that he will be shown. After stopping at Haran, Abraham is again told to go to the land of Israel (Genesis 12). Abraham marries Sarah, and they remain in the Land of Israel. In time, they give birth to Isaac, the son of promise. Not wanting to marry a daughter of the Canaanites, Abraham sends his servant (Eliezer of Damascus) back to Haran to find a wife from Abraham's kindred. Through God's blessing on his journey of faith, the servant returns with Rebekah, who marries Isaac. Now, the region of Syria (and in particular Damascus where Eliezer came from) and Ur of the Chaldees in Mesopotamia, and the whole region around Haran, were all Aramaic strongholds. Eliezer would have no problem communicating, in Aramaic, with everyone he met on his long journey to Haran and back. He communicates with Abraham's kindred there, indicating that they too spoke Aramaic.

Isaac and Rebekah give birth to Jacob, to whom the promises and blessings of faithful Abraham were passed. In turn, they too, seek a wife for their son, Jacob. But again, rather than marrying an unbelieving pagan wife of the Canaanites, they seek a wife from Abraham's kindred. Jacob is sent back to his mother Rebekah's family, who have now moved from Ur of the Chaldees, and are in Haran. After a long journey, he goes to Laban, and meets Rachel, whom he later marries, along with Leah. Their children gave rise to the twelve tribes of Israel.

But after twenty years of serving Laban, the time comes for Jacob to leave Laban. Knowing Laban's deceit and treachery, he packs up his family's goods, and seeks to leave quietly and peaceably. Laban soon discovers he has gone, and pursues after him. Laban is warned in a dream, by God, not to do Jacob any harm.

Genesis chapter 31 tells us the events surrounding their final parting from each other. They erect a heap of stones as a memorial, or witness, of the promises they have made to each other. But, interestingly, in verse 47 we are told they speak different languages:

“And Jacob said unto his brethren, Gather stones, and they took stones, and made an heap: and they did eat there upon the heap. And Laban called it Jegar Sahadutha: but Jacob called it Galeed. And Laban said, This heap is a witness between me and thee this day. Therefore was the name of it called Galeed; and Mizpah...”  
(Genesis 31:46-48)

In these verses, we find that Laban speaks Aramaic, in the phrase *Jegar Sahadutha*, which we discuss again in other chapters. Jacob, however, speaks Hebrew, and calls it *Galeed*, the equivalent Hebrew expression. From these simple verses, we can make a number of conclusions:

1. Laban, coming from Ur of the Chaldees, in Mesopotamia, speaks Aramaic.
2. Abraham, coming from that region himself, must also have spoken Aramaic.
3. It follows that Laban's whole family (Rachel, Leah, Rebekah previously) must all have been able to speak Aramaic.
4. Eliezer, previously, was a native Aramaic speaker, and so he would have had no difficulty talking to Laban.
5. To communicate with them, Jacob also must have been able to speak Aramaic, although he prefers Hebrew.

Thus, we find that the patriarchs and matriarchs could all speak Aramaic, although Hebrew was their first choice.

Just as Aramaic is Judaism's second holy language, it was also the second language of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all the kindred of Abraham. As followers of faithful Abraham today, should we also not learn Aramaic, to follow in faithful Abraham's footsteps?

The use of Aramaic in these early chapters of Genesis reminds us of the close contact Israel has had with the Aramaic-speaking nations around them. Aramaic, too, is a holy language used to reveal God's Word. Alongside Hebrew, the two languages together form the Hebrew Bible. One without the other is like a bride without a bridegroom. Together, they remind us that through faithful Abraham, all nations of the earth will be blessed.

On our journey through the pages of the Old Testament, we next come to the mighty Assyrian Empire, which stood against Israel and Judah. The ten northern tribes (Israel) came to an end under the powerful onslaught of the Assyrian Empire. But Judah as a nation-state, and Jerusalem as the Holy City, managed to hold out against all odds, through the faith of Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah.

But eventually, the Assyrian Empire came against Jerusalem to

besiege it, to conquer it as it had done to all the surrounding nations. We read about these dramatic events in the book of Isaiah. But a careful consideration of the passage in Isaiah 36 is interesting. Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, is preparing to attack the cities of Judah. He has sent Rabshakeh to conquer Jerusalem in the reign of king Hezekiah.

Let us read what the passage says:

*“Then said Eliakim and Shebna and Joah unto Rabshakeh, Speak, I pray thee, unto thy servants in the Syrian language, for we understand it: and speak not to us in the Jews’ language, in the ears of the people that are on the wall... Then Rabshakeh stood, and cried with a loud voice in the Jews’ language, and said, Hear ye the words of the great king, the king of Assyria.”*  
(Isaiah 36:11-13)

The phrase “the Syrian language”, in the KJV translation of this verse, simply means Aramaic. The phrase, “the Jews’ language”, is Hebrew, since we have seen that Hebrew was uniquely associated with the Jewish people, and Aramaic with the surrounding nations.

And so, in verse 11, Eliakim, Shebna and Joah ask Rabshakeh not to speak to them in Hebrew, but rather in Aramaic, since then the Jerusalemites on the city wall would not be able to understand what they were saying. This passage shows clearly that at the time of the Assyrian empire, Hebrew was a distinct language associated with the Jewish people, and the everyday language in which the Jews spoke. It also shows that Aramaic and Hebrew were different languages, in that they were mutually unintelligible – that is, people who spoke Hebrew did not automatically understand Aramaic. Nevertheless, a few people could speak both languages. Eliakim, Shebna and Joah remark that they understand Aramaic as well as Hebrew, and Rabshakeh likewise has taken the trouble to learn Hebrew prior to attacking the city.

As we leave the Assyrian Empire and come to the Babylonian Empire, we next come to the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah’s whole book of prophecy is aimed at the Jews, and is therefore written in Hebrew – except for one curious verse:

*“Thus shall ye say unto them, The gods that have not made the heavens and the earth, even they shall perish from the earth, and*

from under these heavens." (Jeremiah 10:11)

This verse is written in Aramaic, surrounded by a sea of other verses in Hebrew. Why should that one verse be written in Aramaic, when everything else in Jeremiah is written in Hebrew?

The answer is that Jeremiah directs this one verse to the nations, to warn them of the coming judgement. It is therefore written in Aramaic, whereas the surrounding passages (to the Jews) are written in Hebrew.

We have seen, then, that Aramaic is to be found in the Law (Genesis 31:46-48) and the Prophets (Jeremiah 10:11). But Aramaic is also found in the Writings, the third division of the Hebrew Bible. The book of Daniel, although containing prophecy, is regarded as one of the Writings. Ezra, too, is part of the Writings. As we shall see in the chapters mentioning Biblical Aramaic, both Ezra and Daniel contain several entire chapters written in Aramaic, rather than Hebrew in the remaining sections.

In the chapter *Biblical Aramaic*, we explore why this should be the case. We conclude that Aramaic is used because the Jews are, in these books, part of the Babylonian exile, and are no longer in their land. Daniel, also, narrates prophecy related to the Gentile nations around Israel, to the Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Greek and Roman empires. Thus, the portions of these books which relate to the surrounding nations, and when the Jews are no longer in their land, mean that God chose Aramaic to reveal these messages rather than Hebrew.

As the Babylonian empire spread across the Middle East, Aramaic gains a stronger and stronger foothold. When king Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. and started the Babylonian exile, Jews in large numbers were transported from Israel and brought to Babylon. They are now encouraged, or forced, to speak Aramaic, as the official language of the Babylonian empire. Slowly, over the next few hundred years, Aramaic became the dominant spoken language both with all the surrounding nations, and also with the Jewish people. Aramaic continued in use down through the intervening centuries, right through New Testament times, and beyond.

Gradually, therefore, as the centuries after the exile rolled by and Aramaic took a stronger and stronger hold, Hebrew became less popular as a spoken language, but remained the sacred language of

the Jewish people, used for liturgical purposes. Even then, in worship there remains a mixture of the two holy languages of Hebrew and Aramaic. Expressions such as *bar mitzvah* are half-Hebrew and half-Aramaic. The important Jewish *Kaddish* prayer is in Aramaic.

Aramaic and Hebrew have thus grown up together, like vines whose branches intertwine. They are like a bride and a bridegroom, each individuals, yet incomplete without the other. Together, they form the complete Hebrew Bible. When we take into account the wider picture of Biblical studies, and include the Aramaic Targums, the Aramaic Old Testament and the Aramaic New Testament, Aramaic takes on an even more conspicuous and important role.

To fully understand the Old Testament, therefore, we need to understand Aramaic. There should be no resistance to Aramaic for those interested in the Holy Bible.

# Aramaic and the Assyrian Empire

**I**N THESE CHAPTERS on Aramaic (the Bible's Second Holy Language), we have seen that Aramaic has a long and ancient history. Aramaic goes right back to the early days of the book of Genesis in the Bible, where it was spoken by Laban and the patriarchs who came from Mesopotamia. As we shall see, Mesopotamia was the heart of the ancient kingdom of Assyria, an empire which is intimately connected with both the Bible and Aramaic.

In fact, as we trace through the pages of the Bible, we find that God's people, centered in Israel, nearly always spoke either Hebrew – the Holy Language of Judaism – or Aramaic, or both. Together, Hebrew and Aramaic are the languages of the Bible, the Holy Scriptures.

But the nations surrounding Israel did not speak Hebrew. Instead, consistently, century after century, for millennia, they spoke Aramaic. As we shall see, the first major world empire of Biblical interest is the Assyrian Empire, and they spoke Aramaic as their official language.

The next world empire of interest to the Bible is the Babylonian Empire, and they also spoke Aramaic as their official language. Then came the Medo-Persian Empire, and they also spoke Aramaic as their official language.

Next came the Greek Empire, and even though the Hellenisation process was starting to occur, and small pockets of Greek speakers could be found outside of Greece and Macedonia, Aramaic was still the spoken language over the whole geographical extent of the

previous Assyrian, Babylonian and Medo-Persian Empires.

And by the time of the Roman Empire, Aramaic was *still* the spoken language across the Middle East. Despite the rise and fall of kings for many centuries, and wars and more wars, the ordinary people across the Middle East still spoke Aramaic. The more things change, the more things stay the same.

And so, let us begin our journey into the major empires of the Bible by looking more closely at the Assyrian empire. We first find mention of Assyria, or Asshur as it is in Hebrew, in the table of the nations in Genesis chapter 10. This chapter, with its detailed genealogy, has been extensively studied in the fascinating book, *After the Flood*, by Bill Cooper.

After decades of painstaking research, Cooper found that the Biblical records agreed in astonishing detail with the ancient written histories of many nations. Genesis chapter 10 was true. The truth and accuracy of the Bible was vindicated.

And in Genesis 10, we read the following:

**Gen. 10:11;** “Out of that land went forth **Asshur**, and builded **Nineveh**, and the city Rehoboth, and Calah.”

**Gen. 10:22;** “The children of Shem; Elam, and **Asshur**, and Arphaxad, and Lud, and **Aram**.”

Thus, we find that *Asshur* is the original Hebrew word. To this day, it has come down to us in English as *Assyria*. You can hear the similarity, Asshur and Asur-ya. If we do a search with modern Bible software on the Strong's Key Number, we find that this word is sometimes translated as Asshur, and sometimes as Assyria. They are interchangeable.

But we find several other important points from these two verses:

- ➔ Asshur is Assyria, which would become the mighty Assyrian Empire.
- ➔ Their capital city was Nineveh. Nineveh is famous. It was the city that Jonah preached to, when he was swallowed by a great fish, and told to preach that in 40 days Nineveh, that great city, would be overthrown.
- ➔ We find that Asshur was a descendant of Shem, one of the

sons of Noah, after the flood. In other words, ethnically and culturally, they were a Semitic people, like the Jews. This is a critically important point. Just as the Jews used Hebrew (a Semitic language), so the Assyrians used Aramaic – another Semitic language.

- We also find that Aram was a descendant of Shem, with Asshur. From the name Aram, we get *Aramit*, which is the Hebrew/Aramaic word for Aramaic. In fact, in the word Aramaic, we can hear the ancient Hebrew word *Aram*. Aram, Aram-aic.

We therefore find that the Assyrian empire was founded on the city of Nineveh, that it was a very ancient kingdom going back to the early days of Genesis (even before Laban from Mesopotamia spoke Aramaic with Jacob), that they were a Semitic people, and that they spoke Aramaic.

Not only was the Assyrian Empire a very ancient empire, it was a very geographically extensive empire indeed. At its peak, it stretched across the whole of the Fertile Crescent, the very cradle of civilisation, as it is often referred to.

The Assyrian Empire stretched down through time, from the early days of Genesis – even before the Tower of Babel in Genesis chapter 11 – from around 2000 B.C. – right down through century after century of interaction with the patriarchs, and later the Israelites. The Assyrian Empire went right down through time until their capital city, Nineveh, was destroyed by the Babylonians in 625 B.C. The Assyrians themselves took captive the ten tribes of Israel – the northern kingdom – in 723 B.C.

But let us examine some more about the Assyrian Empire through the pages of the Bible. At the height of its power, the Assyrian Empire included the lands of the northern Tigris, Armenia, Media, Babylonia, Elam, Mesopotamia, Syria, Israel, Judah, and the northern portion of Egypt.

The greatest Assyrian Kings were Shalmaneser, Sargon, Sennacherib, Tiglath-Pileser and Esarhaddon, all of whom are mentioned throughout the Bible, in books such as 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Micah and Isaiah. Jonah the prophet preached to the Assyrians in the book of Jonah, asking them to repent of their deeds. While at first they did

repent, 150 years later Nahum the prophet again had to be sent to them, to preach the ultimate end of their kingdom, telling them that Nineveh would shortly be destroyed.

As well as Isaiah the prophet, Micah the prophet also contains many references to the Assyrians, and the kings who would come against Israel to do battle with them, punishing them for turning away from God.

As we read through the pages of the Bible, we find constant references to the Assyrian Empire in the divine record.

(A note about dates here... All dates are from the well-researched book *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, by Edwin Thiele.)

- The Assyrian king Shalmaneser III (859-824 B.C.) is contemporary with the Israelite kings Ahab, Jehoshaphat, Joram, Jehoram, Ahaziah, Jehu, Ahaziah, as well as the ill-fated usurpation of Queen Athaliah.
- The Assyrian king Shamshi-Adad V (824-811 B.C.) is contemporary with the Israelite kings Jehu, Joash and Jehoahaz.
- The Assyrian king Adad-Nirari III (811-783 B.C.) is contemporary with the Israelite kings Joash, Jehoahaz, Jehoash, Jeroboam II, Amaziah and Azariah.
- The Assyrian king Shalmaneser IV (783-773 B.C.) is contemporary with the Israelite kings Jeroboam II, Amaziah and Azariah.
- We next have the Assyrian kings Ashur-Dan III (773-756 B.C.) and Ashur-Nirari V (755-745 B.C.) before coming to Tiglath-Pileser III, known as Pul in the Bible. (Pul is a shortened form of Pileser). Pul is contemporary with the Israelite kings Pekah, Pekahiah, Jotham and Ahaz.
- Next, there is king Shalmaneser V (727-722 B.C.) who is contemporary with king Hoshea and king Ahaz of Israel.
- Finally, there is king Sargon II of Assyria (722-705 B.C.) before coming to the famous (or infamous) Sennacherib (705-681 B.C.).

The fall of Samaria, the end of the northern kingdom, happened in

723 B.C., when the Assyrian army brought an end to the ten northern tribes, leaving only Judah to stand alone against a sea of conquered nations and peoples.

The Assyrian empire had conquered everything else in the Middle East, and was at this time at the height of its power. The Assyrians would fight on, determined to conquer the last stronghold, Judah, with its capital at Jerusalem. But the God of Israel was mightier than the gods of the Assyrians, and Sennacherib would meet his end as foretold by the prophet Isaiah, and the kingdom of Assyria would have its capital city (Nineveh) destroyed as foretold by Nahum the prophet.

Thus, the Assyrian empire has a long and intimate connection with the Bible, and the ancient Israelites. While the Israelites spoke Hebrew, the Assyrians spoke Aramaic, as we have already seen.

Some of the history of this time is so fascinating, and so tied up with the history of Hebrew and Aramaic, that we would do well to review it here. While there are many chapters that could be chosen to show the interaction between Israel and Assyria, the events surrounding Hezekiah's reign are one of the most interesting.

In 2 Kings chapter 18, we find that the Assyrian army, the might of the Assyrian empire, comes with a huge army and lays siege to Jerusalem. They had conquered everywhere else in the Middle East, and only Judah was left, with Jerusalem as its capital city. Humanly speaking, it looked inevitable that the Assyrians would conquer Jerusalem too, and would bring an end to the Israelite nation and their worship of the God of Israel.

We read:

**2Kings 18:9-12;** "And it came to pass in the fourth year of king Hezekiah, which was the seventh year of Hoshea son of Elah king of Israel, that Shalmaneser king of Assyria came up against Samaria, and besieged it. And at the end of three years they took it: even in the sixth year of Hezekiah, that is the ninth year of Hoshea king of Israel, Samaria was taken. And the king of Assyria did carry away Israel unto Assyria, and put them in Halah and in Habor by the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes: Because they obeyed not the voice of the LORD their God, but transgressed his covenant, and all that Moses the

servant of the LORD commanded, and would not hear them, nor do them.”

Under Shalmaneser, those events meant that Israel, the northern kingdom, the ten tribes, were conquered, and went into captivity. This happened in 723 B.C.

A while later, Sennacherib, the next Assyrian king, again comes against Judah to battle. All the fenced cities of Judah are now taken, and only Jerusalem is left. Hezekiah, one of the most faithful kings in Israel's history, is forced to pay Sennacherib tribute:

**v.13-16;** “Now in the fourteenth year of king Hezekiah did Sennacherib king of Assyria come up against all the fenced cities of Judah, and took them. And Hezekiah king of Judah sent to the king of Assyria to Lachish, saying, I have offended; return from me: that which thou puttest on me will I bear. And the king of Assyria appointed unto Hezekiah king of Judah three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold. And Hezekiah gave him all the silver that was found in the house of the LORD, and in the treasures of the king's house. At that time did Hezekiah cut off the gold from the doors of the temple of the LORD, and from the pillars which Hezekiah king of Judah had overlaid, and gave it to the king of Assyria.”

Even though Hezekiah gives Sennacherib all the gold and silver they have, still it is not enough. Before long, a huge Assyrian army comes to Jerusalem and lays siege against it:

**2Kings 18:17-25;** “And the king of Assyria sent Tartan and Rabsaris and Rabshakeh from Lachish to king Hezekiah with a great host against Jerusalem. And they went up and came to Jerusalem. And when they were come up, they came and stood by the conduit of the upper pool, which is in the highway of the fuller's field. And when they had called to the king, there came out to them Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, which was over the household, and Shebna the scribe, and Joah the son of Asaph the recorder. And Rabshakeh said unto them, Speak ye now to Hezekiah, Thus saith the great king, the king of Assyria, What confidence is this wherein thou trustest? Thou sayest, (but they are but vain words,) I have counsel and strength for the war. Now on whom dost thou trust, that thou rebellest against me?

Now, behold, thou trustest upon the staff of this bruised reed, even upon Egypt, on which if a man lean, it will go into his hand, and pierce it: so is Pharaoh king of Egypt unto all that trust on him. But if ye say unto me, We trust in the LORD our God: is not that he, whose high places and whose altars Hezekiah hath taken away, and hath said to Judah and Jerusalem, Ye shall worship before this altar in Jerusalem? Now therefore, I pray thee, give pledges to my lord the king of Assyria, and I will deliver thee two thousand horses, if thou be able on thy part to set riders upon them. How then wilt thou turn away the face of one captain of the least of my master's servants, and put thy trust on Egypt for chariots and for horsemen? Am I now come up without the LORD against this place to destroy it? The LORD said to me, Go up against this land, and destroy it."

But interestingly, as previously mentioned, we find that while the Jews in Jerusalem speak Hebrew, the Assyrians speak Aramaic. A few of the influential Jews are able to speak Aramaic, but they want to continue speaking with the Assyrians in Aramaic, to make sure that the ordinary Jews do not understand the threats that the Assyrians are making, and how serious the situation is:

v.26; "Then said Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah, and Shebna, and Joah, unto Rabshakeh, Speak, I pray thee, to thy servants in the Syrian language; for we understand it: and talk not with us in the Jews' language in the ears of the people that are on the wall."

In the next chapter, 2 Kings chapter 19, Hezekiah, the king of Israel, knows he cannot possibly stand against the might and power of the Assyrian army. He takes Sennacherib's letter to the Temple, to God in prayer, and then shows the letter to Isaiah the prophet:

**2Kings 19:1-3;** "And it came to pass, when king Hezekiah heard it, that he rent his clothes, and covered himself with sackcloth, and went into the house of the LORD. And he sent Eliakim, which was over the household, and Shebna the scribe, and the elders of the priests, covered with sackcloth, to Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz. And they said unto him, Thus saith Hezekiah, This day is a day of trouble, and of rebuke, and blasphemy: for the children are come to the birth, and there is not strength to bring forth."

But Isaiah the prophet tells him that Jerusalem, the Holy City, will not fall to the Assyrian army:

**v.6-7;** “And Isaiah said unto them, Thus shall ye say to your master, Thus saith the LORD, Be not afraid of the words which thou hast heard, with which the servants of the king of Assyria have blasphemed me. Behold, I will send a blast upon him, and he shall hear a rumour, and shall return to his own land; and I will cause him to fall by the sword in his own land.”

And so, that very night, the angel of death went out and smote the Assyrian army, and king Sennacherib is killed by his own sons:

**v.32-34;** “Therefore thus saith the LORD concerning the king of Assyria, He shall not come into this city, nor shoot an arrow there, nor come before it with shield, nor cast a bank against it. By the way that he came, by the same shall he return, and shall not come into this city, saith the LORD. For I will defend this city, to save it, for mine own sake, and for my servant David’s sake.”

**2Kings 19:35-37;** “And it came to pass that night, that the angel of the LORD went out, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians an hundred fourscore and five thousand: and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses. So Sennacherib king of Assyria departed, and went and returned, and dwelt at Nineveh. And it came to pass, as he was worshipping in the house of Nisroch his god, that Adrammelech and Sharezer his sons smote him with the sword: and they escaped into the land of Armenia. And Esarhaddon his son reigned in his stead.”

And so, to conclude this chapter, we see that Aramaic is closely connected with the very dawn of civilisation itself, with the Fertile Crescent, the cradle of civilisation, going back all the way to Genesis 10 in the establishment of the Assyrian kingdom, which would later become one of the most powerful and mighty empires the world has ever known.

Just as Hebrew and Aramaic are like two vines growing together and becoming inter-twined, so too the ancient Israelites grew together with the nations around them, becoming intertwined with the Assyrian Empire, Israelite kings becoming intertwined with the

Assyrian kings, the fate of the one becoming the fate of the other.

At this time, as we have seen, the Jews, the Israelites, did not generally speak Aramaic, and except for a select, educated, few, the common people did not understand the Aramaic language of the invading Assyrians.

But, as we shall see in the next chapter, the Babylonian Empire *also* spoke Aramaic. They would take the Israelites captive to Babylon, where things would change permanently, where the Israelites would have to learn Aramaic, and Aramaic would ultimately become more commonly spoken than Hebrew.

But we shall leave that fascinating history to the next chapter.

# Aramaic and the Babylonian Empire

**I**N THESE CHAPTERS on Aramaic, the Bible's Second Holy Language, we have looked at just how ancient the Aramaic language is. In fact, we saw that Aramaic appears right back in the early chapters of Genesis. We looked at the Assyrian Empire, which arose out of the table of nations in Genesis chapter 10, and we saw that the Assyrians spoke Aramaic, in their many dealings and interactions with the Israelites in the Old Testament.

But the next Empire of the Bible which we want to examine is the Babylonian Empire. Like the Assyrian Empire, the Babylonian Empire is very ancient. Its origins, too, also go back to the table of nations in Genesis chapter 10.

**v.8-10;** “And Cush begat Nimrod: he began to be a mighty one in the earth. He was a mighty hunter before the LORD: wherefore it is said, Even as Nimrod the mighty hunter before the LORD. And the beginning of his kingdom was Babel, and Erech, and Accad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar.”

Babel in this verse is Babylon, and if we do a search on the Strong's Number, we find that it is translated almost everywhere as Babylon.

Both the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires, therefore, arose out of the Fertile Crescent, the cradle of civilisation. The origins of Babylon go back to Nimrod, who would be a mighty hunter before the Lord, or in opposition to God. That Babylonian kingdom was always a snare in Israel's side, and false religious ideas arising out of Babylon led Israel astray into idolatry. So too, thousands of years later, Christians also would be led astray by the false religion of Babylon.

We find in the book of Revelation chapter 17, it is written:

v.5; “And upon her forehead was a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.”

The origins of Babylon, therefore, go right back to Genesis chapter 10. After the fall of the Assyrian Empire, which we looked at in the previous chapter, the Babylonian Empire rose to even greater heights and powers. Just as Aramaic was spoken by the Assyrians, so too, the Babylonians also spoke Aramaic. In fact, large portions of the books of Daniel and Ezra are written in Aramaic, because it was the official language of both the Babylonian and Medo-Persian Empires.

But we also find more about Babel, or Babylon, in Genesis chapter 11. After the flood, when God destroyed every living creature from off the face of the earth because they had become corrupt, only Noah and his family were saved. But mankind soon returned to their evil ways, and in Genesis chapter 11, they rebelled further by building an enormous tower – the Tower of Babel – probably intended to be so immense that it would never be destroyed if God sent a flood again, and also so high that it would reach into heaven and challenge God, as a further rebellion.

We read:

**Gen. 11:5-9;** “And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. And the LORD said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech. So the LORD scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the LORD did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the LORD scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.”

Thus, Babel, or Babylon, is intimately associated with rebellion against God. Babel is a play on the word *balal*, which means *to mix*, or *mix up*, or *confuse*. *Bab-El* in Semitic languages also means the *Gate of God*. In their idolatrous minds, they were building a tower, a

stairway, thinking they could reach the gods that ruled heaven itself.

As we continue to go through the Holy Scriptures, we find almost 300 references to Babylon. Jeremiah the prophet pleads with the people, telling them that the Babylonians will soon be coming, that they will conquer Jerusalem, that they will be taken away to Babylon for 70 years (an event known as the Babylonian exile) but at the end of the 70 years, they will return to Jerusalem, to Israel once again.

But the people do not believe Jeremiah. Just as Hezekiah had withstood the might of the Assyrian army a few generations earlier, the people assume that God will vanquish the Babylonians this time round as well. But the people were mistaken. Jeremiah was right, because Jeremiah was a faithful prophet of the living God.

Ezekiel the prophet is also sent to plead with the people. At the command of God, he turns himself into a living parable, faithfully portraying all the terrifying events that would happen to Jerusalem, and how the Babylonians would conquer Israel and take the people captive. But the people would not believe.

And so, the inevitable happened. The Babylonians came against Jerusalem, they laid siege against it, and they conquered it. The prophets were vindicated. Daniel, being of the royal household, is taken captive to Babylon, just as Jeremiah and Ezekiel had said would happen.

The most important and interesting connection which the Babylonian Empire had with ancient Israel is through the powerful king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. He is famed in history for creating the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, which became one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

But Nebuchadnezzar is just as famous for an amazing dream which he had one night. This dream was no ordinary dream, but was a prophecy of things to come, of civilisations and empires that would stretch down through time until that day when God would establish his everlasting kingdom upon the earth, and send his only begotten Son, Jesus, to rule the nations.

Let us, then, examine Nebuchadnezzar's dream.

**Dan. 2:1-4;** "And in the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar Nebuchadnezzar dreamed dreams, wherewith

his spirit was troubled, and his sleep brake from him. Then the king commanded to call the magicians, and the astrologers, and the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans, for to shew the king his dreams. So they came and stood before the king. And the king said unto them, I have dreamed a dream, and my spirit was troubled to know the dream. Then spake the Chaldeans to the king in Syriack, O king, live for ever: tell thy servants the dream, and we will shew the interpretation."

We note here that the Chaldeans spoke to the king in Syriac, or Aramaic. This demonstrates clearly that Aramaic was the normal, spoken language in the Babylonian Empire. This whole section of Daniel, in the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, is written in Aramaic.

We find that the king dreamed a frightening dream, and he was deeply troubled by it:

**Dan. 2:31-36;** "Thou, O king, sawest, and behold a great image. This great image, whose brightness was excellent, stood before thee; and the form thereof was terrible. This image's head was of fine gold, his breast and his arms of silver, his belly and his thighs of brass, His legs of iron, his feet part of iron and part of clay. Thou sawest till that a stone was cut out without hands, which smote the image upon his feet that were of iron and clay, and brake them to pieces. Then was the iron, the clay, the brass, the silver, and the gold, broken to pieces together, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing-floors; and the wind carried them away, that no place was found for them: and the stone that smote the image became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth. This is the dream; and we will tell the interpretation thereof before the king."

Although the king could remember the dream, he did not understand its meaning. All the magicians and astrologers in the whole kingdom can offer no explanation.

But Daniel, an Israelite, prays to God, and the meaning of the dream is revealed to him. It foretells not only about the Babylonian Empire, but also of other world empires that would come, right up until God, the Ancient of Days, would send Jesus, the Messiah, back to the earth to establish His kingdom.

**v.37-45;** "Thou, O king, art a king of kings: for the God of heaven

hath given thee a kingdom, power, and strength, and glory. And wheresoever the children of men dwell, the beasts of the field and the fowls of the heaven hath he given into thine hand, and hath made thee ruler over them all. Thou art this head of gold. And after thee shall arise another kingdom inferior to thee, and another third kingdom of brass, which shall bear rule over all the earth. And the fourth kingdom shall be strong as iron: forasmuch as iron breaketh in pieces and subdueth all things: and as iron that breaketh all these, shall it break in pieces and bruise. And whereas thou sawest the feet and toes, part of potters' clay, and part of iron, the kingdom shall be divided; but there shall be in it of the strength of the iron, forasmuch as thou sawest the iron mixed with miry clay. And as the toes of the feet were part of iron, and part of clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong, and partly broken. And whereas thou sawest iron mixed with miry clay, they shall mingle themselves with the seed of men: but they shall not cleave one to another, even as iron is not mixed with clay. And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever. Forasmuch as thou sawest that the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands, and that it brake in pieces the iron, the brass, the clay, the silver, and the gold; the great God hath made known to the king what shall come to pass hereafter: and the dream is certain, and the interpretation thereof sure."

Thus, the king's dream relates to the important Biblical empires that would follow the Babylonian Empire.

- ➔ The head of gold represented Babylon, with Nebuchadnezzar as its king.
- ➔ Next came the arms of silver, the two arms representing the two halves of the Medo-Persian empires. We shall look at that Empire in a later chapter.
- ➔ Then came the belly and thighs of brass, representing the Greeks. From classic Greek history such as Homer's famous Iliad, the Greeks were known as the brazen-coated Greeks.
- ➔ Then came the legs of iron, the two legs representing the

next empire – the Roman Empire, with (down through time) its two historical legs, in Rome and Constantinople. Again, the might and strength of iron is associated with Rome.

- Finally, the iron legs do not disappear, but are changed to become feet of iron and clay. The might of the Roman Empire would not be replaced suddenly and totally like the previous empires had, but would become the fragmented Holy Roman Empire and latter-day European Union, a disunited kingdom, partly strong but partly weak, yet still recognisably Roman in its character.

These kingdoms must all stand again in the latter days, united, only to be destroyed by the stone cut out of the mountain without (human) hands, representing Jesus, the stone that the builders rejected, who will soon return to establish the kingdom promised by his Father.

The divine order of these empires in the Scriptures of Truth is therefore the Assyrian Empire, the Babylonian Empire, the Medo-Persian Empire, the Greek Empire and the Roman Empire. In later chapters, we shall examine each of these Empires in turn, and show that Aramaic was at the heart of them all, spoken by the everyday peoples of those mighty kingdoms.

But having seen that Aramaic was spoken in Nebuchadnezzar's day, that it was the official language of the Babylonian Empire, and that this whole section of Daniel the prophet was written in Aramaic, let us now jump to another fascinating event in the history of the Babylon empire.

Let us go a few kings later to Belshazzar, and look at the events described in Daniel chapter 5, and examine the writing on the wall:

**Dan. 5:1-4;** "Belshazzar the king made a great feast to a thousand of his lords, and drank wine before the thousand. Belshazzar, while he tasted the wine, commanded to bring the golden and silver vessels which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple which was in Jerusalem; that the king, and his princes, his wives, and his concubines, might drink therein. Then they brought the golden vessels that were taken out of the temple of the house of God which was at Jerusalem; and the king, and his princes, his wives, and his concubines,

drank in them. They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold, and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone.”

As we have seen already, and as the above passage brings out, Babylon was an adulterous and idolatrous empire, in constant opposition to the things of God. Belshazzar drinks from the very cups that pertained to worship of the true God in Jerusalem, from the very cups that were used for worship in the Temple. It was an act of total blasphemy against the God of heaven. And the God of heaven had had enough. He was going to bring an end to the Babylonian Empire. That very night. We go on to read:

**v.5-9;** “In the same hour came forth fingers of a man’s hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaister of the wall of the king’s palace: and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote. Then the king’s countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his loins were loosed, and his knees smote one against another. The king cried aloud to bring in the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers. And the king spake, and said to the wise men of Babylon, Whosoever shall read this writing, and shew me the interpretation thereof, shall be clothed with scarlet, and have a chain of gold about his neck, and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom. Then came in all the king’s wise men: but they could not read the writing, nor make known to the king the interpretation thereof. Then was king Belshazzar greatly troubled, and his countenance was changed in him, and his lords were astonished.”

Daniel, an old man by this time, was brought in to explain the meaning of what the king, and everyone around him, had seen with their own eyes.

**v.13-16;** “Then was Daniel brought in before the king. And the king spake and said unto Daniel, Art thou that Daniel, which art of the children of the captivity of Judah, whom the king my father brought out of Jewry? I have even heard of thee, that the spirit of the gods is in thee, and that light and understanding and excellent wisdom is found in thee. And now the wise men, the astrologers, have been brought in before me, that they should read this writing, and make known unto me the interpretation thereof: but they could not shew the interpretation

of the thing: And I have heard of thee, that thou canst make interpretations, and dissolve doubts: now if thou canst read the writing, and make known to me the interpretation thereof, thou shalt be clothed with scarlet, and have a chain of gold about thy neck, and shalt be the third ruler in the kingdom.”

Daniel continues:

**v.17-28;** “Then Daniel answered and said before the king, Let thy gifts be to thyself, and give thy rewards to another; yet I will read the writing unto the king, and make known to him the interpretation. O thou king, the most high God gave Nebuchadnezzar thy father a kingdom, and majesty, and glory, and honour: And for the majesty that he gave him, all people, nations, and languages, trembled and feared before him: whom he would he slew; and whom he would he kept alive; and whom he would he set up; and whom he would he put down. But when his heart was lifted up, and his mind hardened in pride, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and they took his glory from him: And he was driven from the sons of men; and his heart was made like the beasts, and his dwelling was with the wild asses: they fed him with grass like oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven; till he knew that the most high God ruled in the kingdom of men, and that he appointeth over it whomsoever he will. And thou his son, O Belshazzar, hast not humbled thine heart, though thou knewest all this; But hast lifted up thyself against the Lord of heaven; and they have brought the vessels of his house before thee, and thou, and thy lords, thy wives, and thy concubines, have drunk wine in them; and thou hast praised the gods of silver, and gold, of brass, iron, wood, and stone, which see not, nor hear, nor know: and the God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified: Then was the part of the hand sent from him; and this writing was written. And this is the writing that was written, MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. This is the interpretation of the thing: MENE; God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it. TEKEL; Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting. PERES; Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians.”

Again, in this passage, we observe the use of Aramaic, rather than

Hebrew, in the events which are narrated. We shall examine this passage more fully in the chapters on Biblical Aramaic, but the Aramaic words *Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin* meant *Number, Number, Weight, Divisions*.

Daniel explains the meaning of the words to the terrified king and his blasphemous people. The writing was on the wall. The Babylonian Empire would end that very night, to be replaced by the Medo-Persian Empire:

**Dan. 5:30-31;** “In that night was Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans slain. And Darius the Median took the kingdom, being about threescore and two years old.”

And so, to conclude this chapter, we see that Aramaic is closely connected with the very dawn of civilisation itself, with the Fertile Crescent, going back all the way to Genesis chapter 10 in the establishment of the Babylonian kingdom.

The Babylonian Empire always stands in opposition to God, in both the Old and New Testaments. It was a system of iniquity and idolatry which put mystery religion, or false religion, at its very heart.

But, like the mighty Assyrian Empire before it, the powerful Babylonian Empire had Aramaic as its official language.

Whereas at the time of the Assyrian Empire the Israelites spoke Hebrew and only a few were able to speak Aramaic, by the time of the Babylonian Empire Aramaic was becoming more widely spoken. The Jews were exiled into Babylon still generally only speaking Hebrew, but by the time they returned 70 years later, Aramaic had become just as well known as Hebrew. In fact, as we shall see in the next chapter, the Babylonian exile created a profound shift in the ordinary language spoken by the Israelites. Hebrew was diminishing as a spoken language, and Aramaic was increasing.

By the time of Jesus, Aramaic had largely won the day, and was the language most commonly spoken amongst ordinary people. That does not mean that Hebrew died out as a spoken language. Far from it. But Aramaic was now unmistakably the second Holy Language of Judaism. It was here to stay.

We too, should make sure that Aramaic is here to stay in our lives. If

we make this ancient and beautiful language part of us, if we let the Holy Scriptures permeate our lives, we shall be guided directly by the Holy Scriptures. We shall not see through a glass darkly as we might do with a translation, but we shall see clearly, as never before.

# The Babylonian Exile

**I**N THE previous chapter, we looked at the Babylonian Empire. Like the Assyrian Empire before it, the Babylonian Empire arose very early in the dawn of civilisation. Both empires spoke Aramaic, with Aramaic being both the official language (the language spoken by the ruling elite) and the language spoken by the ordinary people.

Let us now take a closer look at the Babylonian empire, and in particular the exile of the Jews into Babylon. As we have seen, in the land of Israel, prior to being exiled into Babylon, the Jews spoke almost entirely Hebrew, with a few educated people speaking both Hebrew and Aramaic. But in Babylon, the Jews had to learn Aramaic. It became their normal language of communication with the Babylonians. And by the time the exile finished seventy years later, the Jews were so familiar with Aramaic that it had become a second language to them, even to the extent that (for many) it was the language they were most familiar with. And because Aramaic was the spoken language of all the nations around them, Aramaic became even more commonly spoken as the centuries went by.

Let us start by reminding ourselves of the history of this period. We have already met king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in the previous chapter on the Babylonian Empire. As we saw, Nebuchadnezzar was the king who had a dream, a vision, of the empires that would follow his own, in Daniel chapter 2.

King Nebuchadnezzar was the head of gold in the dream. He was a powerful king and his empire was huge.

King Nebuchadnezzar came against Jerusalem in a siege with his army and conquered it. Jerusalem had fallen. He burned the city. In fact, parts of the walls which were burnt can be seen to this day in

the City of David archaeological excavations in Jerusalem. The Temple built by Solomon, known as the First Temple, had now been destroyed.

Nebuchadnezzar carried large numbers of the Jews in Jerusalem and Judea into captivity in Babylon, a far away land which they were not familiar with. We can read more about Nebuchadnezzar's siege against Jerusalem and the beginning of the deportation in Daniel chapter 1:

**Dan. 1:1-2;** "In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah came Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon unto Jerusalem, and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with part of the vessels of the house of God: which he carried into the land of Shinar to the house of his god; and he brought the vessels into the treasure house of his god."

We can read more about the Jews being taken into exile in Babylon in, for example, Jeremiah chapter 52:

**v.28-30;** "This is the people whom Nebuchadrezzar carried away captive: in the seventh year three thousand Jews and three and twenty: In the eighteenth year of Nebuchadrezzar he carried away captive from Jerusalem eight hundred thirty and two persons: In the three and twentieth year of Nebuchadrezzar Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard carried away captive of the Jews seven hundred forty and five persons: all the persons were four thousand and six hundred."

Further deportations into Babylon also took place, and they are described in detail in other parts of the Holy Scriptures. Over time, large numbers of Jews were taken into captivity to Babylon.

The Jews, of course, always viewed Israel as their homeland, and Jerusalem as the Holy City. They longed to return to Zion, as we read in Psalm 137:

**Psa. 137:1-6;** "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the LORD'S song in a strange land? If I forget

thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy.”

Thus, in Babylon, Jews began their new life. As we have seen, Aramaic was the official language of the Babylonian empire, and the language of the common people. Thus, the Jews had, of necessity, to learn Aramaic. But Hebrew and Aramaic are closely related, and so there would have been little resistance to Aramaic, and the Hebrew-speaking Jews would have not have found it difficult to learn Aramaic.

Amongst the people who were deported into Babylon were those in the royal household. Daniel the prophet, who we have already looked at in the previous chapter on the Babylonian Empire, was amongst those taken into captivity. Let us continue reading from Daniel chapter 1:

**Dan 1:3-5;** “And the king [Nebuchadnezzar] spake unto Ashpenaz the master of his eunuchs, that he should bring certain of the children of Israel, and of the king’s seed, and of the princes; Children in whom was no blemish, but well favoured, and skilful in all wisdom, and cunning in knowledge, and understanding science, and such as had ability in them to stand in the king’s palace, and whom they might teach the learning and the tongue of the Chaldeans. And the king appointed them a daily provision of the king’s meat, and of the wine which he drank: so nourishing them three years, that at the end thereof they might stand before the king.”

Here, we see that the Jews from Israel were taught “the learning and the tongue (or language) of the Chaldeans” – in other words, they were taught Aramaic and the culture and customs of the Babylonians.

We need to understand the significance of these events clearly. While at first there would be enormous turmoil and the Jews must have hated the idea of being exiled into Babylon, the above verses show that the Jews were (deliberately) treated extremely well. The best of them, the most intelligent and attractive looking, were taken into the king’s palace and treated well. They were fed from the king’s household, given the best of everything, treated like royalty, and

were taught the language and customs of Babylon. Aramaic, of necessity, became the language they would speak in everyday life. Once you are immersed in a language like this, it becomes part of you. It changes you, and it becomes the language that you think in. And so it was with the Jews in Babylon. Aramaic became their everyday language, the language in which they thought.

Why were the Jews treated like this? The reason is not kindness on the part of king Nebuchadnezzar. Rather, it was because he wanted the Jews to feel that Babylon was now their home, that they would be treated well, that they were privileged, that they belonged in Babylon, and to make sure there were no thoughts of revolt or return to Israel. He wanted them to be loyal to him, and to the ruling elite in Babylon.

As we read further in Daniel, we find that Daniel and his three friends were amongst those taken into captivity:

**v.6-7;** “Now among these were of the children of Judah, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: Unto whom the prince of the eunuchs gave names: for he gave unto Daniel the name of Belteshazzar; and to Hananiah, of Shadrach; and to Mishael, of Meshach; and to Azariah, of Abednego.”

This verse is very informative. It tells us that the Jews were given new names – Aramaic names. Their old Hebrew names (Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah) were replaced with new Aramaic names (Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego). Some social conditioning was happening here. Their loyalty to Israel and to the Hebrew language was being replaced with a new culture and a new language. While most people would succumb to the blessings and privileges of a new life under the new royal household, and start to become loyal to the king, Daniel and his three friends did not want to succumb. They wanted to remain loyal to the God of Israel, in whom they put their trust.

As we read on in Daniel, coming to chapter 2, we find that Nebuchadnezzar has his famous dream, as we read about in the previous chapter on the Babylonian Empire.

**Dan. 2:1-4;** “And in the second year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar Nebuchadnezzar dreamed dreams, wherewith his spirit was troubled, and his sleep brake from him. Then the

king commanded to call the magicians, and the astrologers, and the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans, for to shew the king his dreams. So they came and stood before the king. And the king said unto them, I have dreamed a dream, and my spirit was troubled to know the dream. Then spake the Chaldeans to the king in Syriack, O king, live for ever: tell thy servants the dream, and we will shew the interpretation.”

Here we find further evidence that Aramaic was the language spoken by everyone in Babylon. The verse explicitly says that the Chaldeans spoke to the king in Syriac, or Aramaic. The king speaks Aramaic. Those around him – the magicians, astrologers, sorcerers and the Chaldeans – all spoke to the king in Aramaic. And, when Daniel appears before the king to tell him the meaning of the dream, he also speaks to the king in Aramaic, a language in which he has now been thoroughly immersed. In fact, in the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, these entire chapters in Daniel – Daniel 2:4 to Daniel 7:28, are all written in Aramaic because that was the language spoken by the Jews at this time, as well as the language of Babylon.

And so, as we have seen, the Jews were now in exile, in the diaspora, in Babylon. But, as Jeremiah had prophesied, the captivity in Babylon was not permanent, but would last for seventy years.

**Jer. 25:11-12;** “And this whole land shall be a desolation, and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. And it shall come to pass, when seventy years are accomplished, that I will punish the king of Babylon, and that nation, saith the LORD, for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans, and will make it perpetual desolations.”

**Jer. 29:10;** “For thus saith the LORD, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place.”

Daniel was taken into captivity at the very start of the exile into Babylon, at the very start of those seventy years. And he remained in Babylon for the whole period, and was alive at the end of it. Thus, we read at the end of Daniel chapter 1:

**Dan 1:21;** “And Daniel continued even unto the first year of king Cyrus.”

But more importantly, Daniel, as a Jew faithful to the God of heaven, knew well the earlier prophecy of Jeremiah that the captivity would last seventy years. He must have been counting down the days, one by one. By the time the seventy years had passed, Daniel knew that the captivity was over:

**Dan. 9:2;** “In the first year of his reign I Daniel understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem.”

Daniel knew that the time had come. It was time for the Jews to return back to the land of Israel. If they wanted, that is. Many of the faithful ones would return. Others would now regard Babylon as their home, the land they had lived in for the past seventy years. The land many had grown up in. The land they had children in. The land in which they had married wives. Many never came back, and continued to speak Aramaic as they settled throughout the Babylonian empire.

But some of the faithful ones did come back.

Unfortunately, though, many had now started to forget Hebrew. For the past seventy years, as they were scattered throughout the Babylonian empire, they had adopted the customs and local language dialects of the peoples in which they lived. On their return from Babylon, Nehemiah laments that so many no longer knew Hebrew, the Holy Language:

**Neh. 13:23-24;** “In those days also saw I Jews that had married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab: And their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews’ language, but according to the language of each people.”

We see in this verse that Hebrew, for many, was a language they could no longer speak. Nehemiah laments this fact, to their shame. As a faithful Jew, he believed that the Holy Language, Hebrew, should never be forgotten.

And because so many people could no longer speak Hebrew, but now spoke Aramaic as their everyday language, after the exile, when Ezra re-builds the Temple and re-establishes the worship of the one true God in Jerusalem once again, and when Nehemiah re-builds the

walls of the city, we find that Ezra has to make special provision to make sure that the people understood the Law of Moses that is read out to them.

Ezra was a priest as well as a scribe, one highly skilled in the Law of Moses – or the books of the Torah – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. He knew Hebrew inside out, but he knew that many of the people were more familiar with Aramaic.

And so, when he reads out the Law of Moses to the people, we read that Ezra has to translate the Law from Hebrew to Aramaic for them, to make sure they understand it. We read the following:

**Neh. 8:1-8;** “And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate; and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded to Israel. And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month. And he read therein before the street that was before the water gate from the morning until midday, before the men and the women, and those that could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law. And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, and Shema, and Anaiah, and Urijah, and Hilkiah, and Maaseiah, on his right hand; and on his left hand, Pedaiah, and Mishael, and Malchiah, and Hashum, and Hashbadana, Zechariah, and Meshullam. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people; (for he was above all the people;) and when he opened it, all the people stood up: And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground. Also Jeshua, and Bani, and Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, caused the people to understand the law: and the people stood in their place. So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.”

Because the Law of Moses was written in Hebrew but the people are

by this time more familiar with Aramaic, he has to make sure that the Levites “caused the people to understand the Law.” As they read in the book of the Law of God, they have to read “distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.”

Reading the law in Hebrew alone was not enough. Ezra had to read each verse in Hebrew, but then interpret it in Aramaic, to make sure that the people understood it correctly.

Jews understand these verses to mean that the tradition of Targum had begun. As we shall see in the chapter about the Aramaic Targums, the Targums were the “official” translations of the books of the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic. In other words, to make sure that the Jews understood the Hebrew Bible, translations were made into Aramaic. Jews were expected to read both the Hebrew Bible and the Aramaic translation, or Targum.

As time went on, the Targums became written down. They became official, or recognised translations. Obviously Jews never forgot the Hebrew Bible. They never abandoned it. They always revered it. They always held it as the original revelation from God. But they also read the Aramaic Targums, to make sure that they “gave the sense” and were “caused to understand the reading”.

Ever since the days of Ezra, the Jews have a tradition, that one should read the Hebrew text twice and the Aramaic text once.

This comes from the Talmud, where it says, “Rabbi Huna ben Yehudah says in the name of Rabbi Ammi: “A man should always complete his Torah portions together with the congregation, reading the Hebrew [text] twice and the [Aramaic] Targum once.”

The phrase is *Shnayim Mikra ve-echad Targum*. The *Mikra* is The Reading, that is, from the Hebrew Bible. The Targum is the Aramaic Targums.

And so, to conclude this chapter, let us review the interaction between Hebrew and Aramaic, and the gradual shift from Hebrew to Aramaic.

At the time of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Land of Israel, the ancient Israelites spoke Hebrew, although from their interaction with Mesopotamia, they would have been able to speak Aramaic. Abraham came from Ur of the Chaldees after all, the Chaldees being

the land that would later be at the heart of the Babylonian Empire.

Isaac and Jacob, too, would have been able to speak Aramaic. When Isaac's servant Eliezer goes to Padan-Aram to look for a wife for Isaac, he must have spoken Aramaic to Laban and his family. And when Jacob also goes to Padan-Aram, he also must have spoken Aramaic with Laban. Laban, after all, speaks Aramaic in calling their memorial Jegar Sahadutha in Genesis 31:47.

But continuing on through time, Hebrew was by this time the normal spoken language amongst the Israelites. Through the time that Joseph goes into Egypt to serve Pharaoh, through to the time of Moses and coming out of Egypt, the Israelites continued to speak Hebrew. Through the times of David and the divided kingdom, the Israelites continued to speak Hebrew. When the Assyrians came to invade Israel, the Jews also spoke Hebrew. And by the time of the Babylonians, the Jews also spoke Hebrew, except for a few educated people who could speak Aramaic as well.

But when the Jews were exiled into Babylon, that all changed. The Israelites HAD to learn Aramaic, but for them it would have been a natural fit, because Hebrew and Aramaic are such closely related languages.

After the exile, as we saw when Ezra had to translate the Law of Moses to the people, many of the people were by this time more familiar with Aramaic than Hebrew. They had adopted the languages and accents of the people around them. And as time went on, they became less and less familiar with Hebrew, and more and more familiar with Aramaic. Around the time of Ezra, the tradition of creating Targums, or Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible, was already happening.

Around the time of Jesus, the Aramaic Targums were still in use. Most likely, the Aramaic Old Testament was in use too, possibly even going back to the Jews' time in Babylon. And in the first and second century, as the Jews started to write the Talmud, the Talmud (the Gemara, the commentary on the Mishnah) was also written in Aramaic. The Mishnah, although technically Hebrew, has a lot of features of Aramaic, meaning that Hebrew and Aramaic had heavily influenced each other. And going further still into the times of the Massoretes in the 6th to the 11th centuries, the Massoretes adopted

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Aramaic notes on the Hebrew text, preserved in the Massorah which we have today.

It is important to understand, however, that Hebrew never died out. Hebrew always was, and always will be, the **first** Holy Language of the Jewish people. While Aramaic became historically very important, Hebrew was even more important. Religious Jews will always revere Hebrew. The communities living around the Dead Sea area no doubt wanted to speak Hebrew rather than Aramaic, and Yigal Yadin (the Israeli archaeologist) has presented evidence that around the time of the Bar Kokhba revolt in the second century, there was a revival of Hebrew at that time.

But all these facts show that Aramaic had become an important language in its own right. It had become Judaism's **second** Holy Language. May we treat it with the respect and reverence it is due. For it, too, is holy. It, too, is used by the Almighty to reveal His Divine Word.

## Aramaic and the Medo-Persian Empire

**I**N THE LAST few chapters, we looked at the Babylonian Empire, as well as the exile of the Jews into Babylon. Aramaic was the normal spoken language of both the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires, and when the Jews were exiled into Babylon, Aramaic became more widely spoken amongst Jews than Hebrew, as their everyday language. Hebrew was regarded as the Holy Language, sacred, and it was used for worship, for reading the Hebrew Bible, and for prayers. Aramaic was used instead for secular, everyday use.

In fact, the Talmud, in Pesachim 87b, tells us that, after the destruction of the First Temple, God specifically chose to exile the Jews into Babylon because of how similar the Aramaic language was to Hebrew, to make the exile easier. Ur of the Chaldees, after all, was where Abraham had come from. The Jews were not yet ready to be exiled by the Romans, a people with a completely different language – one which the Jews, unlike Aramaic, never adopted as a national language. But banishment of the Jews by the Romans was coming – first in A.D. 70 when the Second temple was burnt to the ground, and again in A.D. 135, when Hadrian ploughed Jerusalem as a field.

And so, as we saw in our earlier chapters, the Jews were now in exile, in the diaspora, in Babylon. But, as Jeremiah had prophesied, the captivity in Babylon was not permanent, but would last for seventy years.

**Jer. 25:11-12;** “And this whole land shall be a desolation, and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. And it shall come to pass, when seventy years are accomplished, that I will punish the king of Babylon, and that

nation, saith the LORD, for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans, and will make it perpetual desolations.”

**Jer. 29:10;** “For thus saith the LORD, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place.”

Daniel was taken into captivity at the very start of the exile into Babylon, at the very start of those seventy years. And he remained in Babylon for the whole period, and was still alive by the end of it. Thus, we read at the end of Daniel chapter 1:

**Dan 1:21;** “And Daniel continued even unto the first year of king Cyrus.”

Daniel, as a Jew faithful to the God of heaven, knew that Jeremiah’s prophecy meant that the captivity would last seventy years. When the seventy years had passed, Daniel knew that the captivity was over:

**Dan. 9:2;** “In the first year of his reign I Daniel understood by books the number of the years, whereof the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem.”

Daniel now understood that the time had come, and the exile was over. It was time for the Jews to return back to the land of Israel. But something else happened to bring the end of Jeremiah’s seventy year prophecy.

God had warned that the Medes and the Persians would bring an end to the Babylonian Empire. Babylon, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, would be destroyed completely for all time – never to be re-built, never to be inhabited, and to remain desolate for the rest of eternity. We read of this remarkable prophecy in Isaiah chapter 13.

**v.17-22;** “Behold, I will stir up the Medes against them, which shall not regard silver; and as for gold, they shall not delight in it. Their bows also shall dash the young men to pieces; and they shall have no pity on the fruit of the womb; their eye shall not spare children. And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldees’ excellency, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah. It shall never be inhabited, neither shall

it be dwelt in from generation to generation: neither shall the Arabian pitch tent there; neither shall the shepherds make their fold there. But wild beasts of the desert shall lie there; and their houses shall be full of doleful creatures; and owls shall dwell there, and satyrs shall dance there. And the wild beasts of the islands shall cry in their desolate houses, and dragons in their pleasant palaces: and her time is near to come, and her days shall not be prolonged.”

Jeremiah chapter 51, too, describes the destruction of the Babylonian Empire at the hands of the Medes and the Persians:

**Jer. 51:11-12;** “Make bright the arrows; gather the shields: the LORD hath raised up the spirit of the kings of the Medes: for his device is against Babylon, to destroy it; because it is the vengeance of the LORD, the vengeance of his temple. Set up the standard upon the walls of Babylon, make the watch strong, set up the watchmen, prepare the ambushes: for the LORD hath both devised and done that which he spake against the inhabitants of Babylon...”

**v.28-29;** “Prepare against her the nations with the kings of the Medes, the captains thereof, and all the rulers thereof, and all the land of his dominion. And the land shall tremble and sorrow: for every purpose of the LORD shall be performed against Babylon, to make the land of Babylon a desolation without an inhabitant.”

And if we remind ourselves of the events of the previous chapter on the Babylonian Empire, that in the reign of king Belshazzar of Babylon, part of a man’s hand appeared on the wall, and wrote the fate of the Babylonian Empire, that it would be destroyed by the Medes and the Persians that very night. As we read in Daniel chapter 5:

**Dan. 5:1-4;** “Belshazzar the king made a great feast to a thousand of his lords, and drank wine before the thousand. Belshazzar, while he tasted the wine, commanded to bring the golden and silver vessels which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple which was in Jerusalem; that the king, and his princes, his wives, and his concubines, might drink therein. Then they brought the golden vessels that were taken out of the temple of the house of God which was at Jerusalem;

and the king, and his princes, his wives, and his concubines, drank in them. They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold, and of silver, of brass, of iron, of wood, and of stone.”

**v.5-6;** “In the same hour came forth fingers of a man’s hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaister of the wall of the king’s palace: and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote. Then the king’s countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his loins were loosed, and his knees smote one against another...”

**v.24-28;** “Then was the part of the hand sent from him; and this writing was written. And this is the writing that was written, MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. This is the interpretation of the thing: MENE; God hath numbered thy kingdom, and finished it. TEKEL; Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting. PERES; Thy kingdom is divided, and given to the Medes and Persians.”

Thus, the Babylonian empire came to an abrupt end, to be replaced by the Medo-Persian Empire. In Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, which we looked at previously, the Medo-Persian Empire consisted of the arms of silver.

Daniel was now made the third ruler in the kingdom, and he was elevated into a position of power and authority. With the idolatrous king Belshazzar killed, when the Medes and Persians took control of the palace, Daniel would greet them. As we continue reading:

**Dan. 5:29;** “Then commanded Belshazzar, and they clothed Daniel with scarlet, and put a chain of gold about his neck, and made a proclamation concerning him, that he should be the third ruler in the kingdom.”

**Dan. 5:30-31;** “In that night was Belshazzar the king of the Chaldeans slain. And Darius the Median took the kingdom, being about threescore and two years old.”

**Dan. 6:1-3;** “It pleased Darius to set over the kingdom an hundred and twenty princes, which should be over the whole kingdom; And over these three presidents; of whom Daniel was first: that the princes might give accounts unto them, and the king should have no damage. Then this Daniel was preferred

above the presidents and princes, because an excellent spirit was in him; and the king thought to set him over the whole realm.”

In the Medo-Persian Empire, therefore, Jews rose to new positions of authority very quickly. Daniel was set first over all the three presidents, and all the princes of the realm had to give account to him.

As we read through the book of Esther, Esther is elevated into the position of queen, or second on the throne to the Persian monarch. Mordechai also rises to a significant position of authority and was trusted by the Persian king.

And so it is, as the scales of time and justice now start to tip towards the Jews at the end of Jeremiah's prophecy that they would be exiled into Babylon for seventy years, Cyrus the king now decrees that Jews should be allowed to return to Israel, to re-build both Jerusalem and the Temple.

**Ezra 6:1-5;** “Then Darius the king made a decree, and search was made in the house of the rolls, where the treasures were laid up in Babylon. And there was found at Achmetha, in the palace that is in the province of the Medes, a roll, and therein was a record thus written: In the first year of Cyrus the king the same Cyrus the king made a decree concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, Let the house be builded, the place where they offered sacrifices, and let the foundations thereof be strongly laid; the height thereof threescore cubits, and the breadth thereof threescore cubits; With three rows of great stones, and a row of new timber: and let the expenses be given out of the king's house: And also let the golden and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took forth out of the temple which is at Jerusalem, and brought unto Babylon, be restored, and brought again unto the temple which is at Jerusalem, every one to his place, and place them in the house of God.”

The events recorded in the book of Ezra and Nehemiah describe these amazing events in more detail. Ezra returned to Israel to re-build the Temple. Nehemiah returned to re-build the walls and restore Jerusalem to its former glory. They are helped by Haggai and Zechariah the prophets. It is one of the happiest and most amazing periods in Biblical history.

But, as we have seen, after seventy long years in Babylon, many of the Jews had now started to forget Hebrew. For the past seventy years, as they were scattered throughout the Babylonian empire, they had adopted the customs and local language dialects of the peoples in which they lived. On their return from Babylon, Nehemiah laments that many no longer knew Hebrew, the Holy Language:

**Neh. 13:23-24;** “In those days also saw I Jews that had married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab: And their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews’ language, but according to the language of each people.”

Nehemiah laments that the Jews could no longer speak Hebrew, the Jews’ language. Aramaic had become the language they now spoke.

Ezra, too, has to make special provision for the people, now that Aramaic (rather than Hebrew) is so commonly spoken. Ezra has to translate the Law from Hebrew to Aramaic for them, to make sure they understand it. In Nehemiah 8, we read the following:

**Neh. 8:1-8;** “And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate; and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded to Israel. And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month. And he read therein before the street that was before the water gate from the morning until midday, before the men and the women, and those that could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law... And the Levites caused the people to understand the law: and the people stood in their place. So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.”

Thus, after the exile, the people no longer understood Hebrew properly. Ezra and the Levites have to *targum* (or *translate*), the Hebrew Scriptures for them, into Aramaic, to make sure they understand what is being read to them. In this way, the tradition of the Aramaic Targums, or translations, came about. Whereas at this stage these Targums were spoken, they soon became written down,

to form the Aramaic Targums which we have today.

As we saw in the chapter on the Babylonian exile, ever since the days of Ezra, the Jews have a tradition that one should read the Hebrew text twice and the Aramaic text once.

And so, the Jews, now in positions of power and authority in the Medo-Persian Empire, continued to speak Aramaic as their everyday language. Let us take a closer look at how mighty and how vast that Empire was, with Aramaic at its heart and as its lingua franca, or common language.

The Medo-Persian Empire was a vast empire indeed, stretching from Egypt and Ethiopia all the way to India, an even further extent than the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires before it. It consisted of a vast network of 127 provinces, as we read in Esther chapter 1:

**Esth. 1:1-4;** “Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus, (this is Ahasuerus which reigned, from India even unto Ethiopia, over an hundred and seven and twenty provinces:) That in those days, when the king Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom, which was in Shushan the palace, In the third year of his reign, he made a feast unto all his princes and his servants; the power of Persia and Media, the nobles and princes of the provinces, being before him: When he shewed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honour of his excellent majesty many days, even an hundred and fourscore days.”

We also find that official correspondence in the Medo-Persian Empire was carried out in Syriac, or Aramaic. As we read in Ezra:

**Ezra 4:6-7;** “And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, wrote they unto him an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. And in the days of Artaxerxes wrote Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, and the rest of their companions, unto Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the writing of the letter was written in the Syrian tongue, and interpreted in the Syrian tongue.”

This whole section of Ezra (Ezra 4:8–6:18 and 7:12–26) is written in Aramaic. It is the section related to the Medo-Persian Empire.

These verses show that the official royal correspondence of the empire was in Aramaic. Aramaic was used to explain the official

decreed into any local Aramaic dialects, and to ensure that everyone fully understood the official decrees.

As we have seen, the Medo-Persian Empire was vast, covering a huge area of land from Ethiopia and Egypt, right across as far east as India. The Elephantine Papyri date to this period. They are a vast collection of ancient Jewish manuscripts dating from the 5th century B.C., and covering a period of 1000 years. Elephantine was an island in the Nile at the border of Nubia.

The Wikipedia article on the Elephantine papyri confirms that Aramaic was used for the majority of these, and that Aramaic was the *lingua franca*, or common language, of the Persian Empire:

“The dry soil of Upper Egypt preserved documents from the Egyptian border fortresses of Elephantine and Syene (Aswan). Hundreds of these Elephantine papyri, written in hieratic and Demotic Egyptian, Aramaic, Greek, Latin and Coptic, span a period of 1000 years. Legal documents and a cache of letters survived, turned up on the local ‘gray market’ of antiquities starting in the late 19th century, and were scattered into several Western collections.”

“Though some fragments on papyrus are much older, the largest number of papyri are written in Aramaic, the *lingua franca* of the Persian Empire, and document the Jewish community among soldiers stationed at Elephantine under Persian rule, 495-399 BCE. The Elephantine documents include letters and legal contracts from family and other archives: divorce documents, the manumission of slaves, and other business, and are a valuable source of knowledge about law, society, religion, language and onomastics, the sometimes surprisingly revealing study of names.”

Thus, all the way from Egypt to India, Aramaic was used for official correspondence as well as for everyday communication. With Aramaic being used during the Assyrian Empire, the Babylonian Empire, and now the Medo-Persian Empire, it is clear that Aramaic was here to stay. And as we shall see when we look at the use of Aramaic in the Greek and Roman Empires that would follow, Aramaic remained in use, in the Middle East, as the language of the everyday people right down through the following centuries,

through Moslem times, and going as far as the times of the Crusaders.

And so, to conclude this chapter, we have seen that Aramaic was the language used for official correspondence throughout the vast network of the Medo-Persian Empire. When the Jews went into the Babylonian exile, Aramaic was largely new to them, and they still spoke Hebrew. But seventy years later, at the end of the Babylonian captivity, several generations had gone by, and the Jews now spoke Aramaic as their normal language.

Afterwards, continuing on through time in the Medo-Persian Empire, the use of Aramaic simply increased. As the Talmud suggests, the Jews by this time possibly even preferred to speak Aramaic as their secular, or everyday, language, and reserved Hebrew for prayers, worship in the Temple, and for reading the Hebrew Bible.

Aramaic, by this time, had gained such a firm grip on Jewish life and customs, that it was here to stay. While Hebrew was certainly still the Holy Language, Aramaic was Judaism's second Holy Language.

And just a few centuries later, at the time of Jesus, Aramaic was still very much still in use amongst Jews both in the Land of Israel and in Babylon. The Talmud, after all, was being written down at this time. The two versions of the Talmud, the Jerusalem Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud, were both written in Aramaic.

Aramaic was, therefore, the normal, everyday language spoken by Jesus and the disciples, and the language in which he preached to those who would hear him. And if Aramaic was good enough for Jesus, should it not also be good enough for us? If Jesus preached in Aramaic, should we not listen to his words in Aramaic? And if Jesus used Aramaic to reveal the parables, should we not make an effort to understand those parables in Aramaic?

Let us then, come to the Aramaic New Testament with reverence and awe, and let our lives be blessed as we read the words of Jesus... in Aramaic.

# Aramaic and the Greek Empire

**I**N THE LAST few chapters, we have been walking through time, taking a look at Aramaic as we progress through the early chapters of Genesis, examine Aramaic in the pages of the Old Testament, and see that Aramaic was the language of the Assyrian Empire, the Babylonian Empire, and the Medo-Persian Empire.

We can follow these great Biblical empires down through the centuries by looking at the incredible prophetic dream of king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, in Daniel chapter 2.

In his dream, the king sees a massive and terrifying image, frightening to behold, which towers above him. None of the magicians, soothsayers, Chaldeans or wise men of Babylon can tell him the dream, or its interpretation. But Daniel, after praying to the God of heaven, has the dream revealed to him. The dream tells of events that would follow Nebuchadnezzar – a series of world empires that would end in the stone cut out of the mountains without hands, a reference to the return of Jesus to the earth.

As we follow through these empires, the next one we come to is the Greek empire. Let us examine the Greek Empire more closely, and in particular its effect on the Middle East, and especially its bearing upon the language spoken by Jews in Israel at the time of Christ.

In Bible prophecy, we can find out more about the Greek Empire, and how it came about, by looking at Daniel chapter 7. This prophecy is similar to Nebuchadnezzar's dream that we looked at in Daniel chapter 2, but contains further details. We read:

**Dan. 7:1-7;** "In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon

Daniel had a dream and visions of his head upon his bed: then he wrote the dream, and told the sum of the matters. Daniel spake and said, I saw in my vision by night, and, behold, the four winds of the heaven strove upon the great sea. And four great beasts came up from the sea, diverse one from another. The first was like a lion, and had eagle's wings: I beheld till the wings thereof were plucked, and it was lifted up from the earth, and made stand upon the feet as a man, and a man's heart was given to it. And behold another beast, a second, like to a bear, and it raised up itself on one side, and it had three ribs in the mouth of it between the teeth of it: and they said thus unto it, Arise, devour much flesh. After this I beheld, and lo another, like a leopard, which had upon the back of it four wings of a fowl; the beast had also four heads; and dominion was given to it. After this I saw in the night visions, and behold a fourth beast, dreadful and terrible, and strong exceedingly; and it had great iron teeth: it devoured and brake in pieces, and stamped the residue with the feet of it: and it was diverse from all the beasts that were before it; and it had ten horns."

In this important prophecy, the metals in the previous vision (gold, silver, brass and iron), representing the Biblical world empires, are replaced with beasts, with animals.

The first beast, a lion with eagle's wings, represents Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian Empire.

The next beast, a bear, higher on one side, represents the lop-sided power of the Medo-Persian Empire. The three ribs represent the three presidents of the Empire, of which Daniel was the first.

But the next beast, a leopard with the wings of a bird, represents the Greek Empire. A leopard is an incredibly swift, powerful animal. The Greek empire, travelling so fast that it appeared to fly through country after country, swept all the way from the west, from Greek, Macedonia, as far east as India – just like the Persian Empire before it. The four heads of the Greek beast represent the four generals who would inherit, and divide, the Greek empire after the sudden and unexpected death of Alexander the Great, as we shall see in more detail in our next chapter about *The Maccabean Revolt*.

But we find even more details about the rise of the Greek Empire in

the next chapter of Daniel. This chapter, too, is an incredible prophecy, one in which the rise and subsequent fall of world empires are all laid out in spectacular detail beforehand, by the God of heaven in whose breath we have our life and being.

We read the following, therefore, in Daniel chapter 8:

**Dan. 8:1-9;** "In the third year of the reign of king Belshazzar a vision appeared unto me, even unto me Daniel, after that which appeared unto me at the first. And I saw in a vision; and it came to pass, when I saw, that I was at Shushan in the palace, which is in the province of Elam; and I saw in a vision, and I was by the river of Ulai. Then I lifted up mine eyes, and saw, and, behold, there stood before the river a ram which had two horns: and the two horns were high; but one was higher than the other, and the higher came up last. I saw the ram pushing westward, and northward, and southward; so that no beasts might stand before him, neither was there any that could deliver out of his hand; but he did according to his will, and became great. And as I was considering, behold, an he goat came from the west on the face of the whole earth, and touched not the ground: and the goat had a notable horn between his eyes. And he came to the ram that had two horns, which I had seen standing before the river, and ran unto him in the fury of his power. And I saw him come close unto the ram, and he was moved with choler against him, and smote the ram, and brake his two horns: and there was no power in the ram to stand before him, but he cast him down to the ground, and stamped upon him: and there was none that could deliver the ram out of his hand. Therefore the he goat waxed very great: and when he was strong, the great horn was broken; and for it came up four notable ones toward the four winds of heaven. And out of one of them came forth a little horn, which waxed exceeding great, toward the south, and toward the east, and toward the pleasant land."

As it is written in Amos the prophet:

**Amos 3:7;** "Surely the Lord GOD will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets."

And so, in this prophetic passage of the Holy Scriptures, the ram represents the Medo-Persian empire. Its two horns represent the

Medes and the Persians, who together defeated the Babylonian Empire. Even while Belshazzar of Babylon is still king, God told his saints about world events in the future – the coming of both the Medo-Persian Empire and the Greek Empire.

As it is written in Daniel the prophet:

**Dan. 4:17;** “This matter is by the decree of the watchers, and the demand by the word of the holy ones: to the intent that the living may know that the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will, and setteth up over it the basest of men.”

As we saw in the chapter on the Medo-Persian Empire, that vast empire spread in all directions and rose to great power, with seemingly nothing to stop it. As we saw, it spread over 127 provinces, all the way from Egypt and Ethiopia in the west, to India in the east. The two horns were not balanced and were not equal in size, just like the Medo-Persian Empire, where the Persians would eventually gain the ascendancy and become greater than the Medes.

The ram with two unequal horns, therefore, was a perfect symbol for the Medo-Persian Empire, the separate powers of the Medes and the Persians who together defeated the Babylonians.

As Daniel considers these things, he sees a he-goat, a male goat, coming out of nowhere, with a single large horn on its head. The goat arises from the west, and travels so fast and so speedily that its feet appear not to even touch the ground. The goat charges at the ram (the Medo-Persian empire) and attacks it swiftly, as if with great anger and speed and power. The goat comes from the west, out of nowhere, and attacks the ram so decisively and quickly that the ram is destroyed and killed, and his two horns are broken. The goat continues in strength, and just when he seems to be at the height of his power, his horn is broken off, destroyed, and four other lesser horns grow in its place. The four horns are divided, but one of them stretches towards the pleasant land – the land of Israel.

We shall examine the significance of these prophetic events in more detail in our next chapter, The Maccabean Revolt. But for now, we note that whereas the ram represents the Medo-Persian Empire, the goat represents the Grecian, or Greek Empire. The goat comes from the west, out of nowhere, so fast and furious that it hardly seems to

touch the ground, and completely, suddenly and decisively destroys the power of the Medo-Persian empire. The single notable horn of the Greek Empire represents Alexander the Great, who, at the height of his power and when he seemingly has the world at his feet, dies unexpectedly, leaving the Greek kingdom and empire to be split up by his four generals. One of these generals, representing the Seleucid kingdom, would stretch forth towards the pleasant land (the Land of Israel). He would impose Greek language and customs on the Jews, who in turn would refuse to submit and would rise up in the Maccabean Revolt.

To make sure the reader interprets these events correctly, and understands the significance of them, Daniel himself asks the angel what is the meaning of this prophetic vision. In Daniel chapter 8, it goes on to tell us the meaning:

**v.19;** “And he said, Behold, I will make thee know what shall be in the last end of the indignation: for at the time appointed the end shall be. The ram which thou sawest having two horns are the kings of Media and Persia. And the rough goat is the king of Grecia: and the great horn that is between his eyes is the first king.”

And so, with this prophetic understanding of the destruction of the Medo-Persian Empire and the subsequent rise of the Greek Empire with Alexander the Great as its first king, let us go on to examine the rise of the Greek Empire in more detail. In particular, we are interested in its effect on the language, beliefs and customs of the Jews in the Land of Israel, and of the inhabitants of the Middle East more generally.

We first need to examine the early origins of the Greek Empire. Greece as a nation-state had a long history, and much of this history is interesting for those who enjoy studying the Classics. Greece’s ancient period goes back to around 800-600 B.C., to the time of some of the Greek Classical authors such as Homer (who wrote the Iliad and the Odyssey), as well as Greek philosophers such as Socrates and Plato (who wrote The Republic). Greece’s classical period runs from around the 5th to 4th centuries B.C., covering philosophers such as Aristotle. The early Greeks had some success repelling the Persians from progressing further west.

But outside of Classical Studies, nothing about Ancient or Classical Greece is of importance or relevance as far as the Bible is concerned. It is only when Alexander the Great comes on the scene that an empire is formed, and at this point it becomes relevant to the Scriptures of Truth, because the Greek Empire's deeds had an important impact upon God's people, the Jews, and the Land of Israel.

Greece's early history started just north of modern Greece today, in Macedonia. We can see from looking at a map that this is a relatively small section of land, and Greece is not a large country. Greece is small indeed, when compared with the vast Persian Empire, which stretched as far west as modern-day Turkey and as far east as Iran, India and Afghanistan.

But when we look at a larger-scale map, we see just how far away Greece and Macedonia are, in relation to the Middle East, either from Ur of the Chaldees and the origins of the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires, and even further east when we consider that the Persian Empire stretched as far as India.

Truly, as Daniel's prophecy tells us, that goat-power arose from the west, indeed, very far west in relation to the Holy Land. And just as the prophecy tells us that the goat-power, with its first king (Alexander the Great) flew with anger and rage at the Medo-Persians – travelling so far and so fast that its feet seemed to hardly touch the ground – so, too, Alexander the Great came out of nowhere and conquered everything before him.

In just a few short years, Alexander had gone from an unknown prince, to the revered leader of an Empire, only to be cut off and killed in his prime, just as Daniel's prophecy had foretold.

Alexander the Great was born in 356 B.C. and died in 323 B.C., at the age of just 33 years old. He came to the throne at just twenty years of age. Here is what the Wikipedia article says about him:

“He [Alexander] spent most of his ruling years on an unprecedented military campaign through Asia and northeast Africa, until by the age of thirty he had created one of the largest empires of the ancient world, stretching from Greece to Egypt and into northwest India. He was undefeated in battle and is considered one of history's most successful military

commanders.”

Thus, in just a little over a decade, coming all the way from Greece and Macedonia in the west, Alexander the Great and his small army had conquered the vast and powerful Medo-Persian Empire. Alexander’s decisive victories, and his unique strategy, are studied even today in military schools around the world. His life and achievements are worthy of the description in Daniel’s prophecy, of a leopard with wings appearing to fly half way across the world, in rage and anger conquering everything in its path, and decisively destroying the power of the ram, or Medo-Persian kingdom.

But Daniel’s prophecy also said, “Therefore the he-goat waxed very great: and when he was strong, the great horn was broken.” Alexander the Great, the horn of the he-goat in the prophecy, died in his prime, unexpectedly, in Babylon, but not in battle. Depending on the historian, he succumbed either to alcoholic liver disease after a particularly nasty drinking bout, or to poisoning, or to an infectious disease such as typhoid fever.

But what of the impact of Alexander’s military campaigns? Many people would suggest that following Alexander the Great’s victories, Greek language and culture swept through the then-known world, and everyone became Greeks.

But we need to distinguish here between the Hellenisation process, and the adoption of the Greek *language*.

Alexander’s victories, and the speed with which he had accomplished them, were so impressive that people wanted to know more about the Greek and Macedonian cultures and beliefs. Greek philosophy, and beliefs, and customs, certainly spread far and wide. That was the Hellenisation process. People adopted Greek names, including many people and cities which adopted or adapted the name of Alexander himself, such as the city of Alexandria in Egypt.

But adopting the Greek *language* was a different matter. In just over a dozen years, Alexander and his small army had ridden on horseback over tens of thousands of square miles, defeating armies many times their size and with greater military experience. But Alexander was a military strategist, a soldier, an army general, a leader, but not a teacher of the Greek language.

Learning and mastering a new language, especially one as radically different as Greek when compared with Aramaic and the way that Aramaic works, is a learning process that takes not just years – but decades, even when an intelligent person applies themselves to the task. As we shall see in the chapter, *What Does Josephus Say?*, Josephus says that even after years of diligent study, he still could not even pronounce Greek properly and he still struggled with the language:

*“I have also taken a great deal of pains to obtain the learning of the Greeks, and understand the elements of the Greek language, although I have so long accustomed myself to speak our own tongue, that I cannot pronounce Greek with sufficient exactness...”*

In fact, a cultural shift from one national language to another is a shift that typically takes several generations, if it happens at all. The shift of the Jews' language from Hebrew to Aramaic, for example, took more than seventy years to take place. That was a very short period of time, and there were many positive reasons for it to happen so quickly – Aramaic and Hebrew are very closely related languages and therefore Aramaic would have been easy to learn, the Jews were forced to learn Aramaic because they were forcibly immersed in the language and culture of the Chaldeans, and they would have had little or no resistance to learning Aramaic because they were treated extremely well in Babylon. Aramaic may even have been a deliberate choice, in that it allowed the Jews to make a distinction between the Holy (worship of God, reading the Hebrew Bible, the Temple service) in Hebrew, and the secular (using Aramaic for everyday purposes). Even today in Israel, Ultra-Orthodox Jews reserve Hebrew for holy use, and use Yiddish for everyday secular purposes.

But the widespread adoption of the Greek language across the Middle East, from Aramaic, was a wholly different matter. As anyone who has tried to learn New Testament Greek will testify, Greek is fundamentally a very complicated language. It has a whole series of noun declensions, and verb paradigms, that simply do not have any parallel at all in Aramaic. The sounds of the two languages are also fundamentally different. This is what Josephus says he found as he struggled with the Greek language.

For these reasons, a language shift from Aramaic to Greek, in the

time of Alexander, simply did not happen. With Greek and Aramaic being such different languages, it was impossible for that fundamental shift to take place.

As we shall see in the chapter on *The Maccabean Revolt*, the Jews actually resisted the Hellenisation process, and actively resisted Greek rule. They rose up against the very idea of learning the Greek language and Greek culture.

That does not mean, however, that *no* Jews spoke any Greek. On the contrary, as we shall see in some of our later chapters, pockets of Jews in Israel in the first century had adopted Greek culture and the Greek language, but they were despised as apostate Jews because of it. They are referred to in the New Testament as the Grecian Jews, and the 'Hebrew' Jews despised them. In their eyes, the Hellenisation process brought only foreign and unwanted ideas, beliefs and practices into Judaism. The events of the Maccabean Revolt proved that the Greeks would only destroy their religion.

As we said earlier, we have to remember that a fundamental shift from one national language to another, if it takes place at all, happens only over a very long period of time, measured not in decades, but in hundreds of years.

The gradual shift from Aramaic in the Middle East to Arabic, for example, took literally hundreds of years – and that was despite the fact that Aramaic and Arabic are related Semitic languages!

Similarly, when the Roman Empire invaded Britain, they ruled the country with an iron rule for more than four hundred years. The Romans were a Latin-speaking people. Yet despite this, and even although many of the names of towns and cities in Britain still bear Latin names, the ordinary people in Britain never spoke Latin.

When the Vikings invaded, the people of Britain did not adopt the Swedish or Norwegian languages.

Similarly, when the Norman French invaded Britain in 1066, French became the language of the kings and the court in Britain. The first few kings of England, for example, did not even speak English! They spoke French. Yet despite this pressure, the people of Britain never spoke the French language, even though that French influence lasted for literally hundreds of years.

Many other examples around the world could be brought forth to show that the army of one country invading another country, and ruling over it for a period of decades or even hundreds of years, rarely if ever causes the ordinary people to voluntarily and naturally adopt the language of the invading foreigners. Overturning one language and replacing it with another is just too complex a process, and it takes too long.

Thus, when the Greek empire swept across the Middle East, there is no doubt that the military conquests of Alexander the Great impressed people. They wanted to know more about these people, the Greeks, and the Macedonians. The process of cultural interchange was starting to happen. Hellenisation, or the process of learning and adopting Greek philosophies and ideas, was unavoidable. People and places may have adopted Greek names. The language of business may have changed, in adopting Greek words for coins and other artefacts. And a smattering of common Greek words and ideas no doubt infused the spoken language, Aramaic, of the peoples living across the vast territory of the Middle East and beyond.

But in terms of a wholesale adoption of the Greek language, and the ousting of the Aramaic language – a language that had been spoken throughout the Middle East for the past two thousand years amongst the ordinary people – no, that just did not happen.

We do not find the proud peoples of the Middle East adopting the Greek language just because Alexander and his army rode across the area on horseback. Nor do we find that the proud peoples of the Middle East adopted the Latin language, when the Roman Empire invaded the Middle East, settled there, ruled there, and lived there.

And so, by the time we come to Jesus of Nazareth in Israel in the first century A.D., we find that the peoples in the Middle East still spoke the same language they always had spoken – Aramaic. Jews still clung tenaciously to the Hebrew language, with Aramaic as their everyday language. Small pockets of mainly apostate Jews and others may well have spoken Greek, but that was certainly not the norm.

And so Jesus spoke Aramaic, along with Josephus after him, along with the disciples, along with the people Jesus preached to. Aramaic

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in the Middle East was very much here to stay – for at least another one thousand years. Even into the times of the Crusades, Aramaic was still widely spoken in the Middle East, until itself supplanted by Arabic – another Semitic language.

It is to Aramaic, then, that we must turn, if we want to get back to the Bible, to the language in which Jesus preached, and the language in which we can find rest for our souls in this violent and adulterous generation.

## The Maccabean Revolt

**I**N THE LAST chapter, we looked at the spread of the Greek Empire, all the way from the west (Greece, or Macedonia) to the east (as far as India). Following the rise of Alexander the Great, the Greek Empire spread very rapidly, conquering everything in its path, until Alexander's unexpected death at the age of 33.

As we have seen, in Nebuchadnezzar's prophetic dream in Daniel chapter 2, where Nebuchadnezzar sees a great image made of four metals, the head of gold represents the Babylonian Empire, the two arms of silver represent the Medo-Persian Empire, and the belly and thighs of brass represent the Greek Empire.

And in Daniel's prophetic vision of the four beasts, or world empires, rising up out of the sea (the Mediterranean), the Greek Empire corresponds to the leopard, with four wings of a fowl, and four heads. We read in Daniel chapter 7:

**v.6;** "After this I beheld, and lo another, like a leopard, which had upon the back of it four wings of a fowl; the beast had also four heads; and dominion was given to it."

But we find more detail about the rise of the Greek Empire, the sudden death of its king (Alexander the Great) and the dramatic events after Alexander's death, in the next chapter of Daniel. We see God's guiding hand in world events, setting up kings, and making kings fall before Him, as He guides events leading up to His Son, Jesus, in the coming centuries.

As we turn to Daniel chapter 8 to read about the events surrounding the Greek Empire, therefore, we read the following:

**v.5-12;** "And as I was considering, behold, an he goat came from the west on the face of the whole earth, and touched not the

ground: and the goat had a notable horn between his eyes. And he came to the ram that had two horns, which I had seen standing before the river, and ran unto him in the fury of his power. And I saw him come close unto the ram, and he was moved with choler against him, and smote the ram, and brake his two horns: and there was no power in the ram to stand before him, but he cast him down to the ground, and stamped upon him: and there was none that could deliver the ram out of his hand. Therefore the he goat waxed very great: and when he was strong, the great horn was broken; and for it came up four notable ones toward the four winds of heaven. And out of one of them came forth a little horn, which waxed exceeding great, toward the south, and toward the east, and toward the pleasant land. And it waxed great, even to the host of heaven; and it cast down some of the host and of the stars to the ground, and stamped upon them. Yea, he magnified himself even to the prince of the host, and by him the daily sacrifice was taken away, and the place of his sanctuary was cast down. And an host was given him against the daily sacrifice by reason of transgression, and it cast down the truth to the ground; and it practised, and prospered."

As we continue to read the chapter, Gabriel the angel is sent to explain to Daniel the meaning of the vision.

We find that the he-goat, or male goat, represents the Greek Empire, and its single notable horn on its head represents Alexander the Great, the first notable king of the Greek Empire.

Alexander was moved with choler, that is, anger and fury, against the ram with two horns, representing the combined power of the Medo-Persian Empire.

Alexander, or the Greek Empire, destroyed the power of the Medo-Persian Empire suddenly, decisively, and completely.

Next, the he-goat waxed great. Thus, the Greek Empire grew in power and strength, spreading eastward as far as India.

But "when he was strong, the great horn was broken", meaning that Alexander the Great, that notable horn, would be killed suddenly and unexpectedly, at the age of just 33.

After the death of Alexander, four other horns would grow from nowhere. These represent Alexander's four generals, to whom the Greek Empire would be divided after the unplanned death of Alexander.

But we read that, while three of the horns were unimportant, one of them in particular was worthy of note. It would start small but grow large. It would grow towards the south, toward the east, and towards the pleasant land (the Land of Israel).

That new horn, one of the four, would reach up unto heaven, desiring to challenge the powers of heavens, and cast them down, and trample them. And he would magnify himself, causing the daily sacrifice to be taken away (that is, the Jewish priesthood and the sacrifices they made under the law of Moses). The place of the sanctuary would be cast down – that is the Holy of Holies under the law of Moses. He would have an army, and he would carry out all these things, and prosper.

Furthermore, as we read the angel Gabriel's explanation of the vision later on in Daniel chapter 8, we read the following:

**v.21-25;** "And the rough goat is the king of Grecia: and the great horn that is between his eyes is the first king. Now that being broken, whereas four stood up for it, four kingdoms shall stand up out of the nation, but not in his power. And in the latter time of their kingdom, when the transgressors are come to the full, a king of fierce countenance, and understanding dark sentences, shall stand up. And his power shall be mighty, but not by his own power: and he shall destroy wonderfully, and shall prosper, and practise, and shall destroy the mighty and the holy people. And through his policy also he shall cause craft to prosper in his hand; and he shall magnify himself in his heart, and by peace shall destroy many: he shall also stand up against the Prince of princes; but he shall be broken without hand."

Thus, although that fourth horn would wax great, and although he would magnify himself against God himself (the powers of heaven), and although he would destroy the holy people (the Jews in the Land of Israel, God's chosen people), and although he would cause craft (deceit) to prosper, and although he would magnify himself in his pride and arrogance, and although he would stand up against

God himself – yet he would be destroyed and his power broken.

That king who would arise would be of a fierce countenance, and would understand dark sentences – a language hard to understand.

And so, this incredibly detailed and precise prophetic vision, given in Daniel chapters 7 and 8, and following on from the prophetic dream of Daniel chapter 2, actually explains itself, for those who would listen. The angel Gabriel explains the vision to Daniel, so that we too can understand it.

The historical fulfilment of these chapters of remarkable prophecy is found in the events that would follow Alexander the Great's death. Alexander's death was so sudden that no preparation was made for an heir. He had no son. And so, of necessity, the vast Greek Empire was split into four parts, to be ruled over by his four generals.

As Daniel's prophecy tells us, of the four generals, three of them were unimportant as far as Biblical history is concerned. In the south of Israel, in Egypt, were the Ptolemies, forming the Ptolemaic kingdom. But in the north there were the Seleucids, with the Seleucid kingdom. It is the Seleucid kingdom that is described in some detail in Daniel's prophecy. As time went by, the Seleucids, under that notorious king, Antiochus Epiphanes, would wax strong. He fought the Ptolemies in Egypt, overcoming them, but then stretched forth his hand against the Land of Israel. He brought the full force of his wrath down on the Jews.

He wanted the Jews to stop worshipping the God of heaven, the God of the Bible. He wanted them to abandon the worship of God at the Temple in Jerusalem, and to stop Jewish customs such as circumcision and eating foods that were clean under the Law. Instead, he wanted the false gods of Greece to be worshipped, Greek language and customs to be adopted, and for all Jews to abandon their religion. In short, he gave the Jews in Israel a stark choice between worshipping God, and worshipping devils, between their Bible-based culture, or Greek culture.

These events are so fascinating, and so important to our understanding of how Aramaic and Greek fit together in the language puzzle of the centuries before and after Christ, that we will explore the history of the period further in this chapter.

The Maccabean Revolt took place in 168 B.C., just a few generations before Jesus would be born in Bethlehem, in the Land of Judea. The history of this period comes from several historical sources, including the Talmud, but the most complete account can be found in the book of 1 Maccabees. This book is historical, but not canonical.

Let us read the first chapter of 1 Maccabees together:

**1 Mac. 1:1-64;** “And it happened, after that Alexander son of Philip, the Macedonian, who came out of the land of Chettiim, had smitten Darius king of the Persians and Medes, that he reigned in his stead, the first over Greece, And made many wars, and won many strong holds, and slew the kings of the earth, And went through to the ends of the earth, and took spoils of many nations, insomuch that the earth was quiet before him; whereupon he was exalted and his heart was lifted up. And he gathered a mighty strong host and ruled over countries, and nations, and kings, who became tributaries unto him. And after these things he fell sick, and perceived that he should die. Wherefore he called his servants, such as were honourable, and had been brought up with him from his youth, and parted his kingdom among them, while he was yet alive. So Alexander reigned twelves years, and then died. And his servants bare rule every one in his place. And after his death they all put crowns upon themselves; so did their sons after them many years: and evils were multiplied in the earth. And there came out of them a wicked root Antiochus surnamed Epiphanes, son of Antiochus the king, who had been an hostage at Rome, and he reigned in the hundred and thirty and seventh year of the kingdom of the Greeks. In those days went there out of Israel wicked men, who persuaded many, saying, Let us go and make a covenant with the heathen that are round about us: for since we departed from them we have had much sorrow. So this device pleased them well. Then certain of the people were so forward herein, that they went to the king, who gave them licence to do after the ordinances of the heathen: Whereupon they built a place of exercise at Jerusalem according to the customs of the heathen: And made themselves uncircumcised, and forsook the holy covenant, and joined themselves to the heathen,

and were sold to do mischief. Now when the kingdom was established before Antiochus, he thought to reign over Egypt that he might have the dominion of two realms. Wherefore he entered into Egypt with a great multitude, with chariots, and elephants, and horsemen, and a great navy, And made war against Ptolemee king of Egypt: but Ptolemee was afraid of him, and fled; and many were wounded to death. Thus they got the strong cities in the land of Egypt and he took the spoils thereof. And after that Antiochus had smitten Egypt, he returned again in the hundred forty and third year, and went up against Israel and Jerusalem with a great multitude, And entered proudly into the sanctuary, and took away the golden altar, and the candlestick of light, and all the vessels thereof, And the table of the shewbread, and the pouring vessels, and the vials. and the censers of gold, and the veil, and the crown, and the golden ornaments that were before the temple, all which he pulled off. He took also the silver and the gold, and the precious vessels: also he took the hidden treasures which he found. And when he had taken all away, he went into his own land, having made a great massacre, and spoken very proudly. Therefore there was a great mourning in Israel, in every place where they were; So that the princes and elders mourned, the virgins and young men were made feeble, and the beauty of women was changed. Every bridegroom took up lamentation, and she that sat in the marriage chamber was in heaviness, The land also was moved for the inhabitants thereof, and all the house of Jacob was covered with confusion. And after two years fully expired the king sent his chief collector of tribute unto the cities of Juda, who came unto Jerusalem with a great multitude, And spake peaceable words unto them, but all was deceit: for when they had given him credence, he fell suddenly upon the city, and smote it very sore, and destroyed much people of Israel. And when he had taken the spoils of the city, he set it on fire, and pulled down the houses and walls thereof on every side. But the women and children took they captive, and possessed the cattle. Then builded they the city of David with a great and strong wall, and with mighty towers, and made it a strong hold for them.

And they put therein a sinful nation, wicked men, and fortified themselves therein. They stored it also with armour and victuals, and when they had gathered together the spoils of Jerusalem, they laid them up there, and so they became a sore snare: For it was a place to lie in wait against the sanctuary, and an evil adversary to Israel. Thus they shed innocent blood on every side of the sanctuary, and defiled it: Insomuch that the inhabitants of Jerusalem fled because of them: whereupon the city was made an habitation of strangers, and became strange to those that were born in her; and her own children left her. Her sanctuary was laid waste like a wilderness, her feasts were turned into mourning, her sabbaths into reproach her honour into contempt. As had been her glory, so was her dishonour increased, and her excellency was turned into mourning. Moreover king Antiochus wrote to his whole kingdom, that all should be one people, And every one should leave his laws: so all the heathen agreed according to the commandment of the king. Yea, many also of the Israelites consented to his religion, and sacrificed unto idols, and profaned the sabbath. For the king had sent letters by messengers unto Jerusalem and the cities of Juda that they should follow the strange laws of the land, And forbid burnt offerings, and sacrifice, and drink offerings, in the temple; and that they should profane the sabbaths and festival days: And pollute the sanctuary and holy people: Set up altars, and groves, and chapels of idols, and sacrifice swine's flesh, and unclean beasts: That they should also leave their children uncircumcised, and make their souls abominable with all manner of uncleanness and profanation: To the end they might forget the law, and change all the ordinances. And whosoever would not do according to the commandment of the king, he said, he should die. In the selfsame manner wrote he to his whole kingdom, and appointed overseers over all the people, commanding the cities of Juda to sacrifice, city by city. Then many of the people were gathered unto them, to wit every one that forsook the law; and so they committed evils in the land; And drove the Israelites into secret places, even wheresoever

they could flee for succour. Now the fifteenth day of the month Casleu, in the hundred forty and fifth year, they set up the abomination of desolation upon the altar, and builded idol altars throughout the cities of Juda on every side; And burnt incense at the doors of their houses, and in the streets. And when they had rent in pieces the books of the law which they found, they burnt them with fire. And whosoever was found with any the book of the testament, or if any committed to the law, the king's commandment was, that they should put him to death. Thus did they by their authority unto the Israelites every month, to as many as were found in the cities. Now the five and twentieth day of the month they did sacrifice upon the idol altar, which was upon the altar of God. At which time according to the commandment they put to death certain women, that had caused their children to be circumcised. And they hanged the infants about their necks, and rifled their houses, and slew them that had circumcised them. Howbeit many in Israel were fully resolved and confirmed in themselves not to eat any unclean thing. Wherefore the rather to die, that they might not be defiled with meats, and that they might not profane the holy covenant: so then they died. And there was very great wrath upon Israel."

We read here the terrible atrocities that were committed by the Greeks, under Antiochus Epiphanes. Just as Daniel's prophecy said would happen, his policy, like the Nazis after him, was one of ethnic and cultural cleansing. He wanted to eradicate all traces, practices and memories of the Jews and stop all worship of the God of heaven. Men, women and children who refused to submit to his yoke were simply killed. Greek language and customs were spread on pain of death. Armies were sent in to enforce this. Jews were forced to eat swine's flesh, the Temple was desecrated, and statues and images of Zeus were set up in the Temple to worship. Everything in the Temple of value was looted. The priesthood was dismantled by force.

If we carefully read through Daniel chapter 11, it tells us in even more prophetic detail the events of this time period. Those who were faithful would understand exactly what was going on.

And so, as we continue reading through Maccabees, we find that there rose up a faithful priest, called Mattathias, who refused to submit to Greek rule. With his five sons, he fought against Greek rule. These faithful priests rose up to challenge the entire Greek army. Victory by victory, battle after battle, others joined them, until soon they had overcome the Greek army. While reading the whole account in its glorious detail is beyond the scope of this chapter, we can get a flavour of these events by reading chapter 2 of the Book of the Maccabees.

Let us continue where we left off:

**1 Mac. 2:1-30;** “In those days arose Mattathias the son of John, the son of Simeon, a priest of the sons of Joarib, from Jerusalem, and dwelt in Modin. And he had five sons, Joannan, called Caddis: Simon; called Thassi: Judas, who was called Maccabeus: Eleazar, called Avaran: and Jonathan, whose surname was Apphus. And when he saw the blasphemies that were committed in Juda and Jerusalem, He said, Woe is me! wherefore was I born to see this misery of my people, and of the holy city, and to dwell there, when it was delivered into the hand of the enemy, and the sanctuary into the hand of strangers? Her temple is become as a man without glory. Her glorious vessels are carried away into captivity, her infants are slain in the streets, her young men with the sword of the enemy. What nation hath not had a part in her kingdom and gotten of her spoils? All her ornaments are taken away; of a free woman she is become a bondslave. And, behold, our sanctuary, even our beauty and our glory, is laid waste, and the Gentiles have profaned it. To what end therefore shall we live any longer? Then Mattathias and his sons rent their clothes, and put on sackcloth, and mourned very sore. In the mean while the king’s officers, such as compelled the people to revolt, came into the city Modin, to make them sacrifice. And when many of Israel came unto them, Mattathias also and his sons came together. Then answered the king’s officers, and said to Mattathias on this wise, Thou art a ruler, and an honourable and great man in this city, and strengthened with sons and brethren: Now therefore come thou first, and fulfil the king’s commandment, like as all the heathen have done, yea, and the men of Juda also, and such as remain at Jerusalem: so shalt thou and thy house be in the number of the king’s friends,

and thou and thy children shall be honoured with silver and gold, and many rewards. Then Mattathias answered and spake with a loud voice, Though all the nations that are under the king's dominion obey him, and fall away every one from the religion of their fathers, and give consent to his commandments: Yet will I and my sons and my brethren walk in the covenant of our fathers. God forbid that we should forsake the law and the ordinances. We will not hearken to the king's words, to go from our religion, either on the right hand, or the left. Now when he had left speaking these words, there came one of the Jews in the sight of all to sacrifice on the altar which was at Modin, according to the king's commandment. Which thing when Mattathias saw, he was inflamed with zeal, and his reins trembled, neither could he forbear to shew his anger according to judgment: wherefore he ran, and slew him upon the altar. Also the king's commissioner, who compelled men to sacrifice, he killed at that time, and the altar he pulled down. Thus dealt he zealously for the law of God like as Phinees did unto Zambri the son of Salom. And Mattathias cried throughout the city with a loud voice, saying, Whosoever is zealous of the law, and maintaineth the covenant, let him follow me. So he and his sons fled into the mountains, and left all that ever they had in the city. Then many that sought after justice and judgment went down into the wilderness, to dwell there: Both they, and their children, and their wives; and their cattle; because afflictions increased sore upon them."

As we pick up the detail in Daniel chapter 11 in the Bible, we read through one of the most remarkable prophecies in the whole of the Bible. Chapter 11 described the exact events that we read about in 1 Maccabees, written about five hundred years before it happened, while Daniel was still captive in Babylon. God's hand was at work, in the rise and fall of empires.

We read in Daniel chapter 11 that they would be "holpen with a little help":

**v.32-36;** "And such as do wickedly against the covenant shall he corrupt by flatteries: but the people that do know their God shall be strong, and do exploits. And they that understand among the people shall instruct many: yet they shall fall by the sword, and

by flame, by captivity, and by spoil, many days. Now when they shall fall, they shall be holpen with a little help: but many shall cleave to them with flatteries. And some of them of understanding shall fall, to try them, and to purge, and to make them white, even to the time of the end: because it is yet for a time appointed. And the king shall do according to his will; and he shall exalt himself, and magnify himself above every god, and shall speak marvellous things against the God of gods, and shall prosper till the indignation be accomplished: for that that is determined shall be done.”

In the end, the Maccabees were that line of faithful priests who rose up against the imposing of Greek language and customs against the Jews. Once they had overcome the Greek armies, they gained the Temple again. History records that they found a small amount of oil which had not been desecrated and polluted by the Greeks, with which they were able to light the Candlestick in the Temple, to cleanse the Temple, and to restore the worship of God in Jerusalem.

But that small amount of oil should only have lasted one day. As they were told in Daniel, “they shall be holpen [helped] by a little help.” God would make that oil last eight days – just long enough to obtain further clean supplies and continue the lighting of the Candlestick, as an everlasting memorial to the Word of God burning perpetually as a witness of light in that degenerate age.

To commemorate these events, the Jews added an extra branch on each side of the Menorah or Candlestick. Instead of three branches on each side, there were now four – eight in total, to commemorate the eight days which the oil burned for.

These fabulous events are known as the Maccabean Revolt. Ever since then, Jews have celebrated it every year, even down to the present day. As we read in 1 Maccabees, these events happened on the 25th day of the Hebrew month Kislev, which corresponds to around December in the western calendar. Ironically, at the very time of year that the pagans celebrated the winter solstice on December 25th, the Jews celebrate victory over the pagans at Hanukkah.

“Hanukkah” is the Hebrew word for “Dedication”, meaning the dedication of the altar, which the Jews accomplished as a result of the Maccabean Revolt. Hanukkah is also known as the Festival of

Lights, because candles are kept burning for eight nights. And so today, at the time of Hanukkah, all across Israel and the entire Jewish world, candles or lights are kept burning for eight days to commemorate the victory of the Maccabean revolt.

The Maccabeans are also known as the *Hasmoneans*, because the Hebrew word for *eight* is *shmoneh*.

When we come to the New Testament, we find that the Maccabean Revolt was celebrated by the Jews in Israel, almost two hundred years after the event. They had not forgotten their victory over the Greeks – over the infiltration of Greek culture and ‘wisdom’, over the Greek language, and over those things being imposed upon them.

The events of Hanukkah, the Feast of Dedication, had not been forgotten by the Jews, by the disciples, and by Jesus himself. Since Jesus was himself the son of David, in the lineage of David, in the line of the kings of Israel going right through the Maccabean period, he would have been in line to the throne of Israel – if Herod and the Romans had not come on the scene. Thus, Jesus of all people would have understood how important that victory was against the Greeks, against those foreign invaders in the Land of Israel, against Antiochus Epiphanes, how that Antiochus had magnified himself against the host of heaven (even to the Almighty God, the Father of Jesus), and caused craft or deceit to prosper in the Land of Israel.

Jesus, a Jew in the line of king David and the Maccabeans, would have understood more than anyone else how important that victory against Antiochus was, and against Greek culture and language.

And so, in John chapter 10, as Jesus preaches to the Jews, we find that John adds further spiritual importance to the events described. We read:

**John 10:19-21;** “There was a division therefore again among the Jews for these sayings. And many of them said, He hath a devil, and is mad; why hear ye him? Others said, These are not the words of him that hath a devil. Can a devil open the eyes of the blind?”

**John 10:22-23;** “And it was at Jerusalem the feast of the dedication, and it was winter. And Jesus walked in the temple in

Solomon's porch.”

As the Jews wonder whether Jesus has a devil, whether he is like Antiochus Epiphanies, causing craft and deceit to prosper in the Land, John records that it is “the feast of dedication”, and it is winter. In other words, the Jews, including Jesus, are, at this very time, celebrating Hannukah, “the Feast of Dedication”, as Jesus walks through the Temple. That very Temple that Jesus is walking through, is the very Temple that was desecrated by the Greeks, the very Temple that his ancestors had fought for and won their victory. It was the very Temple that the priests, under the Maccabean victory, had risen up to defend, to throw off the shackles of Greek tyranny and culture and language, and gain their independence, the freedom to worship the God of Heaven.

And yet here were the priests of Jesus' day, in that very Temple, unable to tell whether Jesus was the Messiah, the descendant of those who were faithful and victorious against the Greeks, or whether he had a devil, and should be killed like Antiochus Epiphanes. In the end, instead of rising up against the Romans and throwing off the shackles of Rome as they had done against the Greeks not long before, instead of hailing Jesus as the Messiah and falling down before him, and gaining their Land back from the oppressor – instead, the priests choose to kill and crucify the Prince of Princes, to oppress and kill the disciples, to cause craft to prosper in the Land, and to rise up against the host of Heaven and rebel against God himself.

Ironically, in a cruel twist of fate, and demonstrating their shocking hypocrisy and guile, as Jesus walks through the Temple and celebrates Hanukkah, the Feast of Dedication, and its victory over the Greeks, the priests are doing the very things that Antiochus Epiphanies was earlier condemned and destroyed for, by those faithful priests under the Maccabean Revolt.

And so, many today wonder whether Jesus would have spoken Greek, or Aramaic, or Hebrew. Would Jesus, as a faithful Jew, as a future king in the line of David and the Maccabean kings, have spoken Greek, that language that the Greeks under Antiochus had imposed upon them, as he desecrated the Temple, sacrificed swine's flesh, and raised up images of Zeus in the Temple that Jesus walked through on that cold winter's day?

Surely, even if Jesus could have spoken Greek, it was the language of the enemy, of the desecrators of the Temple, of the ones who had risen up to challenge his Father's dominion in heaven. Surely Greek was the last language that Jesus, as a faithful Jew, would have wanted to speak.

Aramaic, on the other hand, was the language of the everyday people, who had won their victory over the Greeks. Surely that was a more fitting language, as indeed Josephus the Jewish historian tells us?

And would not Jesus have loved going to the synagogue, to speak Hebrew, the Holy Language, as he read from the scrolls in the Temple?

And does not this have a bearing on the language in which the gospels would first have been written down – Aramaic, or Greek? Why would Jesus and the disciples have preached and spoken in Greek, the language of the foreign invaders whose oppressions they had earlier revolted against?

Does it not make sense that Aramaic came first, that Aramaic was the language that Jesus and the disciples first preached in, and the language the gospels and letters of the New Testament were first written down in, and that Greek was translated from the Aramaic afterwards?

That after all, was exactly the case with the writings of Josephus – Aramaic first, and then translated into Greek. It was a parallel to the Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament – first in Hebrew, then translated into Greek.

Should we really be surprised, therefore, if there is evidence that the Aramaic New Testament came first, and Greek was shortly afterwards derived from it? As we shall see in the chapter about the Aramaic New Testament, that is exactly what we indeed find.

The Hebrew Old Testament, and the Aramaic New Testament. Together, those two Holy Languages make up a perfect whole. One is incomplete without the other. Jew without Gentile is incomplete. It was always within God's plan and purpose for the Gentiles, that wild olive tree, to be grafted in to the hope of Israel, into the good olive tree. And just as Aramaic was the language of the Gentile

nations surrounding Israel all throughout the Old Testament, so when we come to the New Testament, it makes perfect sense that Aramaic should be used as the language used to preach (once again) to the nations surrounding Israel.

Hebrew is the Holy Language for Israel, and Aramaic is the Holy Language for the Gentiles. Whether Jew or Gentile, therefore, should we *all* not study Aramaic?

# Aramaic and the Roman Empire

**I**N THE LAST few chapters, as we traced through the history of Aramaic from the very beginning of Creation down through the pages of the Old Testament, we have looked at the major Empires of the Bible, including the Assyrian Empire, the Babylonian Empire, the Medo-Persian Empire, and the Greek Empire.

We come now to look at the next – and final – Biblical empire, that is, the Roman Empire.

The Roman Empire is extremely important and interesting for Aramaic, because it was the Empire into which Jesus of Nazareth was born. These times are very important for Bible prophecy too, because they are the times in which the Temple in Jerusalem is destroyed by the Roman armies in A.D. 70, the destruction of Massada in A.D. 73, and Micah's prophecy that Jerusalem would be ploughed like a field, which happened in A.D. 135 under the Roman Emperor Hadrian, as a result of the Bar Kokhba Revolt.

The first prophecy that mentions the Roman Empire coming against God's people, Israel, is in the well-known chapter of the Blessings and the Cursings to the Jewish people in Deuteronomy chapter 28.

The Jews were told that if they obeyed God, they would be blessed with all manner of blessings. But if they disobeyed God, they would be cursed with even more cursing. This entire chapter outlines in incredible prophetic detail all the events surrounding the history of Israel and the Jewish people.

But, in particular, it also prophesies that the Roman Empire would come against Israel, and ultimately destroy it. We read in

Deuteronomy chapter 28:

**Deut. 28:48-52;** “Therefore shalt thou serve thine enemies which the LORD shall send against thee, in hunger, and in thirst, and in nakedness, and in want of all things: and he shall put a yoke of iron upon thy neck, until he have destroyed thee. The LORD shall bring a nation against thee from far, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flieth; a nation whose tongue thou shalt not understand; A nation of fierce countenance, which shall not regard the person of the old, nor shew favour to the young: And he shall eat the fruit of thy cattle, and the fruit of thy land, until thou be destroyed: which also shall not leave thee either corn, wine, or oil, or the increase of thy kine, or flocks of thy sheep, until he have destroyed thee. And he shall besiege thee in all thy gates, until thy high and fenced walls come down, wherein thou trustedst, throughout all thy land: and he shall besiege thee in all thy gates throughout all thy land, which the LORD thy God hath given thee.”

These verses foretell the following remarkable details:

- ➔ That nation would put a yoke of iron around the neck of Israel. Iron was the symbol of the Roman Empire. They made their weapons from iron, and talked about the iron might of Rome.
- ➔ That nation would come from afar – from Rome, from Italy, even further west than the Greek Empire.
- ➔ That nation would be as swift as the eagle flieth. The eagle was the banner of the Roman Empire when they went into battle.
- ➔ The Jews would not understand the language, or tongue, of the invading Romans. The Jews never spoke Latin, nor were they required to, even although the Romans ruled Israel for literally hundreds of years.
- ➔ That Roman Empire would be cruel to the Jews, and would persecute them heavily. The chapter goes on to foretell some of the horrifying details of what would happen in A.D. 70 under the Roman Empire.
- ➔ It foretold that the Roman Empire would besiege cities all

throughout the Land of Israel, including the Holy City, Jerusalem. Ultimately, Jerusalem would fall.

As we read through Micah's prophecy, it too foretells that Jerusalem would be destroyed. While the Romans in A.D. 70 only destroyed the Temple, the Romans in A.D. 135 destroyed Jerusalem entirely, flattening it and destroying it, and ploughing over Jerusalem like a field, to build the new Roman city, known as Aelia Capitolina. Reading from Micah chapter 3:

**Mic. 3:8-12;** "But truly I am full of power by the spirit of the LORD, and of judgment, and of might, to declare unto Jacob his transgression, and to Israel his sin. Hear this, I pray you, ye heads of the house of Jacob, and princes of the house of Israel, that abhor judgment, and pervert all equity. They build up Zion with blood, and Jerusalem with iniquity. The heads thereof judge for reward, and the priests thereof teach for hire, and the prophets thereof divine for money: yet will they lean upon the LORD, and say, Is not the LORD among us? none evil can come upon us. Therefore shall Zion for your sake be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps, and the mountain of the house as the high places of the forest."

The next two chapters, *A.D. 70 – The End of An Age* and *The Bar Kokhba Revolt*, discuss these events in more detail. They are fundamental to understanding many aspects of the interaction between Hebrew and Aramaic, but also understanding why we should expect very few Hebrew and Aramaic manuscripts from the first and second centuries A.D. from the Roman Empire. Quite simply, the Romans systematically destroyed everything they could find related to the Jews or Jewish writings.

And so, just like the Greek Empire before it, we have seen that the Roman Empire would come against the Land of Israel, to rule over it, and ultimately to destroy the Temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and soon thereafter to destroy Jerusalem utterly at the time of the Bar Kokhba Revolt.

But that is not all we read about, in the pages of the Holy Bible, related to the Roman Empire.

In previous chapters, we looked at king Nebuchadnezzar's prophetic dream in Daniel chapter 2.

**Dan. 2:31-36;** “Thou, O king, sawest, and behold a great image. This great image, whose brightness was excellent, stood before thee; and the form thereof was terrible. This image’s head was of fine gold, his breast and his arms of silver, his belly and his thighs of brass, His legs of iron, his feet part of iron and part of clay. Thou sawest till that a stone was cut out without hands, which smote the image upon his feet that were of iron and clay, and brake them to pieces. Then was the iron, the clay, the brass, the silver, and the gold, broken to pieces together, and became like the chaff of the summer threshing-floors; and the wind carried them away, that no place was found for them: and the stone that smote the image became a great mountain, and filled the whole earth. This is the dream; and we will tell the interpretation thereof before the king.”

Daniel goes on to explain that the head of gold was the Babylonian Empire with Nebuchadnezzar as its head, the breast and arms of silver represents the Medo-Persian Empire, and the belly and thighs of brass represent the Greek Empire. The legs of iron represented the Roman Empire, down through time, with the two halves of the Roman Empire in Rome and Constantinople.

Verse 40 tells us more about this fourth empire:

**v.40;** “And the fourth kingdom shall be strong as iron: forasmuch as iron breaketh in pieces and subdueth all things: and as iron that breaketh all these, shall it break in pieces and bruise.”

Again, we see a reference to iron, meaning the iron strength of the Roman Empire. It would break in pieces and bruise the Jewish people, in the Land of Israel.

As we go on to Daniel chapter 7, these empires of the Biblical world, described here as different metals, are instead portrayed as beasts, wild animals, rising up out of the sea – the Mediterranean.

That fourth kingdom, the Roman Empire, is described in terrifying terms:

**v.7-8;** “After this I saw in the night visions, and behold a fourth beast, dreadful and terrible, and strong exceedingly; and it had great iron teeth: it devoured and brake in pieces, and stamped the residue with the feet of it: and it was diverse from all the

beasts that were before it; and it had ten horns. I considered the horns, and, behold, there came up among them another little horn, before whom there were three of the first horns plucked up by the roots: and, behold, in this horn were eyes like the eyes of man, and a mouth speaking great things.”

That beast kingdom, the Roman Empire, is more terrifying than anything that had gone before it. It would destroy everything in its path. Although the full interpretation of the prophecy is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is a spectacular prophecy which describes the way that the Roman Empire would become the Holy Roman Empire, from which a blasphemous horn (or power) would arise which would oppose God, and act as though he was God.

That beast kingdom would not be replaced by another kingdom, and although it would change its form from legs of iron to feet of iron and clay, it would ultimately remain in power until the Ancient of Days cast down his Judgement Seat and judged the nations:

**Dan. 7:9-10;** “I beheld till the thrones were cast down, and the Ancient of days did sit, whose garment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like the pure wool: his throne was like the fiery flame, and his wheels as burning fire. A fiery stream issued and came forth from before him: thousand thousands ministered unto him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him: the judgment was set, and the books were opened.”

This, then, is the Roman Empire, as seen through the eyes of the Almighty God. Many look on the Roman Empire with respect, in the tremendous way that the Romans built roads, and viaducts, and were disciplined soldiers, and had incredible engineers who achieved many great things.

But through God’s eyes, from the perspective of the Truth and of the faithful saints who will ultimately inherit the earth, those Bible believers who have been faithful to the Scriptures of Truth down through the centuries, the Roman Empire is that fourth beast system, a terrifying monster that would crush underfoot the saints of the Living God – both faithful Jews and faithful Christians alike in the reigns of Nero and Domitian, to Titus and Vespasian who would destroy the Temple in Jerusalem and bring an end to the Law of Moses, to Hadrian who would plough Jerusalem like a field, and

emperors like Constantine who killed and destroyed anyone he disagreed with.

That fourth beast was more terrifying and destructive than anything that went before it, and it would change its form, but ultimately survive to become the feet of iron and clay, partly strong and partly weak, until Christ returns to destroy that wicked kingdom, and set up God's kingdom on this earth, with Jerusalem as its center.

And so, as we conclude this chapter on the Roman Empire, let us remind ourselves of the words of the prophecy in Deuteronomy. We saw earlier in chapter 28:

**Deut. 28:49-50;** "The LORD shall bring a nation against thee from far, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flieth; a nation whose tongue thou shalt not understand; A nation of fierce countenance..."

In this remarkable prophecy, written approximately one and a half thousand years before it happened, and divinely preserved down through time for the Jews to understand, Moses wrote that the Roman Empire would come against the Jews in the Land of Israel, and that the Jews would not understand the language that the Romans spoke.

And so, the Romans invaded the Land of Israel. The Romans were from Rome, from Italy. They spoke Latin. But even although the Romans ruled Israel with an iron fist for hundreds of years, and even though the Jews were subject to the Romans, the Jews never spoke Latin, they could not understand the Latin language, nor were they required to learn Latin. They no doubt knew a sprinkling of Latin words and phrases which became part of their everyday language, but they did not speak Latin as a daily language.

It is similar to the time when the Romans invaded Britain. The Romans ruled Britain for about four hundred years, and Latin words and phrases did become adopted into English to an extent, but the peoples of Britain did not actually speak Italian, or Latin, despite the presence of the Romans in the country for centuries.

And so, during the Assyrian, Babylonian and Medo-Persian Empires, the nations surrounding Israel all spoke Aramaic, while the Jews themselves had a fundamental shift from Hebrew to Aramaic

after the Babylonian exile. During the Greek Empire, some Greek words may well have entered into everyday language (such as the names of coins and words related to commerce) and some pockets of Greek speaking Jews did emerge, especially following the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes, as we saw in the chapter about the Maccabean Revolt. But the ordinary Jews, especially faithful Jews, continued to speak Aramaic as their everyday language, as well as Hebrew for reading the Hebrew Bible, for prayers, and worship in the Temple and synagogue (just as Jews do today!).

But Aramaic was the normal, everyday language. When the Romans came on the scene, the use of Aramaic only continued, because the citizens of the Roman Empire were not required or forced to learn Latin.

Aramaic continued, then, as a spoken language amongst the ordinary people for centuries, both amongst the Biblical nations surrounding Israel, and the Jews themselves.

Aramaic, therefore, is the backdrop through which we must see the Holy Scriptures, and especially the interactions between Israel and the nations in the pages of the Bible.

It is entirely natural, indeed unsurprising, that the New Testament should have been preserved in Aramaic. It was the obvious choice for a witness to be given to the nations, until Jesus the Messiah would return, to establish His Father's kingdom upon the earth.

Let us therefore appreciate Aramaic, learn Aramaic, and enjoy Aramaic – for it is the language that Jesus spoke. But let us also remember Hebrew, the Holy Language.

# A.D. 70 – The End of an Age

**I**N THE LAST chapter, we looked at the Roman Empire. We saw that the Roman Empire was the fourth beast system of Daniel's prophecy. It would crush underfoot the saints, devour and brake in pieces, and stamp on the residue. But in this chapter, we will discover one very important aspect of the Roman Empire which would shatter the Jewish world, bringing in repercussions down through time to the present day.

That Roman Empire would bring an end to the Jewish priesthood, to the Law of Moses. It would crush underfoot the saints – first with the killing of Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, then by persecuting and killing Christians to the death, and then by systematically killing Jews in a massive anti-Semitic assault across the whole of Israel from the north to the south, finally ending in the destruction of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70, followed by the destruction of the last stronghold of Jewish resistance at Masada, in A.D. 73.

These events are described in detail in the historian Josephus' famous description of these incredible and shocking events – *The Wars of the Jews*. Josephus was an eye-witness of these events. He personally started fighting against the might of the Roman army, but then later was captured and became the official historian for the Romans. Josephus' works provide harrowing details of the terrible events of the siege against Jerusalem, and the triumphant victory of the Romans against Jerusalem.

These events marked the end of an age – the age of Judah's commonwealth, the end of the Jewish priesthood, and the end of the Law of Moses. It became impossible to fulfil the Law of Moses,

because there was no priesthood. Jesus the Messiah had come to fulfil the Law and the Prophets, and he had done so in exact detail.

Let us begin our story by looking at these events first through the pages of Bible, through Bible prophecy, before we discover how these astonishing events were fulfilled through the eye-witness descriptions of Josephus and other historians at the time.

We begin our story by going back to the Law of Moses, to the book of Deuteronomy. Written around 1500 B.C., around one a half thousand years before the events described would take place, Deuteronomy chapter 28 lists the blessings and cursings that would befall the Jewish people.

The cursings provide exact details of how the Romans would come against Jerusalem, to destroy the city and take away the priesthood. But, in particular, it also prophesies that the Roman Empire would come against Israel, and ultimately destroy it. We read in Deuteronomy chapter 28:

**Deut. 28:48-57;** “Therefore shalt thou serve thine enemies which the LORD shall send against thee, in hunger, and in thirst, and in nakedness, and in want of all things: and he shall put a yoke of iron upon thy neck, until he have destroyed thee. The LORD shall bring a nation against thee from far, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flieth; a nation whose tongue thou shalt not understand; A nation of fierce countenance, which shall not regard the person of the old, nor shew favour to the young: And he shall eat the fruit of thy cattle, and the fruit of thy land, until thou be destroyed: which also shall not leave thee either corn, wine, or oil, or the increase of thy kine, or flocks of thy sheep, until he have destroyed thee. And he shall besiege thee in all thy gates, until thy high and fenced walls come down, wherein thou trustedst, throughout all thy land: and he shall besiege thee in all thy gates throughout all thy land, which the LORD thy God hath given thee. And thou shalt eat the fruit of thine own body, the flesh of thy sons and of thy daughters, which the LORD thy God hath given thee, in the siege, and in the straitness, wherewith thine enemies shall distress thee: So that the man that is tender among you, and very delicate, his eye shall be evil toward his brother, and toward the wife of his bosom, and toward the remnant of his children which he shall

leave: So that he will not give to any of them of the flesh of his children whom he shall eat: because he hath nothing left him in the siege, and in the straitness, wherewith thine enemies shall distress thee in all thy gates. The tender and delicate woman among you, which would not adventure to set the sole of her foot upon the ground for delicateness and tenderness, her eye shall be evil toward the husband of her bosom, and toward her son, and toward her daughter, And toward her young one that cometh out from between her feet, and toward her children which she shall bear: for she shall eat them for want of all things secretly in the siege and straitness, wherewith thine enemy shall distress thee in thy gates.”

Deuteronomy describes how the Roman Empire would come against the Jewish people, a nation from afar, as swift as the eagle flight, and put a yoke of iron around their neck. The “iron might” of Rome describes the Romans perfectly, answering to the iron legs of the Roman Empire in Nebuchadnezzar’s prophetic dream in Daniel chapter 2, which we have looked at previously. The eagle was the ensign, or banner, of the Roman army when they went to war. The passage describes the terrible siege against Jerusalem, when the people resorted to cannibalism out of utter desperation. These shocking events are all described in Josephus.

In Daniel chapter 9, further secrets are revealed about these events. Daniel was told the exact prophetic time period from when Nehemiah would re-build the walls of Jerusalem, after Ezra re-built the Temple – events which we have looked at in the chapter on the Medo-Persian Empire. After that time period expired (under a day for a year principle), the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, would be cut off (killed, that is, crucified) but not for himself (not for anything he had done wrong), and the Romans would then come and destroy the city (Jerusalem) and destroy the sanctuary (the Temple), and the end thereof would be with a flood (sudden and decisive, with huge numbers of people), and the war would cause desolations against Jerusalem. The end result would cause the sacrifice and oblation to cease, that is, the Jewish priesthood would be destroyed, and Law of Moses would come to an end.

Thus, we read the following in Daniel chapter 9:

**v.24-27;** “Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and

upon thy holy city, to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most Holy. Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem unto the Messiah the Prince shall be seven weeks, and threescore and two weeks: the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublous times. And after threescore and two weeks shall Messiah be cut off, but not for himself: and the people of the prince that shall come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary; and the end thereof shall be with a flood, and unto the end of the war desolations are determined. And he shall confirm the covenant with many for one week: and in the midst of the week he shall cause the sacrifice and the oblation to cease, and for the overspreading of abominations he shall make it desolate, even until the consummation, and that determined shall be poured upon the desolate.”

Many of the parables that Jesus told, shortly before his untimely end (before he would be “cut off” as Daniel had foretold) were also about the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Romans in A.D. 70.

Consider, for example, the parable of the vineyard.

**Matt. 21:33-43;** “Hear another parable: There was a certain householder, which planted a vineyard, and hedged it round about, and digged a winepress in it, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen, and went into a far country: And when the time of the fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the husbandmen, that they might receive the fruits of it. And the husbandmen took his servants, and beat one, and killed another, and stoned another. Again, he sent other servants more than the first: and they did unto them likewise. But last of all he sent unto them his son, saying, They will reverence my son. But when the husbandmen saw the son, they said among themselves, This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance. And they caught him, and cast him out of the vineyard, and slew him. When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen? They say unto him, He will

miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons. Jesus saith unto them, Did ye never read in the scriptures, The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner: this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes? Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof."

This parable refers to the way that the Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes of Jesus' day relentlessly persecuted both Jesus and the apostles, seeking to make sure that they would retain power for themselves. Once they kill the Son of the Father, Jesus himself, the heir in the parable, their doom is sealed. The king (God) would send his army to miserably destroy those wicked men.

We read more of the fate of those wicked people in the parable of the wedding guests, in Matthew chapter 22:

**Matt. 22:1-7;** "And Jesus answered and spake unto them again by parables, and said, The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son, And sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding: and they would not come. Again, he sent forth other servants, saying, Tell them which are bidden, Behold, I have prepared my dinner: my oxen and my fatlings are killed, and all things are ready: come unto the marriage. But they made light of it, and went their ways, one to his farm, another to his merchandise: And the remnant took his servants, and entreated them spitefully, and slew them. But when the king heard thereof, he was wroth: and he sent forth his armies, and destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city."

In the parable, the king (God) sent forth his armies (the Roman soldiers) to destroy those murderers (of his Son and the apostles) and burn up their city (Jerusalem).

As we read through Matthew 24 and Luke 21, which we shall do shortly, we find that these well-known passages also refer to the destruction of A.D. 70. They draw a parallel between what happened at A.D. 70 and similar events that will happen again in the latter days.

Before it happened, Deuteronomy chapter 28, Daniel chapter 9 and many of the parables of Jesus had foretold that Jesus the Messiah would be killed, that the destruction of Jerusalem would take place, that the city would be burned up and destroyed, that the Temple would be torn down stone from stone, that the daily sacrifice would be taken away, that the priesthood would come to an end, and that the Law of Moses would therefore (of necessity) also come to an end. The Old Covenant (the Law of Moses) had passed away, to be replaced with something better (the New Covenant, under Jesus). Other guests (the Gentiles) would be found for the wedding feast.

And so, with that introduction and background, let us examine more closely the destruction of A.D. 70. We shall not only look at the history of the period, but we shall also understand the significance and importance of these events in our story about Aramaic, the Bible's Second Holy Language. These events not only have profound significance to Jerusalem and the Jews, but they also have profound significance to the Aramaic and Hebrew manuscripts that can be found in Israel in the first and second centuries A.D.

In the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, Josephus estimates that almost 1.2 million people were killed. In a final end to the destruction of the Jews' aspirations to live as a free people in Israel under the Roman Empire, Masada was subsequently destroyed in A.D. 73. Masada was that fortress near En-Gedi close to the Dead Sea. It was the last bastion of Jewish resistance. Thus, forty years after the death of Jesus at the hands of the Romans, all Jewish resistance was destroyed, all hope had ended, and the law of Moses had come to an end.

Let us walk through Matthew chapter 24, where the events leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple are depicted in graphic detail. That coming terrible judgement was foretold by Jesus himself.

**Matt. 24:1-3;** “And Jesus went out, and departed from the temple: and his disciples came to him for to shew him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said unto them, See ye not all these things? verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down. And as he sat upon the mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him privately, saying, Tell us, when shall these things be? and what

shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?"

In these verses, as Jesus and the disciples looked across at the Temple from the Mount of Olives, the disciples beheld the Temple and its beautiful buildings. Jesus said that it would all be destroyed, speaking of the coming Roman invasion of A.D. 70, where one stone would not be left upon another. The disciples wanted to know when these things would happen – or, when the end of their world (or age) would be, that is, the age of the law of Moses.

Jesus told them that the events leading up to the A.D. 70 destruction would be a terrible time. It would be a time of great upheaval, and not a sudden event coming out of nowhere:

**Matt. 24:4-6;** "And Jesus answered and said unto them, Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many. And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet."

Jesus foretells that there would be wars and convulsions all across Israel before that end would come. He tells them things would get worse and worse, more and more painful, like a woman coming close to giving birth:

**v.7-8;** "For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places. All these are the beginning of sorrows."

Jesus told them that beforehand, they would face persecutions unto death. Think, for example, of the persecutions of Nero (A.D. 54-68), where he would mercilessly persecute Christians, blame Christians for the fire of Rome, and say they were everybody's enemy. Under Nero's cruel persecutions, nobody wanted to be accused of being either a Jew or a Christian. It meant only death.

**v.9-11;** "Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake. And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another. And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many."

Jesus told them that, because of these things, the love of many would

wax cold. Yet despite these persecutions, the gospel would be preached all across the Roman Empire – before that destruction of A.D. 70 would come. Ironically, in fact, persecution in Israel only made people flee and spread the gospel far and wide:

**v.12-14;** “And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold. But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.”

These events, then, were the general run-up to the final destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. But then Jesus tells the disciples of more specific things...

He says that there would be the “abomination of desolation”, which we shall look at shortly in this chapter.

**v.15;** “When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place, (whoso readeth, let him understand:)”

But he also says they would have a window of opportunity to flee:

**v.16-21;** “Then let them which be in Judaea flee into the mountains: Let him which is on the housetop not come down to take any thing out of his house: Neither let him which is in the field return back to take his clothes. And woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck in those days! But pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on the sabbath day: For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be.”

Christ tells them, that when that end comes, it will be very obvious:

**v.27;** “For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.”

He tells them that the eagles (the ensign of the Roman army in battle) would be gathering over the carcass of Israel, that is, over Jerusalem, which was now doomed to death and destruction:

**v.28;** “For wheresoever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together.”

It would be a time of massive spiritual and political upheaval:

**v.29;** “Immediately after the tribulation of those days shall the sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken...”

Let us now look at the historian Josephus, and the historical fulfilling of these amazing events. Here is a timeline, showing the violent and dramatic events leading up to the destruction in A.D. 70.

- In A.D. 33-34, Stephen was martyred, and Christians across the Roman Empire, and especially in Israel, were heavily persecuted.
- In A.D. 41, Caligula, that psychopathic emperor, was murdered – answering to the wars and rumours of wars that would follow.
- In A.D. 43, Emperor Claudius starts conquest of Britain, leading to Boudicca’s revolt in A.D. 60. There would be wars and rumours of wars in distant lands.
- In A.D. 54, the Emperor Claudius was poisoned by his wife, succeeded by her son Nero, another psychopath.
- In A.D. 59, the Emperor Nero orders the death of his mother.
- In A.D. 60, Nero murders his wife.
- In A.D. 62, we have the murder of “James the Just”, who was Christ’s brother.
- In A.D. 64, the Great fire of Rome broke out, and Nero blamed Christians for starting it.
- In A.D. 65, Nero murders his second wife.
- In A.D. 66, the Roman procurator of Judea, Gessius Florus, murders 3,600 Jews (crucifying about 2,000) in May. Christians flee Judea.

By this time, as recorded in Josephus’ *The Wars of the Jews*, the Romans started a massive campaign of killing Jews across the Land of Israel, starting in the north (in the Galilee) and working their way southwards. Immense numbers of Jews were killed. Everywhere they were found, Jewish books and Hebrew scrolls are burnt in

massive quantities.

The Jewish Revolt against Rome begins with massacre of the Jerusalem Roman garrison in October of that year (A.D. 66). The Romans of Caesarea kill 20,000 Jews.

The Jewish army (the Zealots) defeats and massacres the Roman garrison at Masada. The Romans, in just a few short years, came back for revenge, leading to the destruction of Masada in A.D. 73.

Meanwhile, the Gentiles of Damascus massacred 10,000 Jews. Roman-occupied cities across Judea, Samaria, Egypt, Syria and Asia attack Jews en-masse. The Jews even fought each other. There were three different factions, with each leader claiming to be ‘messiah.’ It was exactly as Jesus had earlier foretold in Matthew chapter 24 and Luke chapter 21, as we read earlier.

In March, A.D. 66, numerous earthquakes and signs in the heavens are recorded by historians. Josephus records:

“Besides these [signs], a few days after that feast, on the one-and-twentieth day of the month Artemisius, [Iyar,] a certain prodigious and incredible phenomenon appeared; I suppose the account of it would seem to be a fable, were it not related by those that saw it, and were not the events that followed it of so considerable a nature as to deserve such signals; for, before sun-setting, chariots and troops of soldiers in their armour were seen running about among the clouds, and surrounding of cities. Moreover, at that feast which we call Pentecost, as the priests were going by night into the inner [court of the] temple, as their custom was, to perform their sacred ministrations, they said that, in the first place, they felt a quaking, and heard a great noise, and after that they heard a sound as of a great multitude, saying, “Let us remove hence” (*The Jewish Wars*, VI-V-3).

“A supernatural apparition was seen, too amazing to be believed. What I am now to relate would, I imagine, be dismissed as imaginary, had this not been vouched for by eyewitnesses, then followed by subsequent disasters that deserved to be thus signalized. For before sunset chariots were seen in the air over the whole country, and armed battalions speeding through the clouds and encircling the cities.” (rendered in Chilton)

Tacitus, the Roman historian in A.D. 115, records:

“Prodigies had occurred, but their expiation by the offering of victims or solemn vows is held to be unlawful by a nation which is the slave of superstition and the enemy of true beliefs. In the sky appeared a vision of armies in conflict, of glittering armour. A sudden lightning flash from the clouds lit up the Temple. The doors of the holy place abruptly opened, a superhuman voice was heard to declare that the gods were leaving it, and in the same instant came the rushing tumult of their departure. Few people placed a sinister interpretation upon this. The majority were convinced that the ancient scriptures of their priests alluded to the present as the very time when the Orient would triumph and from Judaea would go forth men destined to rule the world.” (Histories, Book 5, v. 13).

In May, A.D. 66, the Roman Procurator Florus demanded 17 talents from the Jewish Temple treasury. This was the event which triggered insult for the Jews to begin their revolt. The Roman garrison in Jerusalem was overrun by rebels (Zealots), who took control of the city. The rebels cause cessation of all sacrifices to the Roman Emperor, thus challenging Rome head-on. But this was merely the beginning of the end for the Jews.

Florus, the Roman Governor, could not control the situation, so the (Roman) Syrian Governor, Cestius Gallus, is called in to subdue the rebellion. He attacks Jerusalem, gets up to the walls of the city, then unexpectedly withdraws, suffering heavy losses in retreat.

This was what Matthew 24 means by saying, when you see the abomination of desolation, when Jerusalem is circled by armies, that was the time to flee. There was now a window of opportunity for the faithful Jews and Christians to retreat.

After the withdrawal of Gallus and the Battle of Beth-horon (a battle against the Jews, which the Romans lost), a great number of people fled the city of Jerusalem, and headed east over the Jordan River to safety in the area of Pella, Jordan. Early Christian settlements sprung up all over the Roman Decapolis. During the flight out, a large number of documents were hidden in the Dead Sea area along the route, to become the Dead Sea Scrolls that we know of today.

In A.D. 67, General Vespasian and his son Titus come across the

Euphrates River. They arrived in Judea from Syria with four Roman legions to destroy the Jewish revolt. Vespasian and the Roman army instigate a campaign of terror against Jews, killing Jews everywhere, starting from Galilee and working their way southwards.

Meanwhile, there were revolts against Rome in Gaul and Spain. Again, we see wars and rumours of wars.

In A.D. 68-69, known in history as “The Year of Four Emperors”, Nero committed suicide and was succeeded by Galba, Otho, and Vitellius who was succeeded by General Vespasian. Vespasian is named Emperor by Roman Senate.

Around this time, the Roman army destroyed Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found.

In March of A.D. 70, General Titus began the siege of Jerusalem. Josephus says that the siege started at Passover, when the highest possible number of Jews from all the surrounding area would be in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover.

The destruction itself is a long and fascinating story – but it was horrific for the Jews. They had no food. They were desperate. They resorted to cannibalism, just as Deuteronomy chapter 28 had said. Any caught escaping were crucified – up to 500 per day. There were so many crucifixions, in fact, that the Romans ran out of wood. Inside, any Jews who suggesting surrender as an option, were killed by the Zealots.

The Temple, and Jerusalem itself, were destroyed by the Roman army on the 9th day of the Hebrew month Av. The 9th of Av has ever since been a day of mourning for Jews. Ironically, it was the very same day that the First Temple had been destroyed by the Babylonian Empire, in 586 B.C. as we saw in the chapters on the Babylonian Empire and the Babylonian Exile.

When the Temple was set on fire, a single Roman soldier threw a firebrand into one of the Temple’s windows, starting a raging fire. As the temple burned, the Romans looted it and massacred the defenders. Titus passed through a curtained opening, and entered the Holy of Holies. It was the desecration spoken of by Daniel the prophet, as mentioned in Jesus’ earlier prophecy in Matthew chapter 24.

Josephus estimated the dead of Jerusalem to be 1,197,000, much higher than normal because so many Jews had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. He estimates that 97,000 Jews who survived the revolt were sold into slavery. Tacitus (Roman historian) says Jerusalem had 600,000 Jews when it fell. These were truly immense numbers, given the smaller population of the world at that time.

September 11th, with the Twin Towers disaster, is a day of mourning for Americans. On that fateful day, three thousand American civilians were killed. But on Jerusalem's day of mourning, in comparison, 1.2 million were killed. The destruction of Jerusalem was four hundred times greater. The destruction was so complete, and so horrifying, that it is difficult to comprehend. It was almost certainly the largest single destruction there had ever been in the history of the world, save only for the destruction of Noah's flood.

These, then, are the events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem, and the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, in A.D. 70. It was the end of an age. There was no priesthood after that fateful day. It became impossible to keep the Law of Moses.

But what is the significance of these events, as we continue our journey through time, looking at Aramaic down through the centuries?

We need to understand the enormity of the destruction that the Romans unleashed on Jerusalem, and Israel generally, and on the Jews in particular. That Roman Empire was the fourth beast system of Daniel's prophecy. To quote from Daniel chapter 7:

v. 7; "After this I saw in the night visions, and behold a fourth beast, dreadful and terrible, and strong exceedingly; and it had great iron teeth: it devoured and brake in pieces, and stamped the residue with the feet of it: and it was diverse from all the beasts that were before it; and it had ten horns."

That Roman Empire destroyed, without mercy, everything to do with God and the people of God. Jews were killed almost without number. Christians were killed and persecuted without mercy by Caligula, Nero, Domitian, and other Roman Emperors.

As the Roman army swept through the Land of Israel, they destroyed everything in their path. Jews and Christians alike were

destroyed, because in those early days the Romans regarded Christianity as just another Jewish sect. Not only were Jews and Christians literally crucified and burnt to death and cities set on fire everywhere, but all Jewish and Christian books and scrolls alike were burnt. Everything that looked Jewish, whether it was Hebrew or Aramaic, was consigned to the flames. The Romans wanted it all destroyed. The Romans did not care whether what they set on fire was the Hebrew scrolls on the Old Testament, or the Aramaic writings of the New Testament. It all looked alike to them.

And so, we should expect that any existing copies of the Hebrew Bible or the Aramaic New Testament from the first century, in Israel, would have been set on fire and destroyed by the Romans. We should not expect anything to survive.

But God's Hand is always at work in human history. The Hebrew Bible survived. Copies were spread far and wide across the Jewish world, and copies were safely protected in the caves around the Dead Sea, near Qumran, to become what we now call the Dead Sea Scrolls.

And in the case of the Aramaic New Testament, as we shall discuss in a number of other chapters, the Aramaic New Testament was preserved and protected. Shortly after the death of Jesus, it was copied into the Estrangela script and taken north of Israel. It was not only free from persecution by the Roman armies, but the Estrangela script does not look like the Ashuri script. It looks different. And therefore, even if the Romans were aware of it, they did not systematically destroy it. God's Word, in the Aramaic New Testament, survived the destruction of A.D. 70 by going north to Syria, and spreading eastwards – outside of the cruel persecutions of the Roman Empire in the Land of Israel. God's guiding hand in history truly is a miracle. God's Word will be preserved, regardless of what man may try to do.

And as we shall see in our next chapter, The Bar-Kokhba Revolt, the persecution of Jews in the Land of Israel would continue for almost another century. Banished from Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the Jews would slowly come back, to form yet another revolt under the Emperor Hadrian. Hadrian put down that revolt, too, at the loss of even more Jewish blood. Copies of anything to do with Jews and Christians, in Hebrew and Aramaic, was burnt (again). But, yet again, the Word of

God survived. The Word of God lived on, divinely preserved, down through time, even to the present day.

God's Word is indeed a miracle. It survives all attempts to destroy it. As its enemies go down to their graves, the Word of God survives. As those who try to destroy it are themselves destroyed, still the Word of God lives on. Everything else passes on – but the Word of God endures forever. All things are mortal – except for the Word of God. The Assyrian Empire, the Babylonian Empire, the Medo-Persian Empire, the Greek Empire, and now the Roman Empire – all have come and gone, but the Word of God is still living, breathing, and with us to this day. Blessed be the Word of the Lord.

May God bless us as we study His Word.

# The Bar Kokhba Revolt

**I**N THE LAST chapter, we looked at the Jewish Wars with the Romans in the first century, leading up to the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70., as described by the historian Josephus in his amazing history of these events, *The Wars of the Jews*.

The events of A.D. 70, as well as the fall of Masada in A.D. 73, had massive repercussions for the Jewish people. Forty years after the death of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, the Messiah, destruction came on the Jews – exactly as the prophecy in Deuteronomy chapter 28 said would happen. As we saw in our last chapter, these events were all recorded beforehand by the prophets of Israel – throughout the book of Daniel, in Micah, as well as Deuteronomy.

Josephus records that in the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and the destruction of the Temple, almost 1.2 million Jews were killed. With the exception of Noah's flood, this had to have been the largest single loss of life in human history, especially with a world population a fraction of what it is today. With the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the priesthood could no longer continue. This meant that the Law of Moses had ended. After A.D. 70, it was impossible to keep the Law of Moses.

These events have a direct bearing on the Hebrew and Aramaic scrolls and manuscripts we would expect to find in Israel, in the first and second centuries A.D. Not only did the Romans kill hundreds of thousands of people, of Jews, but they also destroyed everything related to the Jews that they could find. Emperors like Nero destroyed everything related to Christians too. As the Romans wreaked their campaign of terror across Israel, they burned villages, destroyed yeshivas (religious schools), killed men, women and children, and burned all Hebrew and Aramaic scrolls and manuscripts they could find. Nothing was spared.

Therefore, when people look for the oldest known manuscripts and fragments of the Holy Bible, whether the Old Testament or the New Testament, we should not expect to find anything in Israel, dating to the first and second centuries. The Romans systematically destroyed all Hebrew and Aramaic documents they could find, whether belonging to Jews or Christians (the early converts from Judaism). While many manuscripts were stored away safely in the numerous caves around the Dead Sea, to become the Dead Sea Scrolls that we know of today, the earliest fragments of the Old and New Testaments often arise outside of Israel.

And so, the destruction of A.D. 70 was utterly devastating. It resulted in the destruction of the Temple, the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans, and the loss of Jewish life on a scale that is almost impossible to comprehend.

But as if that was not enough, worse was to come. Just as the cursings in Deuteronomy chapter 28 had said would happen, still worse was to befall the Jewish people.

After the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, the Zealots – those who still wanted to rise up and defeat the Romans, and gain back their homeland – fled to Masada, a fortified mountain-top near the Dead Sea. Knowing that this was the last bastion of Jewish resistance, the Romans knew they had to destroy it. Otherwise, there would always be a remnant of Jews who could rise again. And so, the Roman army camped around Masada with 15,000 troops, and for many long months they besieged it. In a fascinating story which is outside the scope of this chapter, in A.D. 73, Masada fell to the Romans. The ruins can still be visited to this day. History records that the remaining Jews, around one thousand in total, committed mass suicide rather than be crucified, or raped, or tortured, or killed, or become slaves to the Romans, as had happened to so many of their loved ones. The story is a tragic one, of how a religious people wanted to remain free to worship the God of Heaven.

And so, after these terrible events, the Jews had no homeland. They had no priesthood. They found no rest for the soles of their feet. They were persecuted everywhere they went. They were banished from Jerusalem, and the Temple destroyed.

But still the Jewish people yearned to return to their homeland

again. They still yearned for Jerusalem. They still yearned to fight against the Romans, to regain Jerusalem, to re-build the Temple again, and to establish the priesthood, and the Law of Moses.

This has been the hope and yearning of the Jewish people ever since, as recorded in the heartfelt words of Israeli national anthem:

*As long as in the heart, within,  
A Jewish soul still yearns,  
And onward, towards the east, eastwards,  
An eye gazes toward Zion;  
Our hope is not yet perished,  
The hope of two thousand years,  
To be a free people in our own land,  
The land of Zion... and Jerusalem.*

And so, following the terrible destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D. 70 and the end of the last stronghold of rebellion at Masada in A.D. 73, Jews in general, and the Zealots in particular, did not give up on their dream of returning to Jerusalem and re-establishing the Temple and the priesthood once again.

Slowly, steadily, over the coming years Jews returned to the Land of Israel. They could no longer offer sacrifices or obey the Law of Moses – but at least they could return and live in Israel.

After the passage of many decades, as the numbers of Jews able to come back to Israel and live in Jerusalem increased, as Jews felt that yearning to re-establish Jerusalem as their capital once again, and to re-build and re-establish the Temple from the Roman army just as their Maccabean ancestors has done with the Greek army around two hundred years earlier, steadily the pressure to fight the Romans became stronger and stronger.

Let us briefly catch up with the history of the Roman Empire, from the time of Jesus, through the persecutions of Nero, the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, and onwards to the Bar Kokhba Revolt.

At the time of Jesus, Tiberius (A.D. 14-37) was the Roman Emperor.

Then we have:

- ➔ the insane Caligula (A.D. 37-41),
- ➔ the sick but probably sane Claudius (A.D. 41-54),

- ➔ the psychopathic Emperor Nero (A.D. 54-68) who probably started the Great Fire of Rome and is renowned for his merciless persecution of Christians,
- ➔ the Year of the Four Emperors in which three Emperors (Galba, Otho and Vitellius) were all either murdered or committed suicide, followed by
- ➔ Vespasian (A.D. 69-79) who destroyed the Temple in A.D. 70 when he conquered Jerusalem,
- ➔ Titus (A.D. 70-81), the son of Vespasian,
- ➔ the insane and psychopathic Domitian (A.D. 81-96) who again mercilessly persecuted Jews and Christians,
- ➔ Nerva (A.D. 96-98),
- ➔ Trajan (A.D. 98-117), until finally, the reign of
- ➔ Hadrian, from A.D. 117-138.

After the brutal and tyrannical reigns of those previous Roman Emperors, Hadrian is generally regarded by history as a “good” Emperor, and according to Edward Gibbon (the author of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*) his reign marks the start of “The Age of the Antonines”, a period of relative calm and peace for the Roman Empire, answering to the White Horse period of the Roman Empire, foretold in the prophecy of Revelation chapter 6:1-2. We read:

**Rev. 6:1-2;** “And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals, and I heard, as it were the noise of thunder, one of the four beasts saying, Come and see. And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer.”

Following that earlier period of bloodshed, murders, suicides, tyrannical persecutions and insanity, Hadrian, then, marks that period of the Roman Empire which entered a period of peace, where the Roman Empire went forth to conquer. The white horse with a bow signifies the Roman Empire conquering through Pax Romana – the Peace of Rome.

This Emperor Hadrian is the same Emperor who, early in his reign, built Hadrian’s Wall in Britain, that massive stone defensive wall

which broadly separates Scotland from England. The north of England, at Hadrian's Wall, marked the farthest northern extent of the Roman Empire.

But, under Emperor Hadrian, the Jews once again rebelled against Roman rule. That tragic event led to what is known as the Bar-Kokhba Revolt, from A.D. 132-136, in the middle of Emperor Hadrian's reign. While the Jews inflicted heavy casualties on the Roman armies, as the prophecy in Revelation chapter 6 had foretold, the Roman Empire was now in the White Horse Period. It was the white horse on whom sat an archer with a bow. A crown was given unto him, and he would go forth conquering and to conquer.

The result, tragically, was once again the total annihilation of the Jewish forces at the hand of the Roman armies. Once again, the numbers would be staggering. The Wikipedia article on the Bar Kokhba Revolt suggests that, alongside massive Roman military casualties, some 580,000 Jews were killed, along with the destruction of 50 fortified towns and 985 villages being razed to the ground.

The blow was so severe that Jews were permanently banished from Jerusalem, never to return in significant numbers until the latter days, when in 1948, the Jewish people declared the State of Israel. In 1967, following the Six Day War, Jerusalem would once again be in the hands of Israel, in preparation for the coming of their Messiah.

Whereas in the destruction of A.D. 70, the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, in A.D. 135, the Romans went one stage further. Jerusalem, the Holy City, was utterly and completely destroyed. It was razed to the ground, ploughed over like a field, and the Romans re-built a completely new Roman city on its ploughed ruins. That new city was known as Aelia Capitolina. It was the New Jerusalem. It was dedicated to the gods of Rome, rather than the God of Israel.

All these events, of course, were long ago foretold by the prophets of Israel. As it is written in the prophet Amos:

**Amos 3:7;** "Surely the Lord GOD will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets."

And so, hundreds of years before it came to pass, Micah had foretold that that Jerusalem would be destroyed, that Jerusalem would be flattened completely, that Jerusalem – the Holy City – would be

ploughed over like a field. Reading from Micah chapter 3:

**Mic. 3:8-12;** “But truly I am full of power by the spirit of the LORD, and of judgment, and of might, to declare unto Jacob his transgression, and to Israel his sin. Hear this, I pray you, ye heads of the house of Jacob, and princes of the house of Israel, that abhor judgment, and pervert all equity. They build up Zion with blood, and Jerusalem with iniquity. The heads thereof judge for reward, and the priests thereof teach for hire, and the prophets thereof divine for money: yet will they lean upon the LORD, and say, Is not the LORD among us? none evil can come upon us. Therefore shall Zion for your sake be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps, and the mountain of the house as the high places of the forest.”

Thus, the Bar Kokhba Revolt ended up as a disaster for the Jewish people. Having lost the Temple in A.D. 70. They now lost the Holy City, Jerusalem. Jews were banished from ever again entering Jerusalem. Jerusalem was destroyed, flattened, ploughed over, and rebuilt as a Roman city. It remained that way for centuries. Prior to Jerusalem once again being in the hands of the Jewish people after the Six Day War in 1967, the closest Jews ever got to the Temple was the Western Wall in Jerusalem – the remains of the massive wall that Herod had built around the Temple before the Romans destroyed it in A.D. 70. Today, that Western Wall is an iconic image in modern-day Jerusalem. It is nearly all that remains from the vast destruction by the Romans.

The Temple in A.D. 70 was destroyed on the 9th day of the Hebrew month Av. The destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian Empire also took place on the 9th of Av. When the Romans finally conquered Jerusalem again under the Bar Kokhba Revolt, it too happened on the 9th of Av. Many other tragedies have also befallen the Jewish people on the 9th of Av. It has been a national day of mourning ever since.

But let us return to the Bar Kokhba Revolt, to discover some more about those tragic events. The Revolt was led by Simon Bar Kokhba, hence the name. Let us provide some quotes from the Wikipedia article on the subject, to provide a flavour of how horrifying these events were. We read:

“The Bar Kokhba revolt resulted in an extensive depopulation of Judean Jewish communities, more so than the Great Revolt of Judea of 70 CE. Despite easing persecution of Jews following Hadrian’s death in 138 CE, the Romans barred Jews from Jerusalem, except for attendance in Tisha B’Av. [The 9th of Av, the date of the destruction of the Temple]. The Jewish community of Judea was devastated in events some scholars describe as a genocide.”

Mainstream Jews hailed Simon Bar Kokhba as the Messiah, just as Jesus had promised would happen when he said in Matthew chapter 24 that “false Messiahs will appear...” But interestingly, we then read:

“Although Jewish Christians hailed Jesus as the Messiah and did not support Bar Kokhba, they were barred from Jerusalem along with the rest of the Jews. The war and its aftermath helped differentiate Christianity as a religion distinct from Judaism.”

Thus, importantly, the Romans did not differentiate between truly Jewish believers, and Jewish converts to Christianity (i.e. those who believed Jesus was the Messiah), and converts to Christianity from the Gentiles, the nations surrounding Israel. To the Romans, both Jews and Christians alike were the enemy, to be destroyed, and their Holy Writings burned. Caligula, Nero and Domitian are well known in history for their persecution of Christians. Vespasian, Titus and Hadrian are well known in history for their persecution of Jews.

But together, Hebrew and Aramaic scrolls, documents and manuscripts, whether of a Jewish or Christian character, were destroyed and burnt by the Romans. Thus, while many people ask the question, “What is the earliest known Hebrew or Aramaic originals?”, we cannot really expect to find any “original” Hebrew or Aramaic manuscripts arising out of Israel, out of Roman Judea or Roman Palestine, in the first and second centuries A.D. The Romans simply destroyed whatever they could find. The Dead Sea Scrolls provide us with an insight into what was available at the time, but they are all that was rescued from the destruction.

As we continue to read the Wikipedia article, the following quotes provide an insight into the terrible destruction:

“The reasons [for the Revolt] seem to centre around the

proscription of circumcision, the construction of a new city, Aelia Capitolina, over the ruins of Jerusalem, and the erection of a temple to Jupiter on the Temple mount.”

“Works on Aelia Capitolina, as Jerusalem was to be called, commenced in 131 CE. The governor of Judea, Tineius Rufus, performed the foundation ceremony, which involved ploughing over the designated city limits. “Ploughing up the Temple”, seen as a religious offence, turned many Jews against the Roman authorities. The Romans issued a coin inscribed Aelia Capitolina.”

Simon Bar Kokhba started the revolt from the city of Modi'in – the same city in Israel from which the priest Mattathias and his sons, including one called Simon, had earlier started the Maccabean Revolt.

“Eusebius of Caesarea wrote that Christians were killed and suffered “all kinds of persecutions” at the hands of Jews when they refused to help Bar Kokhba against the Roman troops.”

Thus, the Bar Kokhba Revolt was likely to be one of several factors involved in Christianity and Judaism parting and going their separate ways. Prior to this, the Romans treated Jews and Christians as much the same. But after this, the Romans continued to despise Jews, and Christianity gained a more favoured place, leading up to the Emperor Constantine converting to Christianity.

Quoting from Wikipedia again:

“The Jerusalem Talmud relates that the number of dead in Betar was enormous, that the Romans “went on killing until their horses were submerged in blood to their nostrils.” According to a Rabbinic midrash, in addition to Bar Kokhba himself, the Romans executed eight leading members of the Sanhedrin... The Rabbinic account describes agonizing tortures: R. Akiba was flayed, R. Ishmael had the skin of his head pulled off slowly, and R. Hanania was burned at a stake, with wet wool held by a Torah scroll wrapped around his body to prolong his death.”

“According to Cassius Dio [a Roman historian]... 580,000 Jews were killed in the overall operations, and 50 fortified towns and 985 villages were razed to the ground, with many more Jews

dying of famine and disease.”

“He [Hadrian] prohibited the Torah law and the Hebrew calendar, and executed Judaic scholars. The sacred scroll was ceremonially burned on the Temple Mount. At the former Temple sanctuary, he installed two statues, one of Jupiter, another of himself. In an attempt to erase any memory of Judea or Ancient Israel, he wiped the name off the map and replaced it with Syria Palaestina. By destroying the association of Jews to Judea and forbidding the practice of Jewish faith, Hadrian aimed to root out a nation that inflicted heavy casualties on the Roman Empire. Similarly, he re-established Jerusalem, but now as the Roman pagan polis of Aelia Capitolina, and Jews were forbidden from entering it, except on the day of Tisha B’Av [or the 9th of Av].”

Following the Bar Kokhba Revolt, Jews and Judaism fundamentally changed. Whereas before, Jews, Jerusalem and Judaism were all intimately connected and focused around the keeping of the Law of Moses and the Temple in Jerusalem, after the destruction, Judaism (of necessity) became a more “portable” religion centred around synagogues. Rabbinic Judaism prevailed, and the centres of Jewish learning became the Galilee (where enough Jews remained) and the Babylonian Jewish community. Jews were now a dispersed people, and the Jewish diaspora had begun.

Wikipedia continues:

“Modern historians view the Bar-Kokhba Revolt as being of decisive historic importance. The massive destruction and loss of life occasioned by the revolt has led some scholars such as Bernard Lewis to date the beginning of the Jewish diaspora from this date. They note that, unlike the aftermath of the First Jewish–Roman War chronicled by Josephus, the majority of the Jewish population of Judea was either killed, exiled, or sold into slavery after the Bar-Kokhba Revolt, and Jewish religious and political authority was suppressed far more brutally. After the revolt, the Jewish religious center shifted to the Babylonian Jewish community and its scholars. Judea would not be a center of Jewish religious, cultural, or political life again until the modern era, although Jews continued to live there and important religious developments still occurred there. In Galilee,

the Jerusalem Talmud was compiled in the 2nd–4th centuries.”

In considering the Bar Kokhba Revolt in relation to the Hebrew and Aramaic languages, we find that Hebrew and Aramaic were both used at this time. Archaeologists such as Yigael Yadin suggest that there was a resurgence of Hebrew at this time. This would be entirely natural, since the Jews were fiercely nationalistic and patriotic and wanted to regain Jerusalem as their Holy City, to restore worship at the Temple, and to re-establish the Law of Moses. As well as a longing for those things, a longing for Hebrew would not be surprising.

But still, Aramaic was heavily used, even amongst those patriotic Zealots. This is perhaps exemplified by the very name of the revolt itself – it is recorded in history as the Bar Kokhba Revolt. This is Aramaic, in the use of the Aramaic *bar* (for ‘son’) rather than the Hebrew *ben*, and the Aramaic *kokhba* (for star), rather than the Hebrew *kokhav*. In fact, the Talmud records that while at first the Jews had hailed Simon Bar Kokhba as their Messiah at the start of the Revolt, when the revolt decisively failed, his name was changed from Bar *Kokhba* (“the Son of a *Star*” in Aramaic) to Bar *Koziva* (“the Son of a *Lie*”, also in Aramaic).

Thus, the debate whether Hebrew or Aramaic was “the spoken language at the time” will no doubt continue. The evidence is that both were spoken languages. Religious Jews, or Zealots, no doubt longed for Hebrew to be the predominant language again, just as they longed for the Law of Moses to be established in the Temple again and Jerusalem to be the Holy City again, but ever since the Babylonian exile, they were fighting a losing battle against the rising tide of the Aramaic language.

Both Hebrew and Aramaic are important languages. Hebrew will always remain the Holy Language of the Jews, the language in which God Himself gave the Law of Moses, the preferred language of patriarchs, the spoken language of Moses, the language spoken by all the prophets of Israel and the kings of Israel, and the Holy Language in which the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible was divinely revealed and preserved.

But Aramaic is Judaism’s second Holy Language, the language of the nations around Israel in Biblical times, the language in which the

divine message was revealed to the Gentiles, and the Holy Language of the New Testament.

Hebrew and Aramaic together are the original Holy Languages of the Holy Scriptures. We should honour them both, learn them both, and respect them both. Like Jew and Gentile, they are like two brethren dwelling together down through time. Let us not cause division between these two holy brethren, and may we pray for that blessing for them to dwell together in unity, as we are exhorted in Psalm 133:

**Psa. 133:1-3;** "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments; As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the LORD commanded the blessing, even life for evermore."

In conclusion, Aramaic and Hebrew are both important languages. They are both the Holy Languages of the Scriptures.

Let them dwell together in unity!

As spoken by David at the death of Saul and Jonathan:

**2Sam. 1:23;** "Saul and Jonathan were lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their death they were not divided: they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions."

Thus, Hebrew and Aramaic are lovely and pleasant in their lives. In the death of so many Jews during the Bar Kokhba Revolt, they were not divided. They were swifter than eagles, and stronger than lions.

Behold how good and how pleasant it is for Hebrew and Aramaic to dwell together in unity! Let them not be divided!

# Aramaic, Hebrew and the Greek Septuagint Translation

**A** NUMBER OF chapters in this book have already provided solid evidence to show that, contrary to popular belief, Aramaic, rather than Greek, was the commonly spoken language across the Middle East.

Despite this evidence, however, many people still promote the idea that Greek was the normal, everyday, spoken language in Egypt and across the whole Middle East in general, at the time of Christ. While there certainly were small pockets of Greek speakers (as we will see in the chapter *Aramaic – The Language of Egypt*), who are referred to in the New Testament as Grecian Jews, Aramaic was still the predominant language of Egypt.

Nevertheless, some people might point to the Septuagint, or LXX, as evidence that Greek must surely have been spoken widely enough for the Hebrew Old Testament to have been translated into Greek. (The Septuagint, of course, is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, made in Alexandria in Egypt, and supposedly carried out in 250 B.C.)

While a study of the Septuagint is obviously beyond the scope of this book, combating the myths and misconceptions that have grown up around the Septuagint is definitely important to a fuller understanding of Aramaic. In particular, the relative importance of Greek and Aramaic, and the extent to which these languages were used, and where and why they were spoken, is critical to an

understanding of the background to the New Testament.

With these points in mind, let us take a closer look at the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, and determine where, why, and when it was translated.

To start with, it is important to understand three crucial points:

- First, only the Torah (the five books of Moses, or the Jewish Law) was translated into Greek at this time, and not the whole of the Hebrew Old Testament! The canon of the Hebrew Bible would not be fixed for another 300 years, around the time of the Council of Jamnia at the end of the first century A.D.
- Secondly, the date of 250 B.C. is widely accepted as being far too early. In his extremely detailed and well-researched book *The Text of the Old Testament*, Ernst Würthwein puts the correct date around 185 B.C. or earlier, which is contemporary with the Maccabean revolt, and the imposition of Greek language and culture on the Jews.
- Thirdly, the Torah was translated into Greek not because Jews **needed** it, but because King Ptolemy **wanted** it; he wanted copies in Greek, of all the books in the world, for his personal library in Egypt!

However, let us return to the Jewish scholar and historian of the day, Josephus, to paint a picture of these events. Josephus records the facts as he understood them in his day, without the pious myths and fables that the Church Fathers would add over the following four or five centuries.

The following, then, is the account of the early history of the Greek translation of the Hebrew Torah, by Ptolemy II, taken from Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews*:

1:10 "I found, therefore, that the second of the Ptolemies was a king who was extraordinarily diligent in what concerned learning, and the collection of books; that he was also peculiarly ambitious to procure a translation of our law, and of the constitution of our government therein contained, into the Greek tongue."

As stated earlier, this passage shows that King Ptolemy wanted the translation of the Jewish Law (the Torah) into Greek. The Jews themselves did not request it. They did not need it. The translation into Greek was for a pagan king, and was only of the Torah, the Five Books of Moses, and not the entire Old Testament as is commonly promulgated.

But Josephus goes on to say:

12:12 “Demetrius Phalerius, who was library keeper to the king, was now endeavouring, if it were possible, to gather together all the books that were in the habitable earth, and buying whatever was anywhere valuable, or agreeable to the king’s inclination, (who was very earnestly set upon collecting of books,) to which inclination of his Demetrius was zealously subservient.”

This passage shows that the translation into Greek was because Ptolemy wanted copies of all books, everywhere. Jews neither wanted nor requested this translation.

12:13 “And when once Ptolemy asked him how many ten thousands of books he had collected, he replied, that he had already about twenty times ten thousand; but that, in a little time, he should have fifty times ten thousand.”

Again, we see that the library was simply a showcase collection of all the books in the world, into Greek. Demetrius was doing the king’s bidding, and the king’s bidding was to translate everything into Greek for his own edification and vanity.

Josephus continues:

12:14 “But he said he had been informed that there were many books of laws among the Jews worthy of inquiring after, and worthy of the king’s library, but which, being written in characters and in a dialect of their own, will cause no small pains in getting them translated into the Greek tongue;”

This passage provides clear evidence that even at this time, around the time of the Maccabean revolt, Jews were still able to read the Hebrew Bible. Hebrew was seen at the time as being unique to the Jews, and still used by them. Jews themselves could therefore still understand Hebrew at this time, and had no need of a translation into Greek.

12:15 “that the character in which they are written seems to be like to that which is the proper character of the Syrians, and that its sound, when pronounced, is like theirs also; and that this sound appears to be peculiar to themselves. Therefore he said that nothing hindered why they might not get those books to be translated also; for while nothing is wanting that is necessary for that purpose, we may have their books also in this library.”

This fascinating paragraph shows the similarity, and distinction, between Hebrew and Aramaic (called Syrian or Syriac in Josephus). Ptolemy is told that the Hebrew Bible is written in a language similar to Aramaic (which he must therefore have been familiar with), and that Aramaic and Hebrew sound similar, but that Hebrew is unique to Jews (thus implying that Aramaic is more widely spoken).

If you go through the video lessons on the Aramaic alphabet that are available at [JesusSpokeAramaic.com](http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com), you will see that Hebrew and Aramaic share the same letters of the alphabet, but that Aramaic has other scripts which Hebrew does not use.

Let us continue to read what Josephus says:

12:34 “Now when this had been done after so magnificent a manner, according to the king’s inclinations, he gave orders to Demetrius to give him in writing his sentiments concerning the transcribing of the Jewish books; for no part of the administration is done rashly by these kings, but all things are managed with great circumspection.”

12:35 “On which account I have included a copy of these letters, and set down the multitude of the vessels sent as gifts [to Jerusalem], and the construction of everyone, that the exactness of the craftsmen’s workmanship, as it appeared to those that saw them, and which workman made every vessel, may be made manifest, and this on account of the excellency of the vessels themselves. Now the copy of the letter was to this purpose:--”

12:36 “Demetrius to the great king. When you, O king, gave me a charge concerning the collection of books that were still required to fill your library, and concerning the care that ought to be taken about such as are imperfect, I have used the utmost diligence about those matters. And I let you know, that we want

the books of the Jewish legislation, with some others; for they are written in the Hebrew characters, and being in the language of that nation, are to us unknown.”

These paragraphs clearly state that the books which were translated into Greek were the books of the Torah or Jewish Law (legislation), not the entire Hebrew Bible, because of course the canon of the Old Testament had not been fixed by this early stage!

Josephus continues:

12:37 “It has also happened to them, that they have been transcribed more carelessly than they ought to have been, because they have not had hereto royal care taken about them. Now it is necessary that you should have accurate copies of them. And indeed this legislation is full of hidden wisdom, and entirely blameless, as being the legislation of God:”

This paragraph says that other books in the library had been poorly translated into Greek, and he wants the books of the Torah to be translated into Greek well by royal decree, because they are full of wisdom. This suggests that bad, poorly done copies of the Torah into Greek were circulating at this time.

Josephus goes on to say:

12:38 “for which cause it is, as Hecateus of Abdera says, that the poets and historians make no mention of it, nor of those men who lead their lives according to it, since it is a holy law, and ought not to be proclaimed by profane mouths.”

12:39 “If then it please you, O king, you may write to the high priest of the Jews, to send six of the elders out of every tribe, and those such as are most skilful of the laws, that by their means we may learn the clear and agreeing sense of these books, and may obtain an accurate interpretation of their contents, and so may have such a collection of these as may be suitable to your desire.”

12:40 “When this letter was sent to the king, he commanded that a letter should be drawn up for Eleazar, the Jewish high priest, concerning these matters; and that they should inform him of the release of the Jews that had been in slavery among them. He also sent fifty talents of gold for the making of large basins, and

vials, and cups, and an immense quantity of precious stones.”

These paragraphs show that the High Priest was commanded, by royal decree of Ptolemy, to help with the translation of the Torah into Greek. The Jews, however, were paid well for co-operating. It is important to understand that Jews, generally, neither required nor requested the translation of the Jewish Law or Torah from Hebrew into Greek, because so few Jews spoke Greek.

So there you have it! Contrary to the widespread myth that Jews themselves wanted to translate the Hebrew Bible into Greek because they could no longer understand Hebrew, we find quite the reverse:

- ➔ **Jews at this time could understand Hebrew perfectly well, and had no need of a translation into Greek. They were still able to read the Hebrew Bible. That is why Ptolemy had no difficulty getting six Jews from every tribe, who could understand Hebrew and the Hebrew Bible.**
- ➔ ***Ptolemy* (not the Jews) wanted the Torah, or Jewish Law, translated into Greek for the immense showcase library of books he was collecting.**
- ➔ **Jews did not *want* a translation into Greek. They were *commanded* to help with the translation by royal decree, and had to be paid to co-operate.**

It should be remembered that Jews generally had very strong anti-Greek feelings. The Maccabean revolt was still fresh in their minds, when Greek language and culture was forced upon them by Antiochus, and the Temple was desecrated. Ever since the Maccabean victory, Jews strongly rejected Greek philosophy and the Greek language, and discouraged the speaking of Greek. The chapters about Josephus and the Maccabean Revolt go into these events in further detail.

Despite this, some Jews had succumbed to Greek learning and had allowed Greek philosophical ideas of heaven and hell to enter Judaism. They had started to Hellenize Judaism, and were despised for it. They are known in the New Testament as Grecian Jews:

**Acts 6:1;** “And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily

ministration.”

Contrast that attitude with the Jewish translations of the Targums, from the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic. Aramaic and Hebrew are similar languages, and after the exile, Aramaic gradually began to be more widely spoken than Hebrew. Because the influence of Aramaic on Hebrew was already significant, Jews had little resistance to an Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible. The Targums arose according to need and were welcomed and encouraged by Jews, and met with their general acceptance and approval. Aramaic was welcomed, even encouraged. A knowledge of Greek was actively discouraged.

To understand the influence which Aramaic has had on Judaism down through the centuries, and how the Aramaic translations of the Hebrew Bible arose, make sure you read all the later chapters in this book about Biblical Aramaic, the Aramaic Targums, the Aramaic Old Testament and the Aramaic New Testament.

You might also consider subscribing to [JesusSpokeAramaic.com](http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com) to learn more and benefit fully from your experience.

# What Does Josephus Say?

## “The Language of Our Country”

**W**ELCOME TO this exciting chapter in our look at Aramaic, the Bible's Second Holy Language. In this chapter, we are going to take a look at what the commonly-spoken language was in Israel in the first century A.D., or what Josephus calls “the language of our country”.

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You can get free access to an entire video lesson about Josephus, entitled *What Does Josephus Say*, by following the link below:  
<http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com/Lessons/History-of-Aramaic/Josephus>

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By this, Josephus meant the language that people generally spoke in Israel, that is, **their** language, not the language of the current foreign occupiers (the Romans) or the Hellenistic invaders who had shortly beforehand wreaked havoc under the hand of Antiochus Epiphanes, leading to the Maccabean revolt, which we covered in a previous chapter. Rather, by “the language of our country”, Josephus meant the language spoken in Roman Judea, or first century Israel.

So, first of all, who was Josephus? Josephus was born Joseph ben Matityahu, his birth-name, or Hebrew name. But in A.D. 69, he was re-named Titus Flavius Josephus by the Roman Emperor Vespasian who decided to keep him as a hostage and an interpreter. Josephus was a Jew, who lived around 37-100 A.D., in other words, within living memory of Jesus, and an eye-witness of the events surrounding the disciples of Jesus preaching the gospel in Israel and to the whole world.

In fact, as Wikipedia says, “[His] works provide valuable insight into

first century Judaism and the background of early Christianity” and “[his works] provide crucial information about the First Jewish-Roman war and also represent important literary source material for understanding the context of the Dead Sea Scrolls and late [Second] Temple Judaism.”

Josephus was born to a father of priestly descent, and to a mother who claimed royal ancestry. He was therefore well educated, and was a scholar as well as a historian. In fact, Josephus works include *Antiquities of the Jews*, (a monumental work recording the history of the Jews from the creation of the world down through to his own day) and *The Jewish Wars*.

Josephus was the most important and well-known historian in Roman Judea – or Israel in the first century, as we would call it today. He carefully recorded the painful events around the destruction of the Jewish Temple in A.D. 70 and the subsequent ransacking of Jerusalem at the hands of the Romans, followed by the siege of Masada.

Josephus *has* been criticised as perhaps being too friendly with the Romans, but his love and patriotism towards his own people, the Jews, comes across clearly in his writings. If *anyone* is qualified to speak about this time, it was Josephus. He knew his people. He knew the country. And as a scholar and a historian, he knew the language of his country better than anyone else.

So what exactly *does* Josephus say about the language normally spoken by Jews in the first century in Israel? Surely the answer to this question must be critical to an understanding of the culture in which the New Testament was born, and the culture and context in which it must be understood.

Well, it is true that the documents which we have preserved of Josephus today, were written hundreds of years ago in Greek. In fact, William Whiston's classic translation of 1732, from the Greek edition of Josephus, was a classic book in Victorian times and is still, even today, the version of Josephus' works that most people will be familiar with.

But we would have to go to Josephus *himself*, rather than a later Greek *copy*, to discover what Josephus himself refers to as “the language of our country”. It is at this point that many are surprised

by what Josephus *actually* says...

In fact, Josephus is at pains to point out that he originally wrote in **Aramaic**, and only *later* did he translate his extensive writings into the Greek language. Furthermore, Josephus admits that he still could not pronounce Greek well, even after *years* of learning it. Even more amazingly, he says that only a few people he knew could even speak Greek, and that Greek learning was actually frowned upon by the Jews.

So let us open up the pages of Josephus' classic writings, and examine for ourselves the evidence presented by Josephus, or Joseph ben Matityahu, a Jew, a scholar, and **the** classic historian of Roman Judea.

First, let us examine *Antiquities of the Jews*. Josephus says:

1:7 "but because this work surrounded a great deal... in process of time, as usually happens to such as undertake great things, I grew weary and went on slowly, it being a large subject, and a difficult thing to translate our history into a foreign, and to us unaccustomed, language."

[All quotes from Josephus have been taken from William Whiston's translation].

Here, Josephus clearly states that Greek (into which he was **translating** his history) was, to Jews, a **foreign language** that they were **unaccustomed** to. In fact, the whole idea of translating his monumental work into Greek was, to him, a very daunting task, one which would take many years and which would progress only slowly, and which would be wearisome and tiring to him.

But Josephus continues:

1:129 "for such names are pronounced here after the manner of the Greeks, to please my readers; for our own country language does not so pronounce them;"

Again, Josephus emphasises that neither he, nor his countrymen, actually speak Greek. He is **translating** names *purely for the benefit of his Greek readers*. He is at pains to point out that Jews emphatically do not pronounce names according to the way that Greeks do. Greek was, to Josephus, a foreign language – one that he had to make an

effort to learn.

But Josephus continues:

20:262 “And I am so bold as to say, now I have so completely perfected the work I proposed to myself to do, that no other person, whether he were a Jew or foreigner, had he ever so great an inclination to it, could so accurately deliver these accounts to the Greeks as is done in these books.”

Josephus, rightly or wrongly, says that he is the only person (Jew or foreigner), who was able to competently translate his history into Greek so accurately. This illustrates clearly, just how few people, Jew or Gentile, in Roman Judea, knew Greek well enough to attempt a translation.

But was Josephus correct in saying that he was the only one who could attempt a task as great and burdensome as translating his work into Greek? Let him answer the question for us:

20:263 “For those of my own nation freely acknowledge that I far exceed them in the learning belonging to Jews: I have also taken a great deal of pains to obtain the learning of the Greeks, and understand the elements of the Greek language, although I have so long accustomed myself to speak our own tongue, that I cannot pronounce Greek with sufficient exactness;”

Coming from noble birth, with a priestly father and a mother descended from royalty, we have seen that Josephus was educated, intelligent and already an acknowledged scholar. Yet even *with* that background, Josephus admits that he struggled to learn the Greek language, he admits that he does not speak Greek well, and that he had to go to great pains to learn it. This is because Aramaic is Josephus' mother tongue and he has spoken Aramaic all his life. With that Aramaic background, Josephus admits that he can hardly even pronounce Greek properly.

All those who, as adults, have struggled to learn a foreign language will know exactly what Josephus means! Learning the grammar and vocabulary of a foreign language is a difficult task in any century, and first century Roman Judea was no different. Josephus proves that Greek was a foreign language to the Jews, one which they did not speak and were not familiar with.

But as we read more of Josephus' testimony, we discover that there was another reason why Josephus struggled to learn Greek:

20:264 "for our nation does not encourage those who learn the languages of many nations,"

Josephus says that Jews actually **discouraged** learning the languages of the nations around them. This was because Jews had learned from painful, bitter, history, that the nations around them only caused problems and only led them away from God. Jews did not want assimilation. The Maccabean revolt was still fresh in their minds, when Greek language and culture was forced upon them by Antiochus Epiphanes, when the Temple was desecrated, and Jews were forced to eat swine's flesh and worship statues of Zeus. Ever since the Maccabean victory, Jews largely rejected Greek philosophy and the Greek language, and discouraged the speaking of Greek, keeping the Maccabean revolt and subsequent victory at the front of their minds.

Despite this, some Jews had succumbed to Greek learning and had allowed pagan Greek philosophy such as wisdom, devils, false ideas of heaven and hell, and so on, to enter Judaism. Some Jews had started to Hellenize Judaism and absorb ideas from the Greek pagan culture around them, and mainstream Judaism despised them for it. Those Hellenistic Jews are known in the New Testament as *Grecian Jews*:

**Acts 6:1**; "And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations."

But let us return to the subject of the language in which Josephus wrote his classic works. In his *The Wars of the Jews*, Josephus writes:

1:3 "I have proposed to myself, for the sake of such as live under the government of the Romans, to translate those books into the Greek tongue, which I formerly composed in the language of our country."

Josephus says that his works were originally written in Aramaic, the language of his country, of Roman Judea or Israel. But that he **translated** those works into Greek later. They were not originally

written in Greek, since Josephus has already told us that he was unfamiliar with that language. The later translation into Greek was necessary because the Romans carried out a wholesale destruction of all Hebrew and Aramaic manuscripts in the destruction of A.D. 70. Greek copies were all that remained.

Josephus also draws a distinction between his histories and those of other Jews, all of which were written in Aramaic, and other histories of Judaism which Greeks had (by this time) attempted:

1:17 “Many Jews before me have composed the histories of our ancestors very exactly; as have some of the Greeks done it also, and have translated our histories into their own tongue, and have not much mistaken the truth in their histories.”

In *Against Apion*, another of Josephus’ works, Josephus also explains that his work was translated into Greek:

1:1 “My books of the “Antiquity of the Jews” ... Those Antiquities contain the history of five thousand years, and are taken out of our sacred books; but are translated by me into the Greek tongue.”

In translating into Greek, Josephus testifies that he originally wrote in a language other than Greek – Aramaic, in other words.

And despite being a renowned scholar, Josephus even had to obtain help in learning the Greek language:

1:50 “Afterward I got leisure at Rome; and when all my materials were prepared for that work, I made use of some persons to assist me in learning the Greek tongue.”

Thus, once Josephus was determined to translate his works into Greek, he could not at that time even speak Greek. Having (and needing) a certain amount of leisure time, he has to go to Rome to obtain assistance in learning Greek, before he could begin the onerous task of translation. A lengthy journey to Rome was necessary because Greek was not spoken locally.

Why did Josephus have to go to Rome? Was Greek not spoken in Alexandria, in Egypt? Was the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Torah, not made in Alexandria? Was there nobody with a proficiency in Greek living in Egypt at that time who could have

assisted Josephus in learning Greek, and thus avoid a journey to Rome?

Well, Josephus continues:

1:73 “I shall begin with the writings of the Egyptians... But Manetho was a man who was by birth an Egyptian, yet had he made himself master of the Greek learning, as is very evident: for he wrote the history of his own country in the Greek tongue.”

Not only was Greek not spoken in Israel, but this testimony tells us that Greek was not spoken in Egypt either! Here, Manetho is an Egyptian, yet he (like Josephus) bucks the trend and decides to *learn* Greek. Greek, therefore, was clearly **not** the *lingua franca*, or common language, of Egypt, or Israel, or indeed anywhere else in the Middle East.

Now, you might think that when Josephus talks about “our own language” or “our own tongue” or “the language of our country”, he means *Hebrew* rather than *Aramaic*. Well, let’s examine whether that is, in fact, the case.

In his extensive writings, Josephus is very precise in identifying when he means Hebrew, or the Hebrew language, as opposed to Aramaic, which he consistently refers to as “the language of our country”. In fact, Josephus frequently makes the distinction between Aramaic, which is what he originally wrote in, and Hebrew. When he *means* Hebrew, Josephus explicitly says so, in contrast to Aramaic. Here are a few examples from *The Antiquities of the Jews* to illustrate this point:

“and call it the Sabbath; which word denotes *rest* in the Hebrew tongue.”

“This man was called *Adam*, which in the Hebrew tongue signifies one that is Red.”

“Now a woman is called in the Hebrew tongue *Issa*.”

“He also commanded him to be called *Israel*, which in the Hebrew tongue signifies one that struggled with the divine angel.”

“Now the former of those names, *Gershom*, in the Hebrew

tongue, signifies that he was in a strange land;”

“Adonibezek, which name denotes the Lord of Bezek, for Adoni, in the Hebrew tongue, signifies Lord.”

“Deborah, a certain prophetess among them, (whose name in the Hebrew tongue signifies a Bee,)”

“Now *Barak*, in the Hebrew tongue, signifies *Lightning*.”

“Now *Naomi* signifies in the Hebrew tongue *happiness*, and *Mara*, *sorrow*.”

“to a certain city called *Mizpeh*, which, in the Hebrew tongue, signifies a *watch tower*;”

“Now *Nabal*, in the Hebrew tongue, signifies *folly*.”

In these examples, Josephus makes reference to these words being in Hebrew, because these are all examples of words which are different to the equivalent word in Aramaic. Josephus, writing in *Aramaic*, gives the *Hebrew* word, but then has to explain what the word means to his Aramaic readers. If he had been writing in Hebrew in the first place, a translation would obviously not have been necessary! This proves that Josephus must have written in Aramaic rather than Hebrew.

And so, when Josephus means *Hebrew*, he uses the phrase “the Hebrew tongue”. By contrast, when he means Aramaic, he says the “language of our country” or “our own language” or similar phrase. Here are some further examples:

“He also placed a partition around the temple, which in our tongue we call Gison, but it is called Thrigeos by the Greeks”

“although I have so long accustomed myself to speak our own tongue, that I cannot pronounce Greek.”

“to translate those books into the Greek tongue, which I formerly composed in the language of our country.”

But did Josephus *really* mean Aramaic when he says, “the language of our own country”? Is it still nevertheless possible that he meant Hebrew? Well, here is a verse from the New Testament, from the book of Acts, which settles the matter for once and all.

**Acts 1:19;** “And it was known unto all the dwellers at Jerusalem;

insomuch as that field is called in their proper tongue, Aceldama, that is to say, The field of blood.”

Here, after the death of Judas, the inhabitants of Jerusalem call the field where he died, Aceldama. They call it Aceldama “in their proper tongue”, in other words, *in their own tongue*, that is, in the language in which the people of Jerusalem spoke.

And so, if we can identify which language Aceldama is in, we can identify the language that Josephus refers to as “the language of our country” and “our own tongue”. Josephus uses the same phrase, “our own tongue” (as opposed to the languages of the nations around them), the same phrase as the New Testament itself uses here in the book of Acts.

So, in which language is Aceldama? Well, this phrase is made up from the Aramaic *hake* meaning *field*, and *dama* meaning *the blood*. (The KJV is translated from Greek, and Greek has no letter *h*, and so *hake* becomes *ace* or *ake* when written in Greek).

**Grammar Note:** “The field of blood” is in the construct state, where the word “the” goes with the second noun, i.e. literally in Aramaic it is “field of the blood” whereas in English we would say “the field of blood”.

But, critically, *Aceldama* **cannot** be Hebrew. It can **only** be Aramaic. In Hebrew, the word for field is not *hake* – it is *sadeh*. In Hebrew, the equivalent phrase would be *sadeh haDam*. *Aceldama* uniquely and precisely identifies “our own tongue”, the phrase used by both Josephus and the New Testament, as **Aramaic**, rather than *Hebrew*. Aramaic was, therefore, the language generally spoken in first century Israel, by Jews in Roman Judea. Both Josephus and the New Testament are in harmony. “By the mouth of two or three witnesses, shall the matter be established.” (Deu. 19:15)

We have seen, then, that Aramaic was the language of Josephus, the language of the New Testament, the language of Israel and Jerusalem, and therefore the language spoken by Jesus and the disciples. Aramaic should therefore command our respect. Aramaic should command our love. It is the Holy Language of the New Testament, just as Hebrew is the Holy Language of the Old Testament. If we love the Scriptures, we will love Aramaic, for the Scriptures were given (in part) in Aramaic.

Studying Aramaic and the Aramaic background to the Holy Bible brings us back to a deeper, richer and more authentic understanding of God's Word. We owe it to ourselves to understand Aramaic. Jesus spoke Aramaic, and we, too, should take the time to understand this wonderful language.

Aramaic is an exciting journey into the world of Jesus, of Roman Judea, of the history of Israel, and of the New Testament. Make sure you study all the *amazing* video lessons that are available at [JesusSpokeAramaic.com](http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com) to help you understand and appreciate the wonderful world of Aramaic and what it can offer you. We also offer DVDs, Workbooks, Aramaic and Hebrew Bibles, Study Guides, Meditational Audio CDs and Aramaic books to help you in your journey into the wonderful world of Aramaic.

# Aramaic – The Language of Egypt

**I**N THESE chapters about Aramaic, the Bible's Second Holy Language, we have seen how widely Aramaic was spoken – across millennia, down through the centuries, across several world empires, and across many countries. Aramaic must surely be one of the world's most important cultural languages.

In this particular chapter, we are going to take a look at what language was spoken in Egypt in the first century A.D.

Why would this be important? Well, it is a commonly held belief that, following the conquests of Alexander the Great, Greek had become the *lingua franca*, or common language, across the Middle East by the first century A.D. In fact, many grammars of New Testament Greek routinely suggest that Greek was commonly spoken all the way from Greece, throughout the Middle East, and as far afield as India.

People who hold this view also suggest that Greek was spoken in Egypt in the first century A.D. This is suggested because the Septuagint was written in Alexandria, in Egypt, supposedly around 250 B.C., which suggests that Greek “must” have been spoken there.

But in these chapters about Aramaic, the Bible's Second Holy Language, we provide detailed and conclusive evidence that Aramaic (not Greek) was the common language spoken across the Middle East in the first century A.D., and continued to be spoken for many centuries after Christ until it was eventually displaced by Arabic around the time of the Moslem conquests.

What, then, is the evidence for the language that was spoken in

Egypt around the time of Christ? Was it Greek, or Aramaic?

Those who believe that Greek was spoken in Egypt might bring forth the following evidence:

- ➔ Alexander the Great conquered Egypt first, which introduced Greek to Egypt.
- ➔ The Hebrew Law, or Torah, was translated into Greek (the Septuagint) at Alexandria in Egypt.

While at first that might sound like a good case, we need to examine the evidence in more detail, to establish the facts. When we investigate the facts, we find that the written historical evidence proves that Greek was **not** the *normal* spoken language in Egypt. In other words, Greek was generally *not* the language spoken in Egypt. It was Aramaic.

To demonstrate this, let's look at a few verses from Acts chapter 21:

**Acts 21:37-39;** "And as Paul was to be led into the castle, he said unto the chief captain, May I speak unto thee? Who said, Canst thou speak Greek? Art not thou that Egyptian, which before these days madest an uproar, and leddest out into the wilderness four thousand men that were murderers? But Paul said, I am a man which am a Jew of Tarsus, a city in Cilicia, a citizen of no mean city: and, I beseech thee, suffer me to speak unto the people."

Read those verses again, carefully. Yes, Paul does speak Greek to the Roman soldier. But by speaking Greek, the Roman soldier is actually *surprised*, and instantly knows that Paul could not possibly be an Egyptian, simply because he spoke Greek. Therefore, this proves that the people of Egypt did not speak Greek.

In an earlier chapter, we looked at the evidence of Josephus. Josephus was a scholar and a Jew who lived in the first century A.D, and the foremost historian of his day. In the chapter about Josephus, we saw that Josephus repeatedly says that Aramaic was the language spoken in Israel in his days, as well as being spoken throughout the whole Middle East.

However, in Josephus' writings, he is careful to draw a distinction between the Greek tongue and the Egyptian tongue. In *Against*

*Apion* 1:73, he mentions a certain Manetho, who despite being an Egyptian, is unusual for learning Greek (just as Josephus says that he, too, is **unusual** for learning Greek).

Josephus records:

“Manetho was a man who was by birth an Egyptian, yet had he made himself master of the Greek learning, as is very evident: for he wrote the history of his own country in the Greek tongue.”

In other words, this passage shows that Greek was very much a foreign language to Manetho, an Egyptian. He had to make an effort to learn Greek, since people in Egypt at this time did not normally speak Greek.

As we examine in a number of other chapters in this book, it is important to understand that Jews generally had very strong anti-Greek feelings. The Maccabean revolt was still fresh in their minds, when Greek language and culture was forced upon them by Antiochus, they were forced to sacrifice to Zeus and eat swine’s flesh, and the Temple in Jerusalem was desecrated. Ever since the Maccabean victory against Greek culture, Jews strongly rejected Greek philosophy and the Greek language, and discouraged the speaking of Greek.

Despite this, some Jews *had* succumbed to Greek learning and had allowed Greek philosophical ideas such as the immortality of the soul, and heaven and hell, to enter Judaism. They had started to Hellenize Judaism, and were despised by mainstream Judaism because of it. They are known in the New Testament as Grecian Jews:

**Acts 6:1**; “And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration.”

These Grecian Jews, those who had succumbed to pagan Greek influence and culture, and who spoke Greek, were very much a minority in Judaism at this time. Mainstream Judaism despised these Grecian Jews because they were seen as betrayers of true Judaism who had adopted the language and culture of the enemy of the Jewish people in the Maccabean revolt.

And as we saw in the chapter about Josephus, Aramaic was what Josephus calls “our language” and “the language of our country” (Israel).

There is one further point that demonstrates clearly that Aramaic was the normal, spoken language in Egypt. This, too, comes from the writings of Josephus.

In *Antiquities of the Jews*, Josephus wrote the history of the Hebrew nation from the time of Creation, through the Exodus from Egypt, right up until his own day. In his historical record, Josephus writes:

3:32 “Now the Hebrews call this food *manna*; for the particle *man*, in our language, is the asking of a question, What is this?”

This is a very interesting verse. The bread that came down from heaven, as Josephus says, is called *manna*, from the word *man*, meaning *what*, because the Hebrews leaving Egypt said ‘*what is it?*’ Now, it so happens that *man* is Aramaic, not Hebrew. The equivalent of what in Hebrew is *ma*.

This suggests that, not only was Aramaic spoken in Egypt (as we have already seen), but the Israelites coming out of Egypt must have spoken (at least some) Aramaic, in order for them to use the Aramaic word *man* in the use of the word *manna*. Just as the Jews in the Babylon had started to speak Aramaic and their use of Hebrew was declining, so too, the Jews spending four hundred years in Egypt was resulting in them speaking Aramaic and the declining use of Hebrew. The Israelites wanted to be just like the nations around them, who all spoke Aramaic.

The conclusion of this chapter, then, is this. The evidence proves that Aramaic was spoken in Egypt, and that the Israelites coming out of Egypt also spoke Aramaic, and were familiar with Aramaic. As we will see in the chapter about Aramaic and Judaism, Aramaic is the second holy language of the Hebrew Bible, and the second holy language of Judaism. It must therefore command our respect and attention.

Make sure you watch all the video lessons that are available at [JesusSpokeAramaic.com](http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com) about Aramaic, the Bible's Second Holy Language, and the rich cultural heritage and tradition that it holds.

If we want to truly understand the correct cultural background of

the Holy Scriptures, we must understand Aramaic, as well as Hebrew. Both Aramaic and Hebrew have a part to play.

# Aramaic in the New Testament

**I**N PREVIOUS chapters of this book, we have travelled through time to look at Aramaic at the beginning of Creation, Aramaic as it is used in the Old Testament, and Aramaic through the Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian empires. We also looked at the Maccabean revolt and its impact on Hebrew and Aramaic.

The last few books of the Old Testament were completed several centuries B.C., and on our journey through time we soon come to the Roman Empire, and to the times of the New Testament. This is an extremely interesting time in terms of languages, since it represents the complicated interaction between the influences of the Greek language, Greek mythology and philosophy, the Greek Empire, the continued use of Aramaic by Israel and the surrounding nations, the use of Hebrew by the Jews, and the impact of the Roman Empire and its use of Latin.

As this is such an interesting and important time, we devote several chapters to these fascinating issues. There are chapters on what Josephus says, on Aramaic as the language of Egypt, and a look at the Greek Septuagint.

Around the time of the New Testament, there is considerable disagreement as to which language was the predominant one at the time – with Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic and Latin being the potential candidates. It seems certain, though, that all of these languages were spoken to some extent by one group of people or another, with different ones being more common in different parts of the country among different groups. To illustrate this, consider the following verse from the New Testament:

**Luke 23:38;** “And a superscription also was written over him in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew, THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.”

This verse shows which languages were the ones that Pontius Pilate felt were important enough to write on the sign above Jesus’ head when he was crucified.

In this chapter, therefore, we look at Aramaic and how it is used in the New Testament. For those who have not considered these issues before, it will be quite an enlightening chapter. And when added to the other chapters showing the importance of Aramaic, we continue to build a picture of the importance of Aramaic amongst Jews in the time of the New Testament.

Let us, then, look through the pages of the New Testament to find evidence for whether Aramaic was the predominant spoken language at the time, or not...

First, we come to the famous words of Jesus on the cross:

**Matthew 27:46;** “And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”

The New Testament is at pains to record the exact words spoken by Jesus. But although he is clearly quoting from Psalm 22, the Hebrew of Psalm 22 is not *exactly* being quoted. The Hebrew word for “abandon” is *azav*, so the expression in the Hebrew of Psalm 22 is “*azavtani*”. But here, Jesus says “*sabachthani*”. This is from the Aramaic verb “*sabach*” which is used over and over again in the Aramaic New Testament. It is a very common Aramaic word, meaning “to leave, forsake, abandon”. It is approximately equivalent to the Hebrew verb “*azav*”, although the Aramaic verb does have other nuances of meaning which are not present in the Hebrew. This is clear evidence that, on the cross, Jesus spoke Aramaic.

It should also be noted that the pronunciation of “Eli”, meaning “my God”, is interesting in that it varies in different gospels. In Mark, it is recorded differently, as “Eloi, Eloi”. Why the difference? In Aramaic, “my God” is “*alahi*”, but as this is being transliterated into Greek, and Greek has no letter for “h”, there is a problem in how to write (or transliterate) it into Greek. Dropping the “h”, or aspirate, entirely,

leads to “Eli”. Trying to represent that an “h” or aspirate is at least present, leads to “eloi”. But again, this emphasises that, on the cross, Jesus was certainly speaking Aramaic. The evidence could not be clearer.

Let us look at another well-known passage:

**Mark 5:41;** “And he took the damsel by the hand, and said unto her, Talitha cumi; which is, being interpreted, Damsel, I say unto thee, arise.”

Now, “talitha” is an extremely common Aramaic word for “girl”. Over and over again, the Aramaic New Testament uses the Aramaic word for “boy” (“talya”) and “girl” (“talitha”). They are the Aramaic equivalent of the Hebrew “yeled” (for “boy”) and “yalda” (for “girl”). “Kumi” means “arise” when addressing a female, and is the same in Hebrew or Aramaic. But again, by using such a common and obvious Aramaic word, it is obvious, again, that Jesus spoke Aramaic. The Greek New Testament is at pains to point out that Jesus spoke Aramaic. His Aramaic words are literally being transliterated from Aramaic into Greek, so that there can be no doubt.

Another example is:

**Mark 7:34;** “And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” which is “be opened”.

Depending on how the Aramaic is understood here, this is either a passive of the Aramaic verb “to open”, hence the translation, “be opened”, or the Aphel (causative) verb, that is, “be opened” as an imperative. Note that both of these forms are characteristically Aramaic – the way that passives verbs are conjugated in Hebrew (the Niphal) and causative (Hiphil) are completely different to Aramaic.

Let us look at another well-known example, quoting from the King James Bible:

**1Cor. 16:22;** “If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema Maranatha”.

The word “Maranatha”, short and sweet though it is, is a fascinating triple word-play in Aramaic. In Aramaic, and specifically Syriac,

with only slight pauses to break up the words, it can mean either:

- “Maran atha”, *our Lord comes*, or *our Lord is coming*.
- “Mara natha”, *our Lord will come*.
- “Mara na atha”, *our Lord, please come!*

Either way, this incredible single word is characteristically Aramaic. It cannot be Hebrew. It is a beautiful and amazing play on words, and it is easy to see how the word would become popular, being so rich in related meanings.

Let us look at another example of an Aramaic phrase in the New Testament which is definitely Aramaic, and cannot be Hebrew.

After Judas betrays Jesus, he realizes the enormity of what he has done, and (as the Scriptures spoke beforehand) he kills himself. The place where he dies is called Aceldama:

**Acts 1:19;** “And it was known unto all the dwellers at Jerusalem; insomuch as that field is called in their proper tongue, Aceldama, that is to say, The field of blood.”

This verse says that Aceldama, is the name of the field, “in their own [or proper] language”, i.e. in the language that the people of Jerusalem spoke. If we can identify that language, we identify which language was spoken by the people of Jerusalem – be it Latin, Greek, Hebrew, or Aramaic.

And we find that “Aceldama” is (and can only be) Aramaic. It is a construct form of “Hakel Dama”, from “Hakel”, the very common Aramaic word for “field”, and “dama” meaning “the blood”. This phrase cannot be Hebrew. The Aramaic word for “field” is hakel, whereas in Hebrew the equivalent word is “sadeh”. “The field of blood” in Hebrew would be “Sadeh haDam”. Thus, if words mean anything at all, this verse proves that the people of Jerusalem spoke Aramaic, not Hebrew. The debate is settled. End of argument. The Scriptures have spoken. To disagree would be to “kick against the pricks” (Acts 9:5), the pricks being the words of Scripture themselves, the goads or nails fastened by the masters of assemblies (Ecclesiastes 12:11).

But if we continue our search in the New Testament, we find many more Aramaic words and expressions. It is as though these words

have been left there on purpose, to prove (for once and all) that Aramaic is the language of the New Testament.

A further example is the word Raca in Matthew's gospel:

**Matt. 5:22;** "But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire."

It is sometimes said that Raca is related to the Hebrew word *Rek*, meaning empty, and there may well be a play in words in both the Hebrew and Aramaic languages, but the form of the word Raca indicates that it is Aramaic. In Aramaic, it is from the verb *to spit*, meaning that spitting on someone as a sign of contempt was a practise which could bring you in danger of the judgement.

A further example is the word Mammon in the gospels:

**Matt. 6:24;** "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon."

Mammon is an Aramaic loan-word which became adopted into medieval Hebrew, and hence into modern Hebrew to mean "finance". However, the original Aramaic word meant money, or wealth. Thus, you cannot worship (serve) both God and money.

A further example is the word Rabboni:

**John 20:16;** "Jesus saith unto her, Mary. She turned herself, and saith unto him, Rabboni; which is to say, Master."

While this does sound like the Hebrew word Rabbi, the Hebrew equivalent is *Rav* (not the English word Rabbi), while the form Rabboni is characteristically Aramaic. Thus, once again, we have an indication in the pages of the New Testament that the ordinary people spoke Aramaic, rather than Hebrew.

As well as the Aramaic words throughout the text of the New Testament which we have just looked at, that Aramaic was the common language of the time is demonstrated by the widespread choice of Aramaic names for people in the New Testament.

An obvious example is when Jesus calls Peter Cephas, which is from

the Aramaic *Keyfa*, meaning Rock. Again, this is an Aramaic word, with no Hebrew cognate equivalent. The Hebrew words are either *even* (stone) or *tsur* (rock).

And it is well-known that the Aramaic word for son, is *bar*, as in *bar-mitzvah*. The Hebrew equivalent is *ben*, as in Ben Zion or Ben Gurion.

Thus, demonstrating once again that Aramaic was the common language of the people in New Testament times, we have a whole host of peoples' names which are Aramaic, all starting with *bar*. Examples include:

- ➔ Bar abbas, the name of the robber released instead of Jesus. His name (ironically!) means "the son of the father".
- ➔ Bartholemew, or Bar Tulmai in Aramaic.
- ➔ Simon bar Jonah, for Peter.
- ➔ Bartimaeus, as in the blind beggar Bartimaeus.
- ➔ Barnabas, meaning "the son of consolation" in Aramaic.
- ➔ Bar-Jesus, the name of the false prophet, a Jew, the sorcerer in Acts 13:6.

Of course, many more examples could have been given, but these should suffice to show that Aramaic was in extensive use, with Aramaic names being commonplace.

As well as the names of people, there are many place names which are clearly Aramaic, rather than Greek or Hebrew. Examples include:

**John 19:13;** "When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he brought Jesus forth, and sat down in the judgment seat in a place that is called the Pavement, but in the Hebrew, Gabbatha."

The term "Hebrew" here refers to the Hebrew (Judean) dialect of Aramaic, as demonstrated by the form of the word Gabbatha, which is easily identifiable as Aramaic. The ending "atha" is the very common ending for feminine nouns in Aramaic, as is explained in the series of video lessons on *Learning Aramaic for Beginners* that are available to subscribers of [JesusSpokeAramaic.com](http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com).

Another example is:

**John 19:17;** "And he bearing his cross went forth into a place

called the place of a skull, which is called in the Hebrew Golgotha:"

Again, here, we see the common feminine ending to the Aramaic word Golgotha.

A final example is:

**John 5:2;** "Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches."

The word, or place-name, Bethesda, is again an Aramaic form.

Although many more examples could be given, these examples should be sufficient to demonstrate that Aramaic is the authentic cultural context in which the New Testament was written.

In addition, there are many instances when the New Testament itself explicitly states that it is translating from Aramaic. It actually says that it is interpreting from a written Aramaic source!

Let us look at a few examples:

**Mark 5:41;** "And he took the damsel by the hand, and said unto her, Talitha cumi; which is, *being interpreted*, Damsel, I say unto thee, arise."

**Mark 15:22;** "And they bring him unto the place Golgotha, which is, *being interpreted*, The place of a skull."

**Mark 15:34;** "And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? which is, *being interpreted*, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

**John 1:38;** "Then Jesus turned, and saw them following, and saith unto them, What seek ye? They said unto him, Rabbi, (which is to say, *being interpreted*, Master,) where dwellest thou?"

**John 1:41;** "He first findeth his own brother Simon, and saith unto him, We have found the Messias, which is, *being interpreted*, the Christ."

**John 1:42;** "And he brought him to Jesus. And when Jesus beheld him, he said, Thou art Simon the son of Jona: thou shalt be called Cephas, which is *by interpretation*, A stone."

**John 9:7;** “And said unto him, Go, wash in the pool of Siloam, (which is *by interpretation*, Sent.) He went his way therefore, and washed, and came seeing.”

**Acts 4:36;** “And Joses, who by the apostles was surnamed Barnabas, (which is, *being interpreted*, The son of consolation,) a Levite, and of the country of Cyprus,”

**Acts 9:36;** “Now there was at Joppa a certain disciple named Tabitha, which *by interpretation* is called Dorcas: this woman was full of good works and almsdeeds which she did.”

**Acts 13:8;** “But Elymas the sorcerer (for so is his name *by interpretation*) withstood them, seeking to turn away the deputy from the faith.”

In these examples, there is a written Aramaic word or name, and the Greek translation *actually tells you* that it is translating.

How much more obvious does it have to get? If words are to mean anything, these words have to mean what they say they mean, which is that the Greek New Testament is translating from an Aramaic original source.

And so, in this chapter, we have seen clear and obvious evidence that Jesus spoke Aramaic, that Aramaic was the language commonly spoken by everyone around Jesus, and that Aramaic was (by their own admission) the native language of the people of Jerusalem. People around Jesus were named in Aramaic. Place names were in Aramaic. The New Testament itself often explicitly states that it is translating from Aramaic.

But all this evidence is, as it were, on the surface level. It is all explicitly stated. Without doing any real work or analysis, we find (just by observation) all the evidence we need, that Jesus spoke Aramaic, and that Aramaic was the language used by everyone around Jesus.

But if we work just *a little* bit harder, and scratch very gently at the thin veneer of Greek in the New Testament in Greek, we find that the Greek unmistakably gives way to the Aramaic underneath. While that is beyond the scope of the current book, all the evidence is available in the numerous video lessons about the Aramaic New Testament which are available to subscribers of

JesusSpokeAramaic.com.

Indeed, much of the groundwork has already been done by previous generations of Bible scholars. These ideas are not revolutionary beams of light from Outer Space, coming from nowhere, and unexpected. We are only standing on the shoulders of giants, stepping in the places where others have stood, presenting evidence that is already known, but presenting it all in bite-sized chunks for easier spiritual digestion.

Many others have already analysed the New Testament in extreme detail, uncovering the evidence that it was originally written in Aramaic, later to be translated into Greek.

An example of a previous work investigating the Aramaic origins of the New Testament is the book, *The Aramaic Origins of the Fourth Gospel* by Charles Burney. It provides ample evidence that John's gospel was originally written in Aramaic. But while that book is limited in its scope to the Fourth Gospel, many of its methods and conclusions can equally be applied to every other book in the New Testament.

In fact, such a study has already been done, and the results are already available. For instance, the book, *The Aramaic Origins of the New Testament* by Andrew Gabriel Roth, uncovers much more evidence that Aramaic is demonstrably behind all the books of the New Testament, not just John's gospel.

Similarly, the book *Was the New Testament REALLY Written in Greek?* uncovers very detailed evidence which reveals that the Greek New Testament was, indeed, translated from an Aramaic original. Not just a *spoken* original, but an original that was already in *written* form at the time the translation into Greek took place.

As we will see in the chapter on the Aramaic Peshitta New Testament, this is what the Churches of the East have always known. We will present specific and detailed evidence to show that it is what the West believed for centuries, until modern revisionist theory took a complete U-turn, when churches and Bible societies were undermined by academics who neither believed the Scriptures, nor thought it to be the inspired Word of God, nor respected their own earlier theories and principles.

If we get back to the Aramaic origins of the New Testament, we get back to true and authentic Biblical roots. We engraft ourselves back into the root-stock of the Scriptures, and we re-gain our moorings, anchoring our faith to the Scriptures – rather than being adrift at sea, not knowing who to believe or what to think.

Get back to the Aramaic, and we get back to the language in which (alongside Hebrew) God chose to reveal His Word.

The Bible's second Holy Language.

# Aramaic – The Language of Jesus

**I**N THIS book so far, we have looked at Aramaic in its cultural context, tracing its use through time and down through whole world empires. Many of these chapters have established the fact that Aramaic was the normal, everyday, spoken language across the Middle East at the time of Jesus, in New Testament times. Thus, just as Aramaic was spoken for centuries – even millennia – before the New Testament, in the Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian Empires – so, too it was spoken during the time that the Roman Empire ruled over Israel, and so, too, it continued to be spoken in the Middle East for centuries afterwards – in fact, as we shall see, well into Crusader times, and Aramaic continues to be spoken today.

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You can get free access to an entire video lesson about Aramaic being the language of Jesus, entitled *Aramaic - The Language of Jesus*, by following the link below:  
<http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com/Lessons/History-of-Aramaic/Aramaic-Jesus>

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With all this historical background and context, it should therefore come as no surprise that Aramaic was the normal, everyday, spoken language at the time of Jesus. Many other chapters have established this fact beyond doubt. However, to bring all this evidence together, and to introduce other more detailed chapters which will explore these issues further, in this chapter we shall bring together some of the main lines of evidence that Jesus, as a religious Jew in Israel in the first century A.D., would have spoken Aramaic.

First, let us examine what is written in mainstream, independent, encyclopaedias. While encyclopaedias are not always correct and they are revised over time as new evidence comes to light, or as new

scholars revise previous opinions, nevertheless Solomon the wise in the Book of Proverbs tells us that “in the multitude of counsellors there is safety.” The Law of Moses also says “at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established.” Solomon also tells us in the Book of Proverbs that, “a threefold cord is not quickly broken.”

Thus, if at least three reliable mainstream encyclopaedias all tell us the same thing, it should settle the matter. What then, do independent encyclopaedias tell us about the language that Jesus spoke? Let us examine a number of encyclopaedias from various backgrounds, both religious and secular.

In Wikipedia, there is a whole (interesting!) article on the “Language of Jesus”. Let us quote from this article:

“It is generally agreed that Jesus and his disciples primarily spoke Aramaic, the common language of Judea in the first century A.D., most likely a Galilean dialect distinguished from that of Jerusalem. The towns of Nazareth and Capernaum in Galilee, where Jesus spent most of his time, were Aramaic-speaking communities.”

Wikipedia’s research is good enough for me. But let’s go on to examine other sources.

The New Advent Encyclopaedia, which is an online Catholic encyclopaedia, has numerous references all throughout to the fact that Jesus spoke Aramaic. Like Wikipedia, it confirms that Aramaic was the commonly spoken language in the first century in Judea. Now admittedly, this is a Catholic encyclopaedia and therefore biased towards Catholic doctrines, but on neutral issues it is nevertheless well researched with articles which have copious references and the reasoning behind their conclusions.

Let us look at a few examples:

“It is obvious that our Lord, who spoke an Aramaic dialect, gave to some of his disciples an Aramaic title.”

“This verbal agreement in the Greek Gospels is all the more surprising, as Jesus spoke in Aramaic.”

“Still, considering the fact that Aramaic was the language

commonly spoken in Palestine at that time, we must conclude that Our Blessed Lady's secret was originally written in Aramaic, though it must have been translated into Greek before St. Luke utilized it."

"Papias says that Matthew wrote the Logia in the Hebrew language; St. Irenæus and Eusebius maintain that he wrote his gospel for the Hebrews in their national language, and the same assertion is found in several writers. Matthew would, therefore, seem to have written in modernized Hebrew, the language then used by the scribes for teaching. But, in the time of Christ, the national language of the Jews was Aramaic, and when, in the New Testament, there is mention of the Hebrew language (Hebrais dialektos), it is Aramaic that is implied. Hence, the aforesaid writers may allude to the Aramaic and not to the Hebrew. Besides, as they assert, the Apostle Matthew wrote his Gospel to help popular teaching. To be understood by his readers who spoke Aramaic, he would have had to reproduce the original catechesis in this language, and it cannot be imagined why, or for whom, he should have taken the trouble to write it in Hebrew, when it would have had to be translated thence into Aramaic for use in religious services. Moreover, Eusebius (Church History III.24.6) tells us that the Gospel of Matthew was a reproduction of his preaching, and this we know, was in Aramaic. An investigation of the Semitic idioms observed in the Gospel does not permit us to conclude as to whether the original was in Hebrew or Aramaic, as the two languages are so closely related... However, we believe the second hypothesis to be the more probable, viz., that Matthew wrote his Gospel in Aramaic."

There are many, many similar quotations throughout the New Advent encyclopaedia to show that Jesus and the disciples spoke Aramaic as their usual everyday language.

Note also that Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ* was made famous partly for the fact that all the actors spoke Aramaic. That Jesus spoke Aramaic is therefore the widely accepted, mainstream, view.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia similarly agrees with this testimony. Let us read its testimony:

“See ARAMAIC LANGUAGE for proof that Jesus spoke that language as the vernacular of the people of Palestine.”

“The name (Aramaic) is given to a form of Semitic speech, most nearly related to Hebrew and Phoenician, but exhibiting marked peculiarities, and subsisting in different dialects. Its original home may have been in Mesopotamia (Aram), but it spread North and West, and, as below shown, became the principal tongue throughout extensive regions. After the return from the Captivity, it displaced Hebrew as the spoken language of the Jews in Palestine.”

The Encyclopaedia Britannica, similarly, adds its testimony that Jesus spoke Aramaic, and that Aramaic was the commonly spoken language in Israel at the time that the New Testament was written. It says:

“Aramaic dialects survived into Roman times, however, particularly in Palestine and Syria. Aramaic had replaced Hebrew as the language of the Jews as early as the 6th century B.C. Certain portions of the Old Testament—i.e., the books of Daniel and Ezra—are written in Aramaic, as are the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds. Among the Jews, Aramaic was used by the common people, while Hebrew remained the language of religion and government and of the upper class. Jesus and the Apostles are believed to have spoken Aramaic, and Aramaic-language translations (Targums) of the Old Testament circulated. Aramaic continued in wide use until about A.D. 650, when it was supplanted by Arabic.”

Thus, the venerable and highly-regarded Encyclopaedia Britannica confirms the main points which we have made in this book.

And so, mainstream encyclopaedias all agree that Jesus, and the disciples, and Jews in Israel in general, spoke Aramaic – that Aramaic was the dominant, generally spoken language in Judea, in Israel, in the first century.

But let us go a step further. There are many, many independent books, written by unrelated authors, that provide further evidence for this very fact. These authors come from different backgrounds, different walks of life, with different religions and beliefs, yet they have all written entire books showing that Aramaic was the

dominant language of first century Israel, and that Jesus spoke it. These are not single web pages, or a single article, or a valid point here and there – but entire books on the subject, each book generally being hundreds of pages long.

Let us continue our study of the evidence, then, by providing examples of entire books that have been written on the subject. You are welcome to read these books for yourself and learn more about the subject!

NOTE: As these books were not written by ourselves at Jesus Spoke Aramaic, we do not necessarily agree with everything written in them!

First, Stephen Missick has written a number of books on the subject. His books include:

- ➔ *The Words of Jesus in the Original Aramaic.*
- ➔ *De-Coding the Language of Jesus: Spiritual Insights from the Aramaic.*
- ➔ *Aramaic: the Language of Jesus of Nazareth.*

Stephen Missick's books are well worth reading. They have been widely circulated and have received good reviews on Amazon.

Although his views are controversial, James Trimm's book, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Origin of the New Testament* also establishes the Semitic (and Aramaic) origins of the New Testament, in its correct cultural context.

An older, but incredibly well-researched book into the Aramaic Origins of John's Gospel is, *The Aramaic Origins of the Fourth Gospel* by Charles Burney, published as early as 1868. This painstakingly goes through the evidence to establish that John's Gospel must have come from a written Aramaic source. We need look no further than the Aramaic Peshitta New Testament text.

And it takes no imagination or leap of faith to realize that if John's Gospel was first written in Aramaic, it makes perfect sense that John's other writings must also have been first written in Aramaic – John's Epistles (1 John, 2 John and 3 John) and the book of Revelation, which was given to John on the island of Patmos, being Christ's last and final prophetic revelation.

But with just a little more research and digging around to find the facts, entire books have been written to show that it is not just John's Gospel that was written first in Aramaic. Book by book, verse by verse, by carefully examining the text of the Aramaic New Testament and comparing it to the Greek New Testament text, we can establish that the entire New Testament (that is, every single book) was also first written in Aramaic.

This has already been done. The results are available for all to see, if we would only look.

First, the book, *Was the New Testament REALLY Written in Greek?*, written by Christopher (Raphael) Lataster, provides detailed, systematic and conclusive evidence that Jesus not only spoke Aramaic, but that the Aramaic New Testament contains the best record the New Testament text, and that the Greek was derived from the Aramaic.

Continuing along this same line, Andrew Gabriel Roth has also written a similar book, *Ruach Qadim: Aramaic Origins of the New Testament*. This book contains ample evidence for the Semitic roots of the New Testament, that Jesus spoke Aramaic, and that the Aramaic New Testament is the original and most authentic text from which the Greek was subsequently derived.

These then, are a number of detailed books, each hundreds of pages long, which provide a wealth of detailed evidence that Aramaic was the dominant language at the time of Jesus, that Aramaic was the primary language spoken in Israel in the first century A.D., that Jesus spoke Aramaic, and that the New Testament has Aramaic origins – and specifically, that it was first written in Aramaic and shortly afterwards translated into Greek for a wider audience – just as the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek for a wider audience, to form the Septuagint or LXX.

These books are by no means exhaustive, and there are many more that could have been quoted.

What we find, then, are all the mainstream encyclopaedias agreeing that Jesus spoke Aramaic and that Aramaic was the dominant language in first century Israel. As we have seen, entire books have been written to provide further detail, if you care to find out more. If you believe these things, you are on safe ground. There is a wealth of

evidence backing up your beliefs. But if you do not believe these things, then you are flying in the face of all the evidence.

But in addition to the books and encyclopaedia articles which we have quoted previously, this book provides a number of detailed chapters which explore the key lines of argument in further detail. Let's introduce the main chapters of this book, as we steadily learn just how widespread Aramaic was, and the impact Aramaic has had on the New Testament and on Judaism. Many of these chapters focus on the time around the first century A.D. and Israel in particular, because this is such a heavily disputed time.

Having examined the use of Aramaic in the Assyrian, Babylonian and Persian Empires, we look at Aramaic (and Hebrew) after the Babylonian Exile, and in the Dead Sea Scrolls. These key chapters establishes Hebrew and Aramaic as dominant languages amongst Jews, rather than Greek, and look at the transition from Hebrew as the primary spoken language, to Aramaic becoming dominant.

We examine the Maccabean revolt, and learn that Jews rebelled against Greek domination. Greek culture, language and philosophy (or 'wisdom') became hated among mainstream Jews following these atrocious events. Pagan Greek practices were forced on them, and they fought back, and gained the victory. Jews wanted to get away from Greek paganism and language, and back to their Semitic (Hebrew and Aramaic) roots.

We take a look at the idea that Jesus spoke Greek, and examine the historical evidence against this view. Instead, we find that, while there certainly were pockets of Greek speakers (even amongst Jews), Jews as a whole rebelled against Greek culture following the events of the Maccabean revolt. We look at historical statements in the Talmud and other writings which show this.

We examine what Josephus says about Aramaic. Josephus was an important historian at the time, and calls Aramaic, "the language of our country", and "our language". He says that he struggled to learn Greek, and that even after many years he never learned to pronounce it correctly, and that Jews did not encourage the learning of foreign languages such as Greek.

We look at the Bar Kokhba revolt, and the impact this had on Hebrew and Aramaic.

Since New Testament times are so pivotal and important, we spend an entire chapter devoted to the use of Aramaic in the New Testament – a very eye-opening chapter which will shed light on many words and phrases in the New Testament. We learn that the New Testament (in Greek) actually says it is translating from Aramaic!

We explore the testimony of “the Church Fathers” – the early believers in the first and subsequent centuries – and read for ourselves what they said about the Aramaic origins of the New Testament writings. Examining these early historical writings is very instructive.

However, we also uncover the early history of the Church – the early believers themselves. Whereas (in the West) we think of “the Church” spreading only West – into Europe with Paul’s missionary journeys – we find that the Church spread East as well. In fact, it might surprise you just how far east the early disciples went, and how early, and how well established the Aramaic New Testament was amongst those early believers. It is a fascinating story – but one that is almost never heard in the West, due to our bias towards hearing our own history endlessly repeated, but ignoring the history of everyone else.

We look at the cultural affinity that Aramaic has with Judaism. We see that, while Hebrew obviously has a special place in that it is the Holy Language, Aramaic, too is intimately associated with Judaism. It is the second holy language. One without the other would be unthinkable. Hebrew and Aramaic have grown together like two vines, becoming inter-twined down through the centuries in the pages of the Bible. But Christianity is an extension of Judaism. The Gentiles were “grafted in” through belief in the hope of Israel. They too, should have Hebrew and Aramaic as their two holy languages, and they, too, should rebel against the pagan influences of Greek.

As we establish just how well-entrenched Aramaic was in the first century, and how the Aramaic New Testament was at the heart of the early believers, we examine the earliest translations that were made. We discover that the earliest Bibles, like Armenian, were translated from “the Syriac”, from the Aramaic New Testament, and not from Greek as many would assume. The early Arabic Bibles, too, were translated partially from the Aramaic New Testament.

As we examine these many facets of Aramaic, like a jewel held up to the light which reveals many beautiful colors as the light of Truth shines through it, you will note just how intertwined Aramaic is with the Holy Scriptures. Aramaic is intimately intertwined with the Bible, God's Word, with the Jewish people, with Judaism, and with all the nations that had dealings with Israel. We are on safe ground as we study Aramaic. We can trust it. We are tied to a safe Biblical rock. But once we leave our moorings, once we let loose the anchor, we sail adrift at sea, driven by every wind of doctrine and tossed by the wild waves of the Gentile sea of nations and their pagan, anti-Biblical 'wisdom'.

Jesus spoke Aramaic, and in Aramaic we will find rest for our souls.

By contrast, Jews fought against pagan Greek influence. They rebelled. They rejected the Greek language. They did not encourage learning the language of the pagan nations around them. Jews were discouraged, even forbidden, from speaking Greek. So if Jesus, a religious Jew, and the disciples, unlearned men as they were, would have been discouraged from speaking Greek and would have avoided learning and using Greek, how could the New Testament have been first written in a language they did not speak or understand?

Does it not make more sense that the New Testament was first written in Aramaic, and then translated (later) into Greek for a wider audience, as the gospel spread West and Greek became the dominant language of the West? That, after all, is the pattern which we find in the Greek Septuagint or LXX. As with the Old Testament (first Hebrew, then Greek), so with the New Testament (first Aramaic, then Greek).

And so, chapter after chapter, enjoy this book on Aramaic – the Bible's Second Holy Language. Study these chapters well, because these fascinating topics will crop up again and again. They are at the very heart of the Bible, the Holy Scriptures, the inspired Word of God...

# Did Jews speak Greek?

THE TITLE of this book, *Discover Aramaic – The Bible’s Second Holy Language*, and the name of the accompanying website, [JesusSpokeAramaic.com](http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com), obviously reflects the fact that Aramaic was the dominant language of Israel (Palestine) in the first century A.D., which is the context in which the New Testament was written. There is a wealth of evidence in this book showing that Aramaic was the language of several entire empires across the Middle East, that the Jews fought against Greek influence in the Maccabean revolt, that Aramaic continued in use for many centuries afterwards – hence the Armenian Bible and early Arabic Bibles being translated from the Aramaic New Testament – and that Aramaic continued for many centuries after that, including right through Moslem and Crusader times, and indeed, right through to the present day.

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You can get free access to an entire video lesson about whether Jews spoke Greek, entitled *Did Jews speak Greek?*, by following the link below:

<http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com/Lessons/History-of-Aramaic/Jews-Greek>

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Nevertheless, because of the fact that the New Testament in Greek has gained such dominance in the West, it is a commonly held belief that Jesus spoke Greek, and that Greek was the lingua franca, or common language, of the whole Middle East, following Alexander the Great’s conquests.

Most, if not all, New Testament Greek grammars, for instance, will contain a statement that either Greek was the lingua franca of the Middle East, or that Jesus spoke Greek, which is why the New Testament was written in Greek. It must be understood that this, however, is a circular argument. In other words, this argument states that the New Testament was written in Greek because Jesus spoke

Greek. And because Jesus spoke Greek, the New Testament was written in Greek.

But it could just as easily be argued that Jesus spoke English, because we have the New Testament in English. English New Testaments have outsold every other version by a substantial margin. They have dominated the West. They have become more popular than every other version. But that does not mean that Jesus spoke English, or that English was the lingua franca of the Middle East!

Instead, to understand whether Jesus really did speak Greek, and whether Greek was the normal spoken language amongst Jews at the time, we have to take a step back, and examine the context of when and where the New Testament was written. How did people in general (and Jews in particular) at the time feel about Greek, and would they have spoken it?

We have to remember that the Middle East, in the first century A.D., was made up of many different peoples, languages and nations. There were Jews and non-Jews. And within Jews, there were many different groups which are well known and well-documented. They include the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the scribes, secular Jews, and other lesser-known groups such as the Essenes.

Unfortunately for the Jews, the Romans ruled in Palestine. The Roman Emperors are well-known from history, including the excesses of despots such as Nero and Domitian, who relentlessly persecuted Christians. Titus and Vespasian are also well-known from history as the destroyers of the Temple in A.D. 70. Now, the Romans had their own language – Latin. They used Latin for official duties, and Latin was the language used by the Romans to write their histories, including those of Julius Caesar, Pliny, Livy, Tacitus and Seutonius, and the various histories which they wrote.

It therefore seems highly unlikely that Jews in Israel, or anyone else in Israel, would have needed Greek to conduct business with the ruling Romans, since they used Latin.

Amongst Jews, therefore, what was the feeling towards Greek? Was it a language that they learned, respected, and used for everyday conversation? We need to do some historical research to answer this question.

But we first need to understand that not all Jews were the same. Just as today we have Ultra-Orthodox Jews, Orthodox Jews, Reform Jews, and so on, so too in Palestine in the first century A.D. there was a mixture of Jews. There were religious Jews and secular Jews. There were Zealots. There were Essenes. There were Pharisees. There were Sadducees. There were scribes, and other groups. They were not all the same.

As we saw in the chapter about the Maccabean revolt, the Greek language and culture were imposed on Jews under Antiochus. Jews were forcibly persecuted. Eventually the Jews rebelled – and won the victory against the Greek army. But in the process, many Jews died and succumbed to Greek culture, Greek wisdom and the Greek language.

We therefore find that, at the time of the New Testament, some Jews had succumbed to Greek learning and had allowed pagan Greek philosophy such as wisdom, devils, false ideas of heaven and hell, and so on, to enter Judaism. These Jews had started to Hellenize Judaism and absorb ideas from the Greek pagan culture around them, and mainstream Judaism despised them for it.

They are known from history as Hellenized Jews, or in the New Testament as the Grecian Jews. We read about them in the book of Acts:

**Acts 6:1;** “And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations.”

The Hellenizing influence amongst Jews at the time was significant enough that Wikipedia has a whole article about it.

Let us quote from Wikipedia, from the article on “Hellenistic Judaism”:

“Hellenistic Judaism was a form of Judaism in the ancient world that combined Jewish religious tradition with elements of Greek culture. Until the fall of the Roman Empire and the Muslim conquests of the Eastern Mediterranean, the main centers of Hellenistic Judaism were Alexandria (Egypt) and Antioch (Northern Syria—now Turkey), the two main Greek urban

settlements of the Middle East and North Africa area, both founded at the end of the 4th century BCE in the wake of the conquests of Alexander the Great. Hellenistic Judaism also existed in Jerusalem during the Second Temple Period, where there was conflict between Hellenizers and traditionalists (sometimes called Judaizers).”

It is easy to see from this and the New Testament passages that there was significant antagonism between mainstream Jews and these Grecian, or hellenized, Jews. They didn't like each other. Mainstream Jews felt that the Grecian, hellenized Jews, were corrupting Judaism, polluting it with their false ideas and pagan culture. Jews had earlier fought against the Greeks in the earlier Maccabean revolt.

There was therefore intense anti-Greek feeling amongst traditional, religious Jews. To understand the nature and intensity of these feelings, let us consider a statement from the Babylonian Talmud:

Babylonian Talmud, Tract Baba Kama (The First Gate), Chapter 7, “At that time it was declared that cursed be he who raised swine and cursed be he who taught his sons Greek.”

In other words, religious Jews believed that learning Greek was something that should be cursed. It was avoided. It was disapproved of. Greek was the language of the enemy. It represented everything that religious and nationalistic Jews had fought for just two centuries earlier, at the time of the Maccabean revolt.

In fact, the Talmud contains other statements that illustrate how mainstream Jews had turned against the Greek language and Greek culture, following the shocking events of the Maccabean revolt.

For instance, the Talmud in Soferim 1:7-8, says that the day in which the Torah was translated into Greek, “was as difficult for the Jewish people as the day when the Golden Calf was made.” In other words, it was a day for national mourning and repentance. It was a disaster.

Also in the Talmud, it says that on the eighth day of the Hebrew month Tebet the Law was written in Greek in the days of king Ptolemy. But it says that, as a result, “And for three days darkness covered the world.” (Gaonic additions to Megillat Ta’anit, 13).

These statements demonstrate just how strongly mainstream, religious, Jews felt about Greek. To them, Greek was the language of

the enemy, the language and culture of everything that was corrupting Judaism. That is why the book of Acts shows that there was a conflict between mainstream Jews and these “Grecian Jews”.

Into this culture, then, we find that Jews in Palestine, in Israel, were actually very anti-Greek. Josephus, the famous Jewish historian at the time, contains many statements that demonstrate this. See the chapter “What does Josephus say?” for further detail.

Josephus is at pains to point out that he originally wrote in Aramaic, and only later did he translate his extensive writings into the Greek language. Furthermore, Josephus admits that he still could not pronounce Greek well, even after years of learning it. Even more amazingly, he says that only a few people he knew could even speak Greek, and that Greek learning was actually frowned upon by the Jews.

For instance, in *Antiquities of the Jews*, Josephus says:

1:7 “but because this work surrounded a great deal... in process of time, as usually happens to such as undertake great things, I grew weary and went on slowly, it being a large subject, and a difficult thing to translate our history into a foreign, and to us unaccustomed, language.”

Josephus here says that Greek was to his people, the Jews, a foreign and unaccustomed language. Translating his works from Aramaic into Greek was a great burden for him.

20:263 “For those of my own nation freely acknowledge that I far exceed them in the learning belonging to Jews: I have also taken a great deal of pains to obtain the learning of the Greeks, and understand the elements of the Greek language, although I have so long accustomed myself to speak our own tongue, that I cannot pronounce Greek with sufficient exactness;”

Josephus here confirms that it took enormous difficulty for him to learn Greek, and even after doing so, he still could not pronounce it properly.

But Josephus continues:

20:264 “for our nation does not encourage those who learn the languages of many nations.”

We see from these statements in Josephus, and the earlier ones from the Talmud, that amongst mainstream, religious Jews, Greek was not spoken. Indeed, it was something which was to be avoided, and any attempt to do so was cursed, as we saw.

Into this cultural context, therefore, let us ask the question again, Did Jews speak Greek?

Now, the Internet is full of badly researched articles whose simplistic argument is based on the circular argument we saw earlier, in other words, that Greek was the lingua franca of the Middle East and therefore Jesus spoke Greek, which is why the New Testament was written in Greek.

As we saw earlier, there was certainly a significant minority of Jews, called Grecian Jews in the New Testament, and Hellenized Jews from history, who had succumbed to Greek language and culture. They spoke Greek, and were no doubt proud of their sophisticated wisdom and superior learning. As we saw in the Wikipedia article earlier, Alexandria in Egypt and possibly Antioch in Turkey, were centers for these Grecian Jews.

But first of all, Alexandria and Antioch were *cities*. They were not countries, let alone whole regions. Just because those cities had significant numbers of Greek-speaking Jews, does not mean that all Jews everywhere else also spoke Greek. After all, New York has a significant number of Hebrew-speaking Jews. But that doesn't mean that all Jews in New York speak Hebrew, or that Hebrew is the national language of the people of New York, or that all Americans speak Hebrew just because some Jews in New York do.

Similarly, just because there were significant numbers of Greek-speaking Jews in Alexandria and Antioch, does not mean that all Jews in Egypt and Syria spoke Greek, or that all Jews in those countries spoke Greek, or that Jews in Israel spoke Greek, or that everyone in general in the Middle East spoke Greek?! Of course not!

In particular, as we have seen from both the historian Josephus and the Talmud, Jews in Israel, in Palestine, generally did NOT speak Greek. They avoided it. It was frowned upon. It was considered better to eat swine's flesh than to learn Greek. It was a thing to be cursed. They openly despised Greek learning and culture. Jews in Israel didn't need Greek to converse with the ruling Romans,

because the Romans spoke Latin. Jews in Israel might occasionally have needed some Greek words for commerce, but actually learning Greek to speak it as their common language – no, that is impossible.

We also have to remember the cultural context into which the New Testament was written. Jesus, of course, was a religious Jew *par excellence*. He was the Messiah, and he came to fulfil the Law. He was in the line of David, and he would have been king if the Maccabean dynasty had not been ended by the Romans. As religious Jews, Jesus and the disciples, of all the Jews in Israel at the time, would have been the most unlikely to have spoken Greek.

And if they did not speak Greek, if they would have avoided it, how could the gospels and the other New Testament writings have been first written in Greek, and only later translated into Aramaic? That would be a cultural anomaly.

Does it not make more cultural sense, as religious Jews in first-century Palestine, that the gospels and the other New Testament writings were first written in what Josephus calls “our language” and “the language of our country”, and then (later) translated into Greek for a wider audience, just as the Hebrew Old Testament was later translated into Greek for a wider audience?

In summary, we need to understand the culture and context of the New Testament. Just because the Greek New Testament has become entrenched in the West today, and just because there were pockets of Greek-speaking Jews in major cities such as Alexandria and possibly Antioch, we should not make the false leap of logic to assume that everyone across the Middle East, religious Jews included, spoke Greek as their common language.

That just was not the case. Jews, in Palestine, in the first century A.D., spoke Aramaic as their normal, everyday language.

And therefore, as the Messiah, as a religious Jew and not a Grecian Jew, in Palestine, in the first century A.D., Jesus spoke Aramaic. As Josephus says, it was the language of his country.

But Greek? No. As Josephus says, that was a foreign language and Jews were not encouraged to learn the languages of the surrounding nations. It was better to eat swine’s flesh than to learn Greek.

# Aramaic and the Church Fathers

**O**VER THE LAST few chapters, we have been looking at the use of Aramaic in Israel in the first century A.D. We saw that Josephus, the most important Jewish historian at the time, records clearly that Aramaic was “the language of his country” (meaning Israel!)

We also explored the use of Aramaic in the New Testament, seeing that there are a smattering of words and phrases in the New Testament which are Aramaic in origin. Most of these are uniquely, and specifically, Aramaic, rather than Hebrew.

We also explored the wider use of Aramaic in Israel, seeing that Aramaic was used by Jews generally at the time of Jesus and all throughout the Land of Israel. We also saw that Aramaic was the normal language of Egypt – although Alexandria, specifically, seems to have had a Greek-speaking population, and in fact, developed over time to become a centre of apostasy against the Bible and the true faith in God.

We also saw that Jews, generally, rebelled against Greek, and actively discouraged the speaking and teaching of Greek, because it invariably led the Jews away from the Hebrew Scriptures and towards the pagan practices and beliefs of the nations around them. The Jews rebelled against the imposition of Greek language and customs in the Maccabean Revolt.

With that background in Aramaic, it is instructive to continue our studies by looking at the “Church Fathers” and what they wrote. It is important to understand that only the Bible should be our source of

authority on doctrinal matters, and in Matthew's gospel, Jesus specifically speaks against calling those in authority "Father", because we have one Father, that is, God:

**Matthew 23:8-12;** "But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren. And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven. Neither be ye called masters: for one is your Master, even Christ. But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted."

Nevertheless, the "Church Fathers" are an important source of history, and the historical records they wrote are instructive for many reasons.

Let us, therefore, examine the writings of the Church Fathers to see what they wrote, in the context of Aramaic, and specifically, the language in which the New Testament was given.

One of the earliest and best source of information for the early history of the Christian Church, and how it spread, is Eusebius' classic *Ecclesiastical History*.

Wikipedia has a whole article about Eusebius, and the opening sentence tells us about him:

"Eusebius of Caesarea (A.D. 260/265 – 339/340), also known as Eusebius Pamphili, was a Roman historian, exegete, and Christian polemicist of Greek descent. He became the bishop of Caesarea about 314. Together with Pamphilus, he was a scholar of the Biblical canon and is regarded as an extremely well learned Christian of his time."

Eusebius, therefore, is acknowledged as an extremely well learned and respected Christian, and one of his specialities was in the Biblical canon. Living much closer to those times than we do now, if anyone ought to know how the Bible was handed down by the apostles, it was surely him.

As we noted more fully in our introduction to the Estrangela script (available at [JesusSpokeAramaic.com](http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com)), Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* contains the record of King Abgarus of Edessa, who wrote to Jesus to ask him to come and heal him of his disease, knowing that

Jesus had already cleansed many lepers, and healed the lame, the blind and the sick.

But Eusebius tells us that these royal records were written in Syriac, the dialect of Aramaic which is used to preserve the Aramaic New Testament and the Aramaic Old Testament. This provides further evidence for much of what has been explained in other chapters of this book – namely, that Aramaic, and Syriac in particular, was extensively used at the time, including for communication in the Land of Israel, even including communication with Jesus himself!

Let us read what Eusebius says in regards to the letter of King Abgarus:

**1Euseb. 13:5;** “And all that our Savior had promised received through him its fulfillment. You have written evidence of these things taken from the archives of Edessa, which was at that time a royal city. For in the public registers there, which contain accounts of ancient times and the acts of Abgarus, these things have been found preserved down to the present time. But there is no better way than to hear the epistles themselves which we have taken from the archives and have literally translated from the Syriac language in the following manner.”

Eusebius then goes on to provide the letter of Abgarus to Jesus and his disciples, with their response. Again, Eusebius records that all this communication was in Syriac.

We read as follows:

“Copy of an epistle written by Abgarus the ruler to Jesus, and sent to him at Jerusalem by Ananias the swift courier.”

**1Euseb. 13:11;** “To these epistles there was added the following account in the Syriac language. “After the ascension of Jesus, Judas, who was also called Thomas, sent to him Thaddeus, an apostle, one of the Seventy. When he was come he lodged with Tobias, the son of Tobias. When the report of him got abroad, it was told Abgarus that an apostle of Jesus was come, as he had written him.”

As we saw in the chapter about Syriac, Syriac is a massively important and influential dialect of Aramaic, going from several centuries B.C., going right through the times of Jesus and beyond,

being used for writing contemporary histories of the Crusades as late as the 1200s and 1300s, and has continued in use ever since.

With the importance of the Syriac dialect of Aramaic being what it is, and with the classic historian Eusebius (“an extremely well learned Christian of his time”, as we read earlier) recording that the communication between King Abgarus and Jesus and the disciples was written in Syriac, there can surely be no doubt that Jesus knew Syriac, and used it for communication. Should it not be expected, then, that the teaching of Jesus and the disciples would be first written in Syriac, the most important dialect of Aramaic in the first century?

But Eusebius continues:

**1Euseb. 13:22;** “These things [i.e. Eusebius writing his history] were done in the three hundred and fortieth year. I have inserted them here in their proper place, translated from the Syriac literally, and I hope to good purpose.”

As late as the third and fourth century A.D., therefore, Eusebius is saying that earlier writings, going back to the time of Jesus, were written in Syriac.

It makes perfect sense, therefore, for the Aramaic New Testament to have been written in Syriac, by the disciples of Jesus, at the time of Jesus. No other language would have been a more obvious choice.

But Eusebius goes on to record how, following the death of James the Just, heresies began to arise in the early Christian Church:

**4Euseb. 22:1;** “Hegesippus in the five books of Memoirs which have come down to us has left a most complete record of his own views... The same author also describes the beginnings of the heresies which arose in his time... after James the Just had suffered martyrdom...”

But in those early days, before those heresies which Eusebius records had developed to become full-blown apostasy, Eusebius records that the Gospels were actually written in Syriac, and preserved by the Hebrews (i.e. by the Jewish converts, rather than by Greeks or other nations):

**4Euseb. 22:8;** “And he wrote of many other matters, which we

have in part already mentioned, introducing the accounts in their appropriate places. And from the Syriac Gospel according to the Hebrews he quotes some passages in the Hebrew tongue, showing that he was a convert from the Hebrews, and he mentions other matters as taken from the unwritten tradition of the Jews.”

This, then, is clear evidence, as Eusebius clearly states, that the Gospels were first written in the Syriac dialect of Aramaic – that same Syriac which King Abgarus had used to write letters to Jesus, and the same Syriac in which the disciples had replied. Could “ignorant and unlearned” fishermen in Galilee read and write Aramaic? Of course! Aramaic was their mother tongue! And Galilee was very close to Edessa in Syria! They used Syriac to communicate... Why should it be any surprise to hear that the New Testament was first written in Syriac, and later translated into other languages as appropriate?

If we simply follow through the evidence given by the early historians, we can clearly see that Syriac (Aramaic) was the language in which Jesus and the disciples wrote, and in which the Gospels and the remainder of the New Testament were first given. These are the facts which Eusebius is telling us.

Syriac, then, was the language of Jesus and the disciples, and in which the New Testament was first written and divinely preserved. The evidence is that it was **later** translated into Greek and other languages, including Coptic, Latin, and other languages. Eusebius records that this order, first Syriac and then Greek, was the order for other faithful writings at the time:

**4Euseb. 30:1;** “In the same reign, as heresies were abounding in the region between the rivers, a certain Bardesanes, a most able man and a most skillful disputant in the Syriac tongue, having composed dialogues against Marcion’s followers and against certain others who were authors of various opinions, committed them to writing in his own language, together with many other works. His pupils, of whom he had very many (for he was a powerful defender of the faith), translated these productions from the Syriac into Greek.”

From Syriac, that all-important dialect of Aramaic, ecclesiastical

writings at the time (including the New Testament) were subsequently translated first into Greek, then from Greek to other languages such as Latin. But it all started with Syriac! And that Syriac is preserved down to the present day in the Aramaic New Testament!

Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* contains other indications that the books of the New Testament were first written in Syriac (i.e. Aramaic!) and then later translated into other languages (such as Greek):

**3Euseb. 38:2;** “Wherefore it has seemed reasonable to reckon it with the other writings of the apostle. For as Paul had written to the Hebrews in his native tongue, some say that the evangelist Luke, others that this Clement himself, translated the epistle.”

Thus, from all the evidence so far, it should be clear that “the native tongue” of Paul, a Jew from Tarsus, an Israelite indeed, was Aramaic. Therefore, Eusebius is saying that Paul’s extensive writings in the New Testament were written in Aramaic.

But Eusebius goes on to say:

**6Euseb. 14:2;** “He says that the Epistle to the Hebrews is the work of Paul, and that it was written to the Hebrews in the Hebrew language; but that Luke translated it carefully and published it for the Greeks, and hence the same style of expression is found in this epistle and in the Acts.”

Although Eusebius says “the Hebrew language”, it means the Hebrew dialect [of the native language], that is, the Aramaic dialect used by the Hebrew people, the Jews, in Israel. The Greek word used by Eusebius in this passage is not the word *glossa*, or *language*, but *phona*, or *sound*, i.e. the *sound*, or *pronunciation*, used by the Hebrew people, the Jews, in Israel.

Similarly, let us look at the next quotation from Eusebius:

**3Euseb. 39:16;** “These things are related by Papias concerning Mark. But concerning Matthew he writes as follows: “So then Matthew wrote the oracles in the Hebrew language, and every one interpreted them as he was able.”

Again, the word Eusebius uses for Hebrew “language” here is not

language, but rather the Greek word *dialecta*, i.e. it is the *dialect* of Aramaic spoken by the Hebrews, the Jews, to distinguish it from the Aramaic spoken by the surrounding nations, both far and wide.

Eusebius, however, confirms this in other places:

**6Euseb. 25:4;** “Among the four Gospels, which are the only indisputable ones in the Church of God under heaven, I have learned by tradition that the first was written by Matthew, who was once a publican, but afterwards an apostle of Jesus Christ, and it was prepared for the converts from Judaism, and published in the Hebrew language.”

Again, if we examine the Greek word used by Eusebius in this passage, he uses the word “Hebrew *arrangement*” for “Hebrew *language*”. He is saying that the New Testament is being recorded according to how Jews locally, write and preserve it, in their own language. And, as we have seen from both Josephus and the New Testament itself, that local language was Aramaic.

In other words, just as Josephus was at pains to point out, everything in Israel was spoken “in the language of their own country”, that is, in the dialect of Aramaic spoken in Israel.

This is why studying the words of the Aramaic New Testament is so important. As far as we can best determine, it contains the local preaching and words of the Lord Jesus himself, and the disciples, as near as they were to the words and phrases originally used.

It is surely wonderful and exciting to have this same preaching available to us today! May we learn and study from the Aramaic New Testament and the other available Aramaic writings! They are as close as we can possibly get to the very words of Jesus himself.

Along with the New Testament writings and those of Josephus, we are seeing a pattern emerge here. First, writings in Israel are written in Aramaic, and then they are translated into other languages such as Greek and Latin, potentially much later. As we examine the Aramaic New Testament and compare the Aramaic directly with the Greek, we will see direct evidence of exactly this – that the Aramaic came first, that the Greek came later, with Latin later still. Over time, Greek and Latin simply became more common and more popular – at least in Europe. In the East, Aramaic retained its place as the

original and only source of the New Testament.

Before we conclude this chapter, let us think some more about the term “Church Fathers”. The Church Fathers were the early historians of the Christian Church, recording how church doctrine changed and steadily departed from the Holy Scriptures, from “the faith once delivered unto the saints”, as the Epistle of Jude describes it. Eusebius records this falling away, as heretical ideas start to enter into the church, as the apostles die and can no longer defend the Holy Scriptures against the heretics.

But when most people think of “the Church Fathers”, they will think of the voluminous records of the Ante-Nicene Church Fathers and the Post-Nicene Church Fathers. Those Church Fathers wrote primarily in Greek and Latin.

But, once again, those Church Fathers only tell half the story. There is another whole group of Church Fathers that is largely ignored in the West today – and those are the *Syriac* Church Fathers.

In Wikipedia, there is a main page about the Church Fathers:

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church\\_Fathers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_Fathers)

It spends most of its time discussing the Greek and Latin Church Fathers, with only a small section on the Syriac Church Fathers – i.e. those early believers and historians who wrote in the Syriac language.

But those early Syriac Church Fathers, though they are largely ignored in the West today, wrote voluminous records. They include:

- Aphrahat
- Ephrem the Syrian
- Isaac of Antioch
- Isaac of Nineveh

They are discussed in further Wikipedia articles, for those who want to investigate further.

Thus, because the Greek and Latin Church Fathers are well known in the West today, many will assume that Greek and Latin were the earliest recorded writings of the Church Fathers, and hence the earliest languages used by the early believers.

But, as we have seen through the writings of Eusebius, Syriac writings go even further back, and are earlier still than both Greek and Latin. And many of the earliest historians, the earliest believers, and the Church Fathers themselves, all wrote in Syriac.

Once again, we are seeing a picture of how important Syriac is. To ignore Syriac, that all-important dialect of Aramaic used at the time of Jesus and the disciples, is to ignore the earliest and most important witness of the text of the New Testament.

Let us rejoice as we read the Aramaic New Testament. Because by all accounts, and by all the evidence, it is not only the earliest text of the New Testament, but the original God-breathed preaching of the Lord Jesus and the disciples. And just as the Holy Scriptures of Truth tell us would happen, God's Word has been preserved faithfully down to the present day.

Let us open up its pages and drink freely from the fountain of life.

# Aramaic and the Dead Sea Scrolls

**P**REVIOUSLY, we have seen how Aramaic was the normal, everyday language used by Jews in Israel around the time of Jesus. We saw that, following the Babylonian Exile, there was a fundamental shift from Hebrew to Aramaic. While Hebrew continued to be spoken, and was used especially in the synagogue and for the Hebrew Bible, Aramaic was by now becoming more dominant and more commonly spoken.

By the time of the Maccabean Revolt, as we saw, Jews fundamentally resisted the Greek language, Greek customs, Greek learning and Greek philosophy. There *were* pockets of Greek-speaking Jews, but Jews in Israel, specifically, were *discouraged* from learning Greek.

As we saw, the historian Josephus repeatedly refers to Aramaic as being “the language of our country” (Israel). We also saw that the New Testament itself contains many words and phrases in Aramaic, and repeatedly refers to translating or interpreting Aramaic phrases.

In the chapter about *Aramaic and the Church Fathers*, we saw that early historians such as Eusebius (in his classic *Ecclesiastical History*), and the Church Fathers, repeatedly refer to the Gospels and other New Testament writings as having been first written in Syriac (Aramaic) and then translated into Greek (and later, of course, into Latin and English).

We see a pattern emerging, then, of the very widespread use of Aramaic in everyday use around the time of the New Testament – not just in Israel, but across the Middle East generally.

We should not be at all surprised, therefore, to find that so many of

the Dead Sea Scrolls were written in Aramaic. In a story that is now famous, the Dead Sea Scrolls were found in caves near Qumran in the 1940s and 1950s. These ancient manuscripts were found in pottery jars, preserved intact in the dry heat of the desert, undisturbed for almost two thousand years.

Whereas the initial discoveries of the Dead Sea Scrolls were from the caves near Qumran, since then many other similar discoveries have taken place across Israel, to build up a much more comprehensive picture of the life and culture of these important times, around the time of Jesus.

These further discoveries occur in caves all around the Dead Sea area and the Judean desert in Israel. Photographs and discussion around these discoveries were published by the Oxford University Press as the *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert* (or DJD). They stretched to an almost complete 40 volume series, showing just how comprehensive the collection of parchments and manuscripts were.

Other similar archaeological remains have also taken place, such as the discoveries at Nahal Hever, or Wadi al-Khabat in Arabic:

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nahal\\_Hever](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nahal_Hever)

These contain two caves, The Cave of Letters, and The Cave of Horrors in which 24 human skeletons were found. These provide archaeological evidence of the Bar Kokhba Revolt, which we discussed in a separate chapter.

The Dead Sea Scrolls have been fraught with political and academic intrigue from the moment they were first discovered due to the many claims from different peoples, groups and institutions for ownership and access to them.

An overview of the controversies can be found on Wikipedia, on the article about the Dead Sea Scrolls:

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dead\\_Sea\\_Scrolls](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dead_Sea_Scrolls)

When the Dead Sea Scrolls were first discovered, the State of Israel (formed in 1948) did not exist, and the manuscript fragments came into the hands of academics associated with the Catholic Church, where they remained for the remainder of the 20th century, generally with no access to anyone else outside of the elite group of academics

who kept tight restrictions on access to the scrolls. It is only in very recent times, with the help of Israel and certain notable scholars, that access to the Dead Sea Scrolls has finally been available to others.

Since the Catholic Church was so heavily involved with the initial access to the Dead Sea Scrolls, the early theories about the origins of the Dead Sea Scrolls rested on Qumran being a scriptorium where scrolls were copied out, much like a Medieval monastery, which was a concept that the Catholic Church understood.

Those theories remained unchallenged for decades, with access to the scrolls limited to only a few scholars. Once access to the Dead Sea Scrolls became possible for others, those early theories have been challenged and other evidence has come to light.

More recently, archaeologists such as Professor Norman Golb have published comprehensive, well-researched and well-argued theories for the origins of the Dead Sea Scrolls. For example, in his excellent book *Who Wrote The Dead Sea Scrolls? The Search For The Secret Of Qumran*, Professor Golb argues that given the large numbers of scrolls, and the many different sites in which they have now been found, and the different handwriting, and given what we know of other historical events happening at the time (such as the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and the Bar Kokhba Revolt in A.D. 135), it is better to understand the Dead Sea Scrolls as manuscripts belonging to different groups, largely independently, stored in caves by different groups of people at different times, to prevent them from being destroyed in the destruction of both A.D. 70 and A.D. 135, rather than by one single group, the Essenes, as the Jesuits of the Catholic Church proposed.

The overview of Professor Golb's book provides a very useful summary of the Dead Sea Scrolls:

"Since their discovery in the Qumran caves beginning in 1947, the Dead Sea Scrolls have been the object of intense fascination and extreme controversy. Here Professor Norman Golb intensifies the debate over the scrolls' origins, arguing that they were not the work of a small, desert-dwelling fringe sect, as other scholars have claimed, but written by different groups of Jews and then smuggled out of Jerusalem's libraries before the Roman siege of A.D. 70."

“Golb also unravels the mystery behind the scholarly monopoly that controlled the scrolls for many years, and discusses his role as a key player in the successful struggle to make the scrolls widely available to both scholars and students. And he pleads passionately for an academic politics and a renewed commitment to the search for the truth in scroll scholarship.”

However, in the context of Aramaic, the Dead Sea Scrolls provide a very valuable insight into the various languages spoken and used during this important time. That is, the scrolls dated from the first few centuries B.C., right through to the destruction of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and some to the later Bar Kokhba Revolt.

Obviously, Hebrew features heavily in the languages used in the Dead Sea Scrolls. This is not surprising, given that the preservation of the Hebrew Scriptures themselves (that is, the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament) was a fundamental goal for hiding the scrolls in the first place, given the imminent destruction of the Temple by the Romans in A.D. 70, and the later (possibly even more destructive and decisive) loss of life at the Bar Kokhba Revolt.

Hebrew texts, including extensive copies of the Hebrew Scriptures, make up about 80% of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Being religious Jewish believers, this again should not really be a surprise. They would want to encourage the use of Hebrew as a religious language, amongst these religious Jews.

Scrolls written in Aramaic make up almost the remaining 20% of the overall Dead Sea Scrolls. This again demonstrates the importance of Aramaic in everyday use, as both a spoken and written language, as we have seen throughout the previous chapters on the Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek and Roman Empires.

By contrast, according to the Wikipedia article, Greek uncial script, with Greek manuscripts and papyrus, as part of the Dead Sea Scrolls, represents less than 3% of the overall scrolls found – and the use of Greek Uncial script dates those particular manuscripts to between the 3rd and 8th centuries A.D., well outside the time period in which the New Testament was given.

Nabatean, a dialect of Aramaic which was used by the Nabataeans (an ancient Arab people of the Negev, east bank of the Jordan, and

the Sinai Peninsula), is also represented in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

But the very small numbers of Greek scrolls found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the fact that those date to between the 3rd and 8th centuries A.D., surely brings at end to the argument that Greek was the *lingua franca*, or normal spoken language, of Jews in Israel in New Testament times. Since there are so few Greek scrolls found, it demonstrates that Greek was not commonly spoken amongst Jews, or at least anything written in Greek was not worth keeping or saving. That also brings an end to the idea that the Greek Septuagint or LXX, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, was commonly used amongst Jews in the first century, such as Jesus. By and large, Jews didn't use the Greek Septuagint. Jews continued to use the Hebrew Bible, with the Aramaic Targums being used alongside the Hebrew, to make sure they fully understood the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Dead Sea Scrolls have fascinated and intrigued people for decades, mainly due to the academic scandals involved in their publication (or lack of publication). But when the dust settles and the arguments come to an end, the main points to be taken away from the Dead Sea Scrolls, from that very large number of hidden scrolls and manuscripts found all throughout the Judean Desert (not just at Qumran), are as follows:

- Overwhelmingly, the Dead Sea Scrolls relate to Jewish religious texts, to the Jewish people, in the land of Israel.
- The Dead Sea Scrolls are most likely to relate to different Jewish groups, and were hidden by different people at different times, for different reasons, but mostly as a result of trying to preserve what could be preserved, as the Roman destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and the later destruction of the Bar Kokhba Revolt, became more and more inevitable.
- The majority of the Dead Sea Scrolls are written in Hebrew, because preserving the Hebrew Bible was of prime importance.
- Both Hebrew and Aramaic are heavily represented in the non-Biblical scrolls, indicating the importance of both these languages in the lives of religious Jews in New Testament

times.

- ➔ The very small number of Greek scrolls, and the comparative lateness of those scrolls, shows that Greek was just not a language that was heavily used by mainstream, religious Jews at this time.

Yet again, we see the importance of both Hebrew and Aramaic, those two related languages that have grown intertwined together throughout the pages of the Holy Scriptures.

The Old Testament in Hebrew, and the New Testament in Aramaic. Hebrew and Aramaic, together, have both been the languages in which God chose to reveal His Word. May we honour both languages, and seek to study the Words of the Most High God.

# What About Hebrew?!

**T**HE FOCUS OF this book is obviously on Aramaic. We have presented a wealth of evidence to show the dominance of Aramaic amongst mainstream Jews, in Palestine, in the first century A.D., as well as the continuing dominance of Aramaic long after that. Aramaic, then, is the cultural context into which the New Testament was given.

However, there is a very strong “Hebrew roots” movement, which seeks to show that Hebrew was the dominant language amongst Jews in Israel in the first century A.D., that Hebrew was the normal spoken language amongst Jews, and that, if the New Testament was written in a language other than Greek, it would have been Hebrew.

In this chapter, therefore, we investigate these issues. The name of the accompanying website, [JesusSpokeAramaic.com](http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com), may lead some people to wrongly assume that Jews in general, and Jesus in particular, ONLY spoke Aramaic, and did NOT speak Hebrew.

But Hebrew, as has been stated many times in this book, is the “holy language” of Judaism. As the language of the Hebrew Scriptures, it has a special place in the heart of Jews. Hebrew is the national language of Israel today. It has always been the sacred language. It is therefore natural to believe that Hebrew has always been foremost in the hearts and minds of Jews for all time. Could there have been a time (in the first century, in Israel) when Jews spoke Aramaic more widely than they spoke Hebrew?

Let’s answer the question by asking another question. Outside of the land of Israel, around the world, how many Jews use Hebrew as their normal, everyday spoken language? How many Jews speak Hebrew, the holy language, so fluently that they can hold a sustained conversation in it, and converse freely in it?

The answer, unfortunately, is that while the majority of Jews claim to hold Hebrew as a special place in their heart, the reality is that very few actually learn Hebrew well enough to read the Scriptures easily, or well enough to hold a conversation in Hebrew. The majority of Jews have learned the language of the countries they live in, and while they aspire to learn Hebrew and may know a fair number of Hebrew words and phrases, learning Hebrew fluently remains an aspiration.

And if that is true for Jews today, it was also true for Jews in Israel in New Testament times. They learned Aramaic after the Babylonian exile. In fact, the Talmud, in Pesachim 87b, specifically states that the Jews were exiled to Babylon because the Aramaic language was close to Hebrew, and it made the assimilation process easier for the Jews.

After the exile, Aramaic started to supplant Hebrew as the dominant language of Jews in Israel, in other words, as the normal, everyday language they would use to hold conversations, conduct general business, and generally discuss secular subjects.

Let us quote from a number of encyclopaedias which demonstrate this:

First of all, let us read the testimony of the International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia:

“See ARAMAIC LANGUAGE for proof that Jesus spoke that language as the vernacular of the people of Palestine.”

“Aramaic became the principal tongue throughout extensive regions. After the return from the Captivity, it displaced Hebrew as the spoken language of the Jews in Palestine.”

The Encyclopaedia Britannica, similarly, adds its testimony that Jesus spoke Aramaic, and that Aramaic was the commonly spoken language in Israel at the time that the New Testament was written. It says:

“Aramaic dialects survived into Roman times, however, particularly in Palestine and Syria. Aramaic had replaced Hebrew as the language of the Jews as early as the 6th century B.C. ... Among the Jews, Aramaic was used by the common people, while Hebrew remained the language of religion and

government and of the upper class. Jesus and the Apostles are believed to have spoken Aramaic, and Aramaic-language translations (Targums) of the Old Testament circulated.”

By the time of the first century, therefore, Hebrew was no longer the dominant language. That does not mean that Jews only spoke Aramaic, or that Hebrew was no longer spoken. In fact, there is plenty of evidence to show that Hebrew was still alive and well, still actually spoken as a living language, at this time. This was the case especially amongst religious Jews. Hebrew did not die out as a spoken language.

For instance, consider the passage in the New Testament when Jesus reads from the scroll of Isaiah:

**Luke 4:16-21;** “And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read. And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, To preach the acceptable year of the Lord. And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him. And he began to say unto them, This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.”

Since Jesus was reading from the Torah scroll in Hebrew, it is entirely possible that this whole incident was spoken in Hebrew.

We can also look at the Dead Sea Scrolls. Obviously the Biblical scrolls were in Hebrew because they were copies of the Hebrew Scriptures, but (for example) the Community Scroll was also written in Hebrew, suggesting that Hebrew was the language the community used for normal conversation. But as this was a religious community, it would not be surprising for them to want to use Hebrew (as the Holy Language) in distinction to Aramaic, which was the everyday secular language.

Likewise, the Mishnah was written in Hebrew, albeit not quite the

same Hebrew as Biblical Hebrew. The Gemara, the extensive commentary on the Mishnah, however, is written in Aramaic. Together, they form the Talmud.

To underline the continued importance of Hebrew, in the Bar Kokhba revolt, we find a resurgence of Hebrew. For instance, in the Wikipedia article on “The Language of Jesus”, we read:

“According to Dead Sea Scrolls archaeologist, Yigael Yadin, Aramaic was the spoken language of Jews until Simon Bar Kokhba tried to revive Hebrew and make it as the official language of Jews during the Bar Kokhba revolt (132-135 AD). Yadin noticed the shift from Aramaic to Hebrew during the time of Bar Kokhba revolt. In his book *Bar Kokhba: The rediscovery of the legendary hero of the last Jewish Revolt Against Imperial Rome*, Yigael Yadin notes, “It is interesting that the earlier documents are written in Aramaic while the later ones are in Hebrew. Possibly the change was made by a special decree of Bar-Kokhba who wanted to restore Hebrew as the official language of the state” (page 181).

In the book *A Roadmap to the Heavens: An Anthropological Study of Hegemony among Priests, Sages, and Laymen (Judaism and Jewish Life)* by Sigalit Ben-Zion (page 155), Yadin remarked, “It seems that this change came as a result of the order that was given by Bar Kokhba, who wanted to revive the Hebrew language and make it the official language of the state.”

Thus, the fact that there is a documented “resurgence” or “revival” of Hebrew at this time, or an attempt to “get back” to Hebrew, only serves to emphasize the point that Aramaic, at this time, was the normal, everyday, language spoken by Jews in Israel. The existence of the New Testament in Aramaic (the Aramaic Peshitta), therefore, should not come as a surprise.

When debating whether Hebrew or Aramaic was the spoken language in Israel when the New Testament was written, many people try to make the case for either Hebrew, or Aramaic, as though it was a stark, black-and-white choice of one or the other, as though one was correct and the other wrong.

Instead, both Hebrew and Aramaic were certainly spoken at the time. The importance of Hebrew should never be forgotten. Hebrew

was, and will always remain, the Holy Language. Amongst religious Jews, such as Jesus, Hebrew no doubt held a special place. It was the language of the Hebrew Bible. How could it be anything less than important?

But in the effort not to forget Hebrew, neither should Aramaic be forgotten. This is what is meant by the statement in the Palestinian Talmud:

“My Son, let not the Aramaic be lightly esteemed by you as the Holy One, blessed be He, has seen fit to give it voice in the Torah and the Prophets and the Writings.” (Palestinian Talmud, Sotah 7:2)

Hebrew is the holy language, but Aramaic, too, has a place. It also is important, as we saw in the chapter *Aramaic – Judaism’s Second Holy Language*. Hebrew and Aramaic have grown up, together, intertwined down through the centuries. If Hebrew is the language of the Jews, then Aramaic is the language of the Gentiles, making it a very appropriate language for the New Testament to be revealed in.

To understand the balance between Hebrew and Aramaic, let us ask some simple questions, and provide some simple answers.

- ➔ Is Hebrew important? Yes, of course, it is the holy language.
- ➔ Had Hebrew ceased to be a spoken language in New Testament times? No, definitely not.
- ➔ Was Hebrew, at the time, an actual SPOKEN language, as opposed to a liturgical language, one used only to recite the Hebrew Scriptures? Yes, the evidence of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Mishnah shows that Hebrew was still a living, spoken, language.
- ➔ Was Hebrew the ONLY language that was spoken by Jews? No.
- ➔ As a religious Jew, would Jesus have spoken Hebrew? Yes, of course.
- ➔ As a religious Jew, would Jesus ONLY have spoken Hebrew? No, he would have had to know Aramaic to read the Aramaic portions of Daniel and Ezra, and to converse with the Aramaic-speaking people around him. He gave Simon

bar Jonah an Aramaic name (Keyfa, or Cephas) so he must have spoken Aramaic!

- ➔ As a religious Jew, would Jesus have PREFERRED to speak Hebrew? That is entirely possible.
- ➔ Was there an effort amongst religious Jews to “get back” to Hebrew? Yes, Jews knew that Aramaic was becoming dominant and that people were starting to lose their knowledge of Hebrew, so yes, many wanted to fight this process. The fact that they wanted to fight it, is the proof that it was happening.

Hopefully this chapter helps to put the importance of Hebrew into context. Those in the Hebrew Roots movement, or who advocate Hebrew primacy over Aramaic primacy, should not forget the importance of Aramaic, and the long cultural connection between the Holy Scriptures, Jews, and the surrounding nations. Aramaic is the glue that binds everything together.

# Was Latin spoken amongst Jews?

**A**S WE CONTINUE our journey into Aramaic down through the centuries, we come to the Roman Empire – a fascinating time in world history. This was also a critical period for the New Testament, since Israel at this time was ruled by the Roman Empire, and the interaction with the Romans has so many interesting references in the New Testament.

A number of earlier chapters of this book have looked at the extent to which Jews in Israel – in Roman Palestine in the first century A.D. – would have spoken Greek. We also investigated whether Jews, at this time, still used Hebrew as a spoken language. In this chapter, for comparison, we investigate the extent to which Latin was spoken in Israel, and in particular whether it was spoken by Jews.

As the Greek Empire fell apart after the death of Alexander the Great, there were battles between the Ptolemies to the south of Israel, in Egypt, and the Seleucids to the north of Israel, in Syria. As we saw in a separate chapter, this led to Antiochus Epiphanes invading Israel and imposing Greek language and culture on the Jews, leading to the Maccabean revolt. The Jews won and gained their victory, but it was short-lived and Israel was soon overrun again – this time by a more persistent sequence of dictators, ones who also would impose their will, and force the Jews into submission, eventually leading to the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70.

Following the end of the Greek Empire, the Roman Empire now ruled Europe and the Middle East, starting with Julius Caesar and leading to a series of dictators or Emperors who would become notorious in history. The Romans formed a vast and cruel Empire

which would be larger than all the Empires that preceded it. The Roman Empire, split into the West and East, became the legs of the great image seen by king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in his dream in Daniel chapter 2. The Roman Empire was also the fulfilment of Daniel's vision of the fourth beast, dreadful and terrible, described in the prophecy of Daniel 7.

Into this Roman Empire was born Jesus of Nazareth, destined to be the king of the Jews, the saviour who would redeem mankind from the curse of sin and death that resulted from Adam and Eve's transgression in the garden of Eden.

The official language of the Roman Empire was, of course Latin. The Romans used Latin for administration of their vast empire, and Latin was the language in which Roman historians wrote their histories. Thus, we find that famous early Roman histories such as *The Gallic Wars* by Julius Caesar, *The Twelve Caesars* by Suetonius, *The Annals [of Imperial Rome]* by Tacitus, and *The History of Rome* by Livy, were all written in Latin.

But despite the fact that Latin was the official and administrative language used by the Romans across their vast Empire, history shows that the vast populations that accepted "Pax Romana" or "The Peace of Rome" continued to speak their own languages, and were not forced to learn Latin.

For instance, the Roman Empire spread across Europe, as far north as Scotland. Although Italy, specifically, was the motherland of the Roman Empire and they spoke Latin (later to become Italian), other countries continued to speak their own languages, although those languages would be influenced by the adoption of many Latin words. English, for instance, contains many words of Latin origin. But the English do not speak Latin today. Neither do the French, the Spanish, the Portuguese, the Germans, nor any of the other host of countries that encompassed the Roman Empire. Interaction with the Roman rulers may have needed a knowledge of some Latin words, but the ordinary people across the Roman Empire did not learn Latin.

Similarly, when we come to the New Testament, Jews in Palestine did not make any particular effort to learn Latin, not were they required to. In fact, as we saw in the chapter *What Does Josephus Say?*,

the Jewish historian Josephus specifically says that Jews did not encourage the learning of many languages. In other words, Jews had no desire to learn the languages of the nations around them, since that would only encourage assimilation which Jews have always resisted, and would ultimately lead the Jewish people away from their Hebrew and Biblical roots.

And so, in the New Testament we find only one explicit reference to Latin. The sign above the cross when Jesus was crucified was written in letters of Greek, Hebrew and Latin:

**Luke 23:38;** “And a superscription also was written over him in letters of Greek, and Latin, and Hebrew, THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS.”

Similarly, in Mel Gibson’s movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, the Romans speak Latin amongst themselves, while the Jews speak Aramaic.

There is a smattering of Latin words in the New Testament, which shows clearly the interaction (unfortunately sometimes a rather unpleasant interaction) which the Jews had with the ruling Romans. Thus, in both the Greek New Testament and the Aramaic New Testament, we find several words of Latin origin such as:

- *assarion* – a farthing, a Roman coin.
- *denarion* – a denarius, another Roman coin.
- *flagellum* – the whip used to flog both Jesus and Paul, to give them the 39 lashes.
- *Kaisar*, or Caesar.
- *kenturion* – a centurion, the soldier in charge of other soldiers.
- *kensos* – a census.
- *kodrantēs* – a quadrans, a Roman coin.
- *kolonia* – a Roman colony for veterans.
- *koustodia* – custody, a Roman sentry or watch.
- *legion* – a Roman legion.
- *lention* – a linen cloth, towel or apron.

- *litra* – a Roman pound (in weight).
- *mila* or *milion* – a Roman mile.
- *porpura* – or purple.
- *praitorion* – or Praetorium, the judgement hall where the Roman garrison was stationed.
- *stratotes* – or soldier, where we get our word ‘strategy’.

In addition, there are quite a few Latin proper names such as Aquila, Amplias, Apelles, Appios, Augustus, Gaius, Gallion, Julius, Justus, Claudius, Clemens, Cornelius, Quartus, Crispus, Cyrenius, Loukas, and others.

Furthermore, Latin inscriptions and other official documents have been found in Israel, or Roman Palestine.

Despite these connections with Latin and the ruling Romans, we do not find that the common people spoke Latin as part of their everyday language, despite the Romans ruling for hundreds of years. Latin was just too different from Aramaic, and the Romans were too despised, for ordinary people (Jews) to make the effort to learn that foreign language.

And so, if that was the case with Latin, why would it not be the case with Greek, too?

For those who think that Greek was the ‘lingua franca’, or common language, of the entire Middle East, just because Alexander the Great ‘conquered’ the Middle East, if Latin did not become the lingua franca of the Middle East (even though the Romans ruled with an iron fist for upwards of five centuries) why would Greek become the lingua franca when the Greek army was there for far less time, and Jews despised the Greeks just as much as the Romans?

Instead, we find that the Greeks, and later the Romans, caused a cultural interchange, in that words to do with commerce and administration started to be used, but there was not a wholesale shift in language use across an immense population, geographically dispersed.

Aramaic continued to be spoken in the Middle East just as it always had been, and Aramaic continued to be spoken long after the Greeks and Romans had gone, right up until the Moslem conquests, and

later the Crusaders. We look at the shift from Aramaic to Arabic, and the use of Aramaic at the time of the Crusaders, in later chapters of this book.

# Aramaic – Judaism's Second Holy Language

**I**N PREVIOUS chapters, we have looked at the long history of Aramaic and its close connection with the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments. We have seen that Aramaic has an extensive and intimate connection with the Jewish people down through the centuries, as well as all the nations surrounding Israel, covering the entire time in which the Bible was written.

In this chapter, however, we look more closely at the connection that Aramaic has with Judaism. Although Hebrew has always been the Holy Language, Aramaic too has a part to play and remains essential to a full understanding of Jewish beliefs and practices. If everything written in Aramaic was taken away from Judaism, it would be as though Judaism was breathing on only one lung. Let us examine, therefore, the Aramaic texts that form an essential part of Judaism.

First and foremost, as we demonstrate in the series of video lessons about Biblical Aramaic that are available at [JesusSpokeAramaic.com](http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com), several entire chapters in Daniel and Ezra are written in Aramaic, as well as words and phrases in the Law (Genesis), the Writings (Daniel and phrases in Job) and the Prophets (Jeremiah). It is therefore impossible to fully read and understand the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) without understanding those sections which are written in Aramaic. In fact, the Talmud (Sanhedrin 38b) even says that Adam conversed in Aramaic, and in the Talmud (Pesachim 87b) it says that, after the destruction of the First Temple, God specifically chose to exile the Jews to Babylon because of the similarity of the Hebrew and Aramaic languages, thereby reducing the culture shock they would experience.

And of course we have the Aramaic Targums, which were the official Jewish translations of the books making up the Hebrew Bible. We examine the Targums in more detail in an entire series of video lessons that are available at [JesusSpokeAramaic.com](http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com).

As we move on a few centuries later, some of the Dead Sea Scrolls, closely connected to Jewish worship, are written in Aramaic, showing the use of Aramaic during this time too.

While the Mishnah (the systematic compilation of the teachings of the Jewish sages based on the Law of Moses) is written in Hebrew, the Gemara (the commentary on the Mishnah) is written almost entirely in Aramaic. Together, they form the Talmud, the fundamental basis on which traditional Judaism is based. Aramaic had, by this time, become so widespread in Jewish life that both the Jerusalem Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud are dominated by Aramaic. Today, literally tens of thousands of Jews around the world read the Talmud, studying both the Mishnah, and the Gemara commentary in Aramaic. The website *Daf Yomi* (My Page of the Day) brings Jews together from around the world to study these classic Hebrew and Aramaic texts, one page per day. This could mean that there are more Jews learning these Aramaic texts today than even during the Babylonian exile!

Many of the most important texts of the Kabbalah, including the Book of Zohar, are also written in Aramaic. This demonstrates that Aramaic has been in constant use amongst Jews, for commentaries and related works, from before New Testament times right through to Medieval times and beyond.

While Hebrew was known as “Lashon HaKodesh” or “The Holy Language” for the Torah and Hebrew Bible itself, Aramaic was used for commentaries, prayers and other works. In a similar way, Yiddish (rather than Hebrew) was used amongst Jewish communities as the ordinary language for conversation and secular matters, while Hebrew remained the Holy Language.

Thus, we find that the traditional *Ketubah* (marriage contract) and the Jewish divorce document are written in Aramaic.

Many hymns and prayers are also written in Aramaic, such as the opening paragraph of the Passover Haggadah (“This is the bread of our affliction”), and the song about the goat at the end of the

Passover Haggadah (“Chad Gadya”), as well as the Kaddish (the prayer of mourning for the dead).

And so, given the close connection that Judaism has with Aramaic which we have seen in this chapter, it is entirely natural and appropriate that Jesus and the disciples would feel completely at home with Aramaic. It is wholly fitting that the New Testament would be written in Aramaic. The combination of Hebrew in the Old Testament and Aramaic in the New Testament, or Hebrew for the Jews and Aramaic for the Gentiles, is an extremely beautiful picture that fulfils the Scriptures in the most appropriate language for each people. Thus, through this combination of Hebrew and Aramaic, all Israel (both Jew and Gentile) will be saved, as the Scripture explains in Romans 11:

**Rom. 11:25-26;** For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in. And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob.”

# What is Biblical Aramaic?

**B**IBLICAL ARAMAIC refers to specific words, phrases, verses and passages in the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, which are written in Aramaic rather than Hebrew. Since Biblical Aramaic appears in the Hebrew Bible, it is written in 'Hebrew' (Ashuri) characters. To learn this important script, make sure you watch the extensive series of video lessons on the Aramaic Alphabet that are available from [JesusSpokeAramaic.com](http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com)!

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You can get free access to an entire video lesson about Biblical Aramaic, entitled *What is Biblical Aramaic?*, by following the link below:

<http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com/Lessons/Biblical-Aramaic/What-is-Biblical-Aramaic>

You can also get access to many sample video lessons on the Hebrew/Aramaic Alphabet by following the link below:

<http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com/Lessons/Aramaic-Alphabet/How-Difficult-to-Learn>

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Biblical Aramaic, especially the Aramaic portions in Daniel and Ezra, are often referred to as 'Chaldee', for example in the classic *Hebrew & Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament* by Wilhelm Gesenius. The Chaldeans were the ruling elite in the Babylonian Empire at this time, and Aramaic was the official language of the Babylonian Empire, hence the term Chaldee refers to the Aramaic found particularly in Daniel and Ezra.

The passages of the Hebrew Bible which are definitely written in Aramaic are as follows:

- The phrase (place name) Jegar Sahadutha in Genesis 31:47.
- The single verse in Jeremiah 10:11.
- Large passages in Daniel (chapters 2:4b-7:28).
- Large passages in Ezra (chapters 4:8-6:18 and 7:12-26).

These passages are obviously written in Aramaic, rather than Hebrew. However, there is strong evidence that many other words and verses in the Hebrew Bible are either heavily influenced by Aramaic, or could perhaps be better understood as being Aramaic rather than Hebrew.

Examples of passages such as these include:

- Genesis 15:1, where the Zohar (1:88b) says that the word *ba-machaze* (“in a vision”) in this verse is Aramaic, since the usual Hebrew word would be *ba-mareh*.
- Numbers 23:10, where the Hebrew word “*roba*” (usually translated “stock” or “fourth part”) is unusual. Rabbi J. H. Hertz, in his commentary on this verse, suggests that this is an Aramaic word meaning *dust*, which makes complete sense in the context.
- Job 36:2, where Rashi, in his commentary on this verse, states that the phrase “*katar-li za'er*” is Aramaic.

However, these should not be considered as isolated examples, or a complete list. When you systematically read the Hebrew Bible with a knowledge of Aramaic, you will find many similar examples where individual words or phrases often make more sense as Aramaic, rather than Hebrew. Common names of people and places in the Bible are also often Aramaic, rather than Hebrew.

As well as these examples, the highly recommended book *A History of the Hebrew Language* written by Shelomo Morag, Angel Saenz-Badillos and John Elwolde, and published by the Cambridge University Press, provides a very comprehensive look at the history of the Hebrew language. This detailed and fascinating book provides a considerable number of examples showing how (over the centuries) Hebrew, including the Hebrew of the Bible, has been heavily influenced by Aramaic – both in individual words and in the presence of grammatical features of the Hebrew Bible which show a clear influence from Aramaic.

The Hebrew of the Jewish Mishnah, dating to the first few centuries A.D., also, similarly, shows a clear influence from Aramaic. There are countless examples in Mishnaic Hebrew, for instance, where the masculine plural ending “-een” is used instead of the equivalent

Hebrew ending “-eem”, plus many other features of Aramaic.

With the above background, it is important to understand that Hebrew and Aramaic are sister languages. Although they are separate languages and not dialects, they have both shared a common history amongst the Semitic nations of the Middle East. Hebrew and Aramaic have grown alongside each other for millennia, and over the centuries they have often touched each other, influenced each other, and even become partly inter-twined, like two vines growing together.

If Hebrew is the Bible's first Holy Language, then Aramaic is the Bible's second Holy Language. Hebrew and Aramaic have grown up together, like two faithful sons of the same Father, to become intermingled. Even today, for instance, the connection between Hebrew and Aramaic is apparent. Jews refer to a “bar mitzva” when Jewish boys come of age, which is a combination of the Aramaic word “bar” (meaning son) and the Hebrew word “mitsva” (meaning commandment). A “bar mitzva” or “son of the commandment” is a combined Hebrew and Aramaic phrase!

It should therefore be obvious how important an understanding of the Aramaic language is. Hebrew and Aramaic, together, are the languages that God has chosen to reveal His Word in the Hebrew Bible. It is impossible to understand the entire Hebrew Bible unless you also understand Aramaic – at the very least, to understand the sections of the Hebrew Bible which are written in Aramaic, and also to understand many words and phrases in the Hebrew Bible better.

In fact, so important is Aramaic to Jews, that the Palestinian Talmud, in Sotah 7:2, says:

“My Son, let not the Aramaic be lightly esteemed by you as the Holy One, blessed be He, has seen fit to give it voice in the Torah and the Prophets and the Writings”.

This means that Jews, in elevating Hebrew to the status of Holy Language, might forget how important Aramaic is. The admonition from the Palestinian Talmud is to remind Jews that Aramaic also holds a place of importance in the Holy Scriptures. Specifically, as we saw at the start of this chapter, Aramaic is found in the three major divisions of the Hebrew Bible – in the Law, or Torah (Genesis 31:47), in the Prophets (Jeremiah 10:11) and in the Writings (the

Aramaic portions of Daniel and Ezra).

Since God Himself has chosen to make Aramaic part of the Holy Scriptures, in His inspired Word, we, too, should realize the critical importance of Aramaic. We, too, should honor the Aramaic and seek to understand it, alongside Hebrew, as the two holy languages in which God has chosen to reveal His Word.

With this background showing how important Aramaic is in the Hebrew Bible, how Aramaic forms an inherent part of the Hebrew Bible and therefore deserves to be studied, it should come as no surprise whatsoever that God would choose to reveal His Word to the Gentiles (through the New Testament) in the Aramaic language. Aramaic was the language God chose to reveal His Word to the Gentiles in Jeremiah and in the prophecies in Daniel, and therefore Aramaic is the most appropriate language to reveal His Word to the Gentiles in the pages of the New Testament. We should not be surprised, then, that the Aramaic New Testament shows all the hallmarks of authenticity, integrity and originality, because it too is the inspired Word of God.

Hebrew to the Jews, and Aramaic to the Gentiles, is the pattern of the Holy Scriptures. Greek, by contrast, was the language of the enemies of the Jews, those who fought against Judaism, those who forced Jews to worship statues of Zeus (or *Deus, Theos*) and who forced Jews to eat swine's flesh. Greek is the language of 'sophia' or worldly 'wisdom', of pagan practices and ideas, and humanist philosophies, of everything that is against God's Word.

As Jews were admonished to do in the Palestinian Talmud, let us not lightly esteem the Aramaic language. But rather, let us honor it and respect it. Because it is not only the language that God has seen fit to give a voice to in the Torah, and the Prophets, and the Writings, but is also the language that God has seen fit to give voice to, in the pages of the New Testament. Aramaic was the language spoken by Jesus and the disciples. We should therefore honor it, respect it, and learn it.

# What are the Aramaic Targums?

Throughout this book, we have mentioned the Aramaic Targums. The Targums (or Targumim in Hebrew) are the official translations of the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic, considered authoritative by Judaism. “Targum” simply means “Translation”, and “Targumim” is plural in Hebrew, and therefore means “Translations”.

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You can get free access to an entire video lesson about the Aramaic Targums, entitled *What are the Aramaic Targums?*, by following the link below:

<http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com/Lessons/Aramaic-Targums/What-are-Aramaic-Targums>

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The Targums were translated by Jews as the need arose for translations of the books of the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic. They have an 'official' (or approved) status within Judaism, whereas the Peshitta Tanakh (the Aramaic Old Testament) is an independent (but still Jewish) translation of the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic which has not gained official acceptance or approval amongst Jews. Generally, the Targums are preferred by Jews whereas the Aramaic Peshitta Old Testament seems to have been adopted or preferred by the early Christians.

The Targums have an interesting history. After the Babylonian exile, Jews were exiled into Babylon, where Aramaic was the official language of the Babylonian Empire. Since the exiled Israelites were forced to speak Aramaic rather than their traditional Hebrew, over the years they became more familiar with Aramaic in everyday usage. Hebrew, of course, continued to be used in religious worship

because it was the language in which the Hebrew Bible was written.

However, as time went by and the decades turned into centuries, Hebrew steadily declined as a spoken language in favour of Aramaic. Over time, Jews translated individual books (or groups of books) of the Hebrew Bible, into Aramaic, for wider availability in what had by now become their everyday spoken language. These ancient Targums, or translations, are still available today. They are still used by Jews, yet are almost entirely ignored by other Bible students.

As we demonstrate later in this chapter, the Aramaic Targums are very important and have a huge amount to offer Bible students. They reveal the context of the New Testament writings and how Jesus and the disciples would have understood the parables Jesus spoke and the debates he had with the scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees. And yet, despite these valuable insights, the Aramaic Targums remain heavily under-utilized and under-valued by most Bible students today.

The origins of the Aramaic Targums go back to Nehemiah's time, where we read in the Hebrew Bible:

**Nehemiah 8:1-8;** “And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate; and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded to Israel. And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month. And he read therein before the street that was before the water gate from the morning until midday, before the men and the women, and those that could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law. And Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose; . . . And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people; (for he was above all the people;) and when he opened it, all the people stood up: And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. And all the people answered, Amen, Amen, with lifting up their hands: and they bowed their heads, and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground. . . . and the Levites, caused

the people to understand the law: and the people stood in their place. So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.”

Thus, seventy years after the exile into Babylon, the Jews started returning to the Land of Israel under Ezra and Nehemiah. Forced to speak Aramaic in Babylon, they were by now much more familiar with Aramaic than with Hebrew. The above passage from the Hebrew Bible records how the Law (Torah) was read in public in Hebrew, but that the people were made to understand the sense, i.e. the Hebrew was translated for them into Aramaic to make sure they understood what was being said. Over time, these oral Aramaic translations became written down, forming the Aramaic Targums that we have today.

By the end of the Babylonian exile, Aramaic as a spoken language had become so widespread that Jews were no longer accustomed to speaking Hebrew. In fact, Nehemiah laments that an understanding of Hebrew could no longer be taken for granted:

**Nehemiah 13:23-24;** “In those days also saw I Jews that had married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab. And their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews' language, but according to the language of each people. And I contended with them, and cursed them, and smote certain of them, and plucked off their hair, and made them swear by God, saying, Ye shall not give your daughters unto their sons, nor take their daughters unto your sons, or for yourselves. Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things?...”

Here, the phrase, “the Jews' language” is referring to Hebrew, the everyday use of which was, by this time, starting to decline.

It is important to realize that the Aramaic Targums arose according to need, i.e. the individual books of the Hebrew Bible were translated into Aramaic as and when required, at different times, and by different people. The Targums are therefore not a single translation of the whole Hebrew Bible as a single effort. Instead, there are different Aramaic translations of different books of the Hebrew Bible, varying in quality and how good they are. Over time,

some of these Targums have gained an authoritative status, and some have not.

This overview of the Aramaic Targums is enough to show that the history of the Targums is very different from that of the Aramaic Old Testament. Although the Aramaic Old Testament is still an Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible, unlike the Targums (which are individual translations of individual books), the Aramaic Old Testament is a single coherent translation of the entire Hebrew Bible, done at a single point in time. It was still translated by Jews (just like the Targums). However, it fell into disuse amongst Jews because it seems to have been adopted by the early Christian believers, whereas the Targums were adopted by mainstream Judaism – the Pharisees and scribes, and later, the Rabbinical authorities.

Finally, a note on the use of the words *Targums* and *Targumim* may be helpful. *Targum* is singular, meaning “Translation”. English has adopted the original Hebrew word. The plural of Targum is *Targums* in English, but *Targumim* is Hebrew.

The Aramaic Targums have a great deal to offer Bible students. A study of them will be richly rewarded, as they yield up their treasures in the many video lessons that are available from [JesusSpokeAramaic.com](http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com). The Targums are the traditional translations in Judaism, into Aramaic, of the books of the Hebrew Bible. These Targums, or Translations, arose over time according to need, rather than being a single concerted effort to translate the books of the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic at one single point in time.

To understand the importance of the Aramaic Targums, we first need to understand the importance they hold in Judaism in general, before we look at the importance to Bible students from other backgrounds.

Due to the close connection that Judaism has with Aramaic, in that Aramaic is Judaism's second Holy Language, the Aramaic Targums have always held an esteemed position amongst Jews. Thus, in the Talmud (the Gemara), in Tractate Berakhot 8a, it is written:

Rav Huna bar Yehuda says in the name of Rabbi Ammi: “One should always complete the reading of one's weekly Torah portion with the congregation, twice from the Mikra and once from the Targum.”

The phrase in Hebrew is “shnayim mikra ve-echad targum.” Here, the Mikra (“Reading”) is the Hebrew Bible, and the Targum is of course referring to the Aramaic Targum, or Targum Onkelos in particular. In other words, so important did the Targums become to Judaism, and following the tradition which Nehemiah established, the Targum is traditionally read alongside the Hebrew text, to ensure a thorough understanding. Maybe this is a tradition which all Bible students should adopt! Rather than reading a commentary, read the Aramaic Targums instead!

There are many reasons why the Aramaic Targums are extremely important to Jews, and why they should be just as important to Bible students in general:

- The Targums are an immensely valuable and under-utilized resource to help in understanding obscure words and phrases, and difficult passages in the Hebrew Bible. Consulting the Aramaic Targums shows how Jews traditionally understood the Hebrew text, around two thousand years ago. Those were people who lived and breathed the Holy Scriptures, who deeply understood the culture and background of the Hebrew Bible, who intimately understood Aramaic and the language of the original Hebrew, and who were much closer in time to those writings than we are today. Whenever, therefore, there are difficult words or passages in the Hebrew Bible, consulting the Aramaic Targums (and the Aramaic Old Testament) should be the first place to look, rather than seeking more modern translations.
- When faced with difficult verses in the Hebrew Bible, Aramaic often clarifies these difficult Hebrew words. However, most Bible students would rather consult either the Greek Septuagint or Latin translations, or in fact just about anything other than the Targums, such as other modern English translations. This is partly because of an anti-Jewish bias, partly because of a pro-western bias in focussing on Greek and Latin academic traditions, and partly because of how easy it is to consult a modern commentary in English. However, all of these traditions are far removed from the Aramaic Targums, both in terms of

time (coming much later than the Targums), and their knowledge of the original Hebrew text. It is generally much more profitable to consult either the Aramaic Targums or the Aramaic Old Testament, when faced with difficult or obscure passages in the Hebrew Bible. Few textual critics and Bible students even consider the Aramaic Targums, let alone give the Targums the authority they deserve.

- The Aramaic Targums shed valuable light on Jewish thought and Judaism, yielding fascinating insights into the historical background and culture of the Hebrew Bible. Thus, to understand the discussions which Jesus had with the Pharisees and scribes, it is often helpful to look at words and phrases in the Targums.
- Studying the Aramaic Targums is particularly useful for understanding the background of the New Testament. Despite that, due to anti-Semitic bias and a bias towards western academic culture, the Targums have largely been ignored by Christians and most seminaries do not even mention them. How can you hope to understand the Bible without understanding its historic context and its Semitic roots?
- For Bible students, studying the Targums is a resource that is almost entirely untapped. There are many studies which, for example, compare the Greek New Testament with the Greek Septuagint, attempting to show that the Greek New Testament quotes from the Septuagint. In contrast, however, the possibility that the Aramaic New Testament (or even the Greek New Testament!) quotes from the Aramaic Targums is almost entirely ignored. Despite this, there are many occasions where the Targums have some very unique and interesting readings, and the New Testament (both the Aramaic New Testament and the Greek) definitely quotes from the Aramaic Targums, or leans heavily upon them. In the video lessons that are available from [JesusSpokeAramaic.com](http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com), we show many examples demonstrating this. You will be very excited and interested by the discoveries that we have made! Despite this fascinating, unique and profitable line of Bible study, very

few people have even looked into this area, and are unaware that the New Testament may, in fact, be quoting from the Aramaic Targums!

- The Aramaic Targums are essentially Jewish in origin, and arose as required, i.e. they are not a single Aramaic translation of the entire Hebrew Bible done at one particular point in time. As such, they are distinct from the Aramaic Old Testament, which is a single translation of the entire Hebrew Bible done at a single point in time. Therefore, the Aramaic Targums are a useful adjunct and important contrast to the Aramaic Old Testament. Comparing the Aramaic Old Testament with the Aramaic Targums is incredibly interesting and useful.

For these reasons, there is a desperate need to study and understand the Aramaic Targums more widely – not just by Jews, but by all Bible students. Christians, in particular, would benefit enormously from abandoning Greek philosophy, Greek mythology and humanism, all of which are detached from the culture and background of the First Century origin of the New Testament, and getting back to the true, original, authentic, Semitic (Hebrew and Aramaic) roots of the New Testament. The Semitic roots of the New Testament provide much richer and truer veins of interpretation than the sterile fruits of Greek 'sophia' or 'wisdom', which the New Testament itself warns against!

Learning Aramaic will open the vast treasure of the Aramaic Targums to you, allowing you to see the Hebrew text through the eyes of people who were much closer culturally to the Hebrew Bible than we are today, who knew and understood the Hebrew text intimately, and who translated the Hebrew text into Aramaic at a time when they were much closer to difficult words and passages in the Hebrew text than we are today.

For all these reasons, a knowledge and understanding of the Aramaic Targums is more important today than it has ever been. Bible students, of whatever background, can have their understanding and appreciation of the Bible richly enhanced by studying the Targums, and viewing the New Testament through a correct cultural understanding.

# What is the Aramaic Peshitta OLD Testament?

**T**HE ARAMAIC Old Testament (also called the Peshitta Tanakh) is an early translation of the Hebrew Bible into Syriac. Syriac is an Eastern dialect of Aramaic, the same Aramaic dialect in which the Aramaic New Testament was written.

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You can get free access to an entire video lesson about the Aramaic Peshitta OT, entitled *What is the Aramaic Peshitta Old Testament?*, by following the link below:

<http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com/Lessons/Aramaic-Peshitta-Old-Testament/What-is-Peshitta-OT>

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As we saw in the chapter on the Aramaic Targums, the Targums are the 'official' Jewish translations of the books of the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic, which have (at least partly) become authoritative in Judaism. The Targums were not translated in one go, at one point in time, by one person or a single group of people. Instead, different Translations, or Targums, arose over time according to need. Targum Onkelos, for instance, is the official Targum of the Law, or Torah.

By contrast, the Aramaic Old Testament has a completely different (independent) history. Almost certainly the Aramaic Old Testament was translated early on (that is, several centuries before Christ) probably in or around Babylon (hence the Syriac, or Eastern dialect of Aramaic in which it is written) or while the Jews were still scattered across the Babylonian Empire. The Aramaic Old Testament is an accurate, consistent and coherent translation, meaning that it is a translation of the books of the Hebrew Bible as a whole, at one point in time, by one translator or a single group of translators, whereas the Targums were translated over time, according to need,

by different people.

It is likely that the Targums and the Aramaic Old Testament influenced each other, since both were translated into Aramaic at approximately the same time. But whereas the Aramaic Targums became approved or adopted by mainstream Judaism, the Aramaic Old Testament, by contrast, seems to have become adopted by the early Jewish converts (Christian believers), and in fact was subsequently ignored and rejected by mainstream Judaism.

There are a number of factors why this may have been the case:

1. As mainstream Judaism and early Christianity both went their separate ways, there may have been a deliberate intention not to accept the translation of the other, or to differentiate between the translations of the two opposing camps.
2. The Targums vary in quality and the intention behind the translation, with some being interpretative in nature. By contrast, the Aramaic Old Testament is a simple, literal, direct translation with no interpretation. The midrashic translation of the Targums appealed to mainstream Judaism, and later to Rabbinical Judaism.
3. In being an independent translation, the Aramaic Old Testament is perhaps more 'favourable' to the belief that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, in that passages which are traditionally understood as Messianic passages remain unchanged, whereas mainstream Judaism in the Targums was more free to change the translation in Messianic passages.
4. The earliest Christian believers were located in Turkey and Syria, where the Aramaic Estrangela script was used. This is the script which the Aramaic New Testament soon adopted. Likewise, the Aramaic Old Testament adopted the Estrangela script, for instance in Codex Ambrosianus. As the Estrangela script looked visibly different from the normal Hebrew (Ashuri) characters, it provided a further reason for the Aramaic Old Testament and the Aramaic Targums to go their separate ways – with the Targums being favoured by Jews, and the Aramaic Old Testament being favoured by the

early Jewish/Christian believers.

The highly recommended book, *The Text of the Old Testament* by Ernst Würthwein, contains a great deal of interesting and useful information on the manuscripts and traditions that make up the Hebrew Bible. It contains individual chapters on the history and manuscript tradition of the Aramaic Targums, as well as that of the Aramaic Old Testament. Like us, it concludes that the Aramaic Old Testament has early (Jewish) origins, that the Targums and the Aramaic Old Testament are likely to have influenced each other, and that the early Jewish believers (Christians) adopted the Aramaic Old Testament as their favoured translation of the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic.

The Aramaic Old Testament, then, is a single coherent translation done at approximately the same time as the Aramaic Targums. “Peshitta” is the Aramaic word meaning straight or simple (like the Hebrew word “*pashut*”), meaning that the Aramaic Old Testament is a straightforward, fairly literal translation of the Hebrew Bible. In other words, and in contrast to some of the Targums, it is not a paraphrase, nor an embellishment, nor a *peshet* (explanation), nor *midrash* (homiletic interpretation) of the Hebrew Bible.

This makes the Aramaic Old Testament an early and very valuable witness of the Hebrew Bible. It is an accurate, honest and reliable translation that can and should be consulted whenever questions arise about the Hebrew Old Testament text. Furthermore, because both the Aramaic Old Testament and the Aramaic New Testament are both in the Syriac (Eastern) dialect of Aramaic, and because both are used by Churches of the East today, they are often grouped together. They are sometimes bound in a single volume, known as the *Peshitta Bible* or *Biblia Peshitta*. The Lamsa Bible, for example, is a translation of the Peshitta Bible (both the Old and New Testaments).

As well as being an important work in its own right, the Aramaic Old Testament is an important alternative to the Aramaic Targums. Comparing the Aramaic Targums and the Aramaic Old Testament is often a fascinating exercise, with the differences always of interest.

So, we have seen that the Aramaic Old Testament was translated from the Hebrew Bible several centuries before Christ. Whereas the Aramaic Targums were adopted by mainstream Judaism, the

Aramaic Old Testament was subsequently adopted by Christian believers as well as Jewish converts to Christianity.

This makes the Aramaic Old Testament a vital witness to the Massoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible. Whenever the text of the Hebrew Bible is unclear or the meaning of the Hebrew is uncertain, consulting the Aramaic Old Testament shows how Jews at the time understood the Hebrew. People who knew Hebrew inside out, thoroughly steeped in its culture and worship, who had respect for the Holy text and did not want to change or corrupt it, and who were more than 2000 years closer to the original text than we are today, translated the Hebrew Bible into the Aramaic Old Testament. The testimony of the Aramaic Old Testament is therefore extremely valuable. When there are suspicions that the Massoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible has been copied incorrectly, the Aramaic Old Testament provides a vital witness, since (assuming it has been preserved as faithfully as the Hebrew Bible and that it is free of corruption) it is an early, honest and very reliable witness to the Hebrew text.

The Aramaic Old Testament is also important in helping towards the understanding of difficult or obscure words and passages in the Hebrew text. Oftentimes a word in the Hebrew Bible is difficult to understand, perhaps because it is rare or has an unusual form which might be ambiguous. In cases like this, rather than checking how modern translations have guessed the meaning of the Hebrew word, the best approach is instead to consult the primary sources of the time – in other words, the Aramaic Old Testament and the Aramaic Targums. The Aramaic translations will tell you how Jews at the time understood the word. The Aramaic Old Testament and the Aramaic Targums do sometimes disagree with each other.

The Aramaic Old Testament is important in understanding many passages in the New Testament, and providing a much richer depth and dimension to the cultural background to the New Testament. It is difficult or impossible to understand the debates which Jesus had with the Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes without a good (and relevant) understanding of the Old Testament, and the law of Moses in particular. As well as a knowledge of the Hebrew Bible itself, a knowledge of the Aramaic Old Testament will provide that understanding, and provide the authentic Semitic (Hebrew and

Aramaic) context necessary to fully understand the words and teachings of Jesus.

In addition, there are certainly places where the Aramaic Old Testament and the Aramaic New Testament quote each other. This possibility is almost entirely ignored, not even studied, by Bible believers today. So little is the Aramaic Old Testament studied, read and understood, that the possibility of the Aramaic New Testament quoting from it, is almost entirely overlooked. Yet, there are definitely times where this is the case, and we look at many examples of this at [JesusSpokeAramaic.com](http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com).

Furthermore, since the Aramaic Old Testament and the Aramaic New Testament are both written in the same Syriac dialect of Aramaic, together they provide an extensive body of literature which allows us to understand the vocabulary and grammar which they use. If your interest lies in the Aramaic New Testament, studying the Aramaic Old Testament will be of immeasurable help in broadening your knowledge of the language, and in seeing how words are used in a wider context. It will also help you to see connections between the Aramaic Old Testament and the Aramaic New Testament that you would otherwise miss. It will shed new light on the language in which Jesus spoke and in which his words were recorded. Conversely, if you are primarily interested in the Aramaic Old Testament, understanding the Aramaic New Testament will also benefit you.

The importance and practical benefits of the Aramaic Old Testament can hardly be over-estimated. For students of the Hebrew Bible and Biblical Aramaic, for students of the Targums, for students of the Aramaic New Testament, and for all Bible students everywhere, it is a hugely under-utilized resource whose treasures lie mostly unknown and almost entirely untapped by Bible students in the West today. Saying it has not been fully studied has to be the understatement of the century. By comparison, the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) is a mass-market popular phenomenon which has had immense volumes of scholarly time and money poured into it. The Aramaic Old Testament, by contrast, is essentially ignored in the West, whereas in the East it has been faithfully used for centuries.

And would you like to know the best thing about the Aramaic Old

Testament? Like the Hebrew Bible and the Aramaic New Testament, the level of variation amongst existing manuscripts is very small. The Hebrew Bible, the Aramaic Old Testament and the Aramaic New Testament simply do not contain the mass corruption, changes, conflicts, blatant errors and insertions, variant readings, and everything else that is the hallmark of the Greek New Testament and the Septuagint. In the Hebrew and Aramaic world, there is no need for countless theories of textual transmission, the endless theorizing over different textual types and geographical origins, the careers built on promoting one manuscript over another, pontificating over whether the majority manuscripts are more original than the corrupt 'early' ones, and multitudes of similar phenomena which abound in the world of Greek textual criticism. The level of variation in manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible, the Aramaic Old Testament and the Aramaic New Testament are on a microscopic level compared to the Greek, and generally consist of grammar variations and spelling alternatives.

Think about the implications of this for a moment! Down through more than twenty centuries of human history, though world empires have come and gone, across cities, countries and continents, the Hebrew Bible, the Aramaic Old Testament and the Aramaic New Testament have been miraculously and meticulously preserved. Wars have ravished. Cities have been plundered. Rulers have come and gone. Religious leaders have long since arisen, died and been buried. Schisms have split both church and state. No single empire or nation has conquered the whole great territorial expanse covered by all those manuscripts over time and geography. Yet amazingly, miraculously, the Hebrew Bible, the Aramaic Old Testament and the Aramaic New Testament have been preserved intact down through all those centuries, remaining as free from corruption and variation as mortal man is capable of. Compare manuscripts separated by whole centuries, countries, continents and cultures, and you will find that all the many thousands of extant copies of the Aramaic Old Testament and Aramaic New Testament exhibit that same reliable uniformity that is so characteristic of the Hebrew Bible.

Copies of the Greek Septuagint and the Greek New Testament differ widely, and doctrinally, in thousands (nay, hundreds of thousands) of places. Greek variant readings of the Scriptures abound. Yet the Hebrew and Aramaic Scriptures stand far apart in how uniformly

they have been preserved. Copied for thousands of years with scarcely a variation between them – preserved the same across all continents. Is not this a testimony to how great the Word of God is, how He has preserved His Word as a sign and a testimony in the midst of this evil and adulterous generation? As it is written in Isaiah 8:20; “To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.”

So, is the Aramaic Old Testament important? Is it worth studying? It most certainly is. Open its pages and find out for yourself!

Be sure to subscribe to [JesusSpokeAramaic.com](http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com) to learn more about the Aramaic Old Testament, the Aramaic New Testament, the Aramaic Targums, and everything else in connection with Aramaic. [JesusSpokeAramaic.com](http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com) is the biggest and best website in the world dedicated to learning Aramaic in the context of the Holy Scriptures. Take a look today!

# What is the Aramaic Peshitta NEW Testament?

**I**N THIS chapter, we are going to take an introductory look at the Aramaic New Testament, also known as *The Syriac* or the *Aramaic Peshitta*. We are going to find out what the Aramaic New Testament is.

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You can get free access to an entire video lesson about the Aramaic Peshitta NT, entitled *What is the Aramaic Peshitta New Testament?*, by following the link below:

<http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com/Lessons/Aramaic-Peshitta-New-Testament/What-is-Aramaic-Peshitta>

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In the many exciting video lessons available at JesusSpokeAramaic.com, we expand on this chapter by taking a look at the history of the Aramaic New Testament, its canon, and why it is so critically important today. We will compare the Aramaic New Testament with the Greek New Testament, and show you some of the many wonders and amazing things about the Aramaic New Testament. It is going to be an exciting journey!

So let's start at the very beginning, which is always a good place to start.

When people think of the New Testament, they usually think of a copy in their local modern language (English, Spanish, French, German, or whatever). Most people will have heard that the New Testament was not originally written in these modern languages, but was translated (or so we are told) from Greek, and Koine (or Common) Greek in particular. Koine Greek is different from Classical Greek. Classical Greek is an earlier form of Greek which the Greek classics, such as Plato and Socrates, were written in.

So what, then, is the Aramaic New Testament? Obviously, this is a version of the New Testament written in Aramaic (rather than Greek).

Now, if you dig a little deeper, you will find several interesting things about the Aramaic New Testament. Prior to the 1850s (or about the time of Westcott and Hort), the following facts were universally accepted, in the West, about Aramaic and the Aramaic New Testament:

- ➔ It was accepted that Aramaic was the commonly spoken language in Israel, by Jews, in the first century A.D., and therefore Aramaic was the language normally spoken by Jesus, the disciples, and Jews in general.
- ➔ It was believed that the Aramaic New Testament dated to at least as early as the first or second century A.D., and was therefore just as old as the earliest Greek manuscript fragments.
- ➔ It was understood that the Aramaic New Testament was essentially free from all the myriad of variations that are found in manuscripts of the Greek New Testament. Many of the variations in the multitude of Greek texts are very significant, often doctrinally important. By contrast, variations of significance are almost entirely missing in the Aramaic New Testament, and the Aramaic text is almost identical across many centuries and entire continents.
- ➔ It was known that the Aramaic New Testament contained many idioms, puns and plays on words – all of which are idiomatic and completely natural in Aramaic.
- ➔ Since it was accepted that Jesus and the disciples spoke Aramaic, as did Jews generally in the first century A.D., it was understood that the Aramaic New Testament must therefore be as close as it is possible to get to the original words spoken by Jesus himself, and as close as possible to the original autographs of Scripture.

Evidence for the above views can be found in the detailed Appendix of the 1852 *Murdock Translation of the Aramaic New Testament*, which is available for free download to subscribers on the

JesusSpokeAramaic.com website. Even though Murdock believed that the Aramaic New Testament was a translation from the Greek, he pays the Aramaic New Testament many amazing and surprising compliments such as those above. He says it is hard to believe that the Aramaic New Testament is a mere translation. The Introduction to the *Norton Translation of the Peshitta* also contains a lot of additional evidence for the above views.

If you read through books and commentaries prior to Westcott and Hort in about the 1850s, you will find very frequent references to the Aramaic New Testament. In the West, it was a well-respected early Aramaic witness of the text of the New Testament, and was commonly used to resolve problems in the Greek New Testament text.

That was how the Aramaic New Testament was regarded in the *West*. With Christianity in the *East*, however (meaning churches east of Constantinople, covering countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran, even as far as India and beyond), it turns out that basically all Eastern Christian churches, across all countries and continents, and down through the centuries, universally hail the Aramaic New Testament as the original written form of the New Testament, the actual inspired Word of God, and thus not a translation from the Greek at all.

Eastern Christian churches believe, and have historical records showing, that the books of the Aramaic New Testament were handed down to them by the very apostles themselves. They have always believed that the Aramaic New Testament is the original inspired Word of God. They have never believed anything different. They have simply never used the various Greek texts.

It is only in the West (Europe, America, etc.) that the idea of the original New Testament being in Aramaic is controversial. But it turns out that there is an immense body of evidence for this view. In the video lessons on the Aramaic New Testament which we have available at JesusSpokeAramaic.com, we will go through the evidence, the history and the facts with you – step by step.

So which view is correct? Is the Aramaic New Testament merely a translation from the Greek, albeit an exceptionally ancient, reliable and authentic translation, or is it the original text from which the

Greek was translated?

For many people, the idea that there exists a version of the New Testament written in Aramaic will be completely new. But please thoroughly go through all the evidence presented at [JesusSpokeAramaic.com](http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com) and decide for yourself. Reading through the evidence and watching all the evidence presented will take time. You will probably need to watch the videos again and again, to make sure you fully understand and assimilate the material we present at [JesusSpokeAramaic.com](http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com) because there is such a lot of ground to cover.

If you don't know much about the Aramaic New Testament, or if you didn't know that there even exists a version of the New Testament written in Aramaic, then many of the ideas presented at [JesusSpokeAramaic.com](http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com) will be new and challenging for you. But we will present solid evidence all throughout our video lessons. We provide detailed transcripts of the lessons so that you can study the material at your leisure, as well as watching the videos and listening to the audio.

Once you understand what the Aramaic New Testament is, once you start to read it for yourself, once you see the astonishing beauty it contains, once you understand just how many problems in the Greek text it helps to explain or shed new light on, you will find that your faith is immensely strengthened.

Rather than being a challenge to your faith, an understanding of the Aramaic New Testament will provide a huge boost to your faith. You will find that worrying and troubling variations in the Greek texts disappear, over and over again. You will find that criticisms of the New Testament based on problems in the Greek texts disappear altogether. Suddenly obscure passages of the New Testament will make sense. Verses will take on exciting new meanings. There will be a depth, originality and vibrancy to the New Testament that you just will never see in a Greek text or an English translation. Related passages in the Hebrew Old Testament become clearer and more obvious.

The Aramaic New Testament is much closer to the traditional KJV text than the huge number of variants in the Greek texts. Faith is increased by understanding just how internally consistent the

Aramaic New Testament is, how essentially all manuscripts across all countries and across whole centuries, all agree with each other (just like the Hebrew Bible). The Aramaic New Testament has all the hallmarks of being divinely preserved down through time, kept unchanged from all the doctrinal battles that raged in the Greek world, preserved from textual interference by those same doctrinal battles.

And so, far from being a challenge to your faith, the evidence provided by the Aramaic New Testament should strengthen the feeble knees, embolden the heart and soul of all students of God's Word, and prepare this generation for the time when Israel's Messiah will come to save his people and judge those nations who stand against the Lord's Anointed and who have touched the apple of his eye.

Just as the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament) contains both Hebrew and Aramaic, the New Testament has been divinely preserved in Aramaic, down through the centuries. Together, Hebrew and Aramaic were the vehicles by which the Lord has revealed His Word to Jew (Hebrew) and Gentile (Aramaic). Greek is the language of the apostasy and the enemies of the Jews. Greeks polluted the Holy Temple at Jerusalem, introduced Greek philosophy to Judaism, and the Maccabees waged war against their evil influence. Jews will never accept a Greek New Testament that calls upon Theos, Deus, or Zeus by another name. They will bow the knee only to the One True God. "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one Lord." Christians should accept nothing less.

So, we have seen that the language in which the New Testament was written – Aramaic or Greek – is a point of controversy. There is a difference of opinion as to which one came first. Either Aramaic came first and the Greek was translated from it, or Greek came first and the Aramaic was translated from it.

If the popular view in the West is correct, the New Testament was originally written in Greek, and somewhere in the first few centuries A.D., it was translated into Aramaic.

Let's imagine (for a moment) that the popular view was correct. Where does that leave the Aramaic New Testament? If nothing else, the Aramaic New Testament is all of these things:

- ➔ The Aramaic New Testament is as close as you can get to the actual words spoken by Jesus and his disciples, since they spoke predominantly in Aramaic.
- ➔ As we saw in the chapter, *What Does Josephus Say?*, following the Maccabean revolt, Jews had a revulsion to Greek learning and philosophy. Jesus and his disciples therefore, as religious Jews, would not have spoken Greek even if they could.
- ➔ The Aramaic New Testament is as close as you can get to the original Aramaic and Semitic idioms that underpin the Greek New Testament.
- ➔ Time and again, the Aramaic New Testament explains variant readings in the Greek New Testament.
- ➔ The Aramaic New Testament explains a multitude of difficult, obscure, problematic, or conflicting words in the Greek New Testament.
- ➔ The Aramaic New Testament comfortably and logically explains passages that are commonly attacked by Bible critics, because those conflicts just do not occur in the Aramaic New Testament.
- ➔ The Aramaic New Testament contains a whole bunch of features that are entirely missing in all translations including the Greek, such as poetry, puns, rhymes, plays on words, idioms, and similar features.
- ➔ The Aramaic New Testament means that you do not need to use the names of pagan deities in worship and Bible study, such as the names of Greek gods (Theos = Deus = Zeus!) and Kurios.
- ➔ The Aramaic New Testament is the only New Testament universally recognized in the Church of the East, and therefore essential for a complete understanding of Bible history. Ignoring the Aramaic New Testament is therefore like trying to breathe with only one lung.

If nothing else, the Aramaic New Testament is all of those things, and more. And that is if the Aramaic New Testament is *only* a

translation.

However, many people are unaware of the Aramaic New Testament. Some Christians do not even know that a version of the New Testament in Aramaic even exists.

We have presented a great deal of evidence on this web site showing that Aramaic must have come first, and that Greek was translated from it (not the other way round). We have not even scratched the surface, but only supplied a few examples. Whole books have been written presenting this evidence in greater detail, with many more examples.

Aramaic Primacy is not the most popular view in the West, but it is universally believed in the East. Bible believers all the way from Turkey to India and beyond, conduct their liturgies in Aramaic and have done so since their churches were founded. Those believers have only ever known the Aramaic New Testament. The Aramaic New Testament is all their liturgies have ever known. They have simply never adopted Greek New Testament manuscripts. In fact, some early translations such as Armenian, were made from the Aramaic New Testament because the translators could not find any Greek New Testament manuscripts in their country.

The evidence, therefore, points to the Aramaic New Testament as being the original text in which the New Testament was given. At an early stage, Greek translations were made, and probably revised over time. This explains the preponderance of variations in the Greek New Testament, and the astonishing and noteworthy lack of them in the original Aramaic.

Just as Bible students go back to the Greek for clarity on their English translations, so we should go back to the original Aramaic for clarity on the Greek. Time and again, the Aramaic New Testament helps to clarify the Greek text. The Aramaic New Testament explains differences and textual variants. The Aramaic New Testament sheds light on the Semitic idioms used in the New Testament. Aramaic breathes life into Bible study like no other source.

If you believe the message of the New Testament, ignoring the Aramaic New Testament means that you are floating adrift at sea. You have lost your moorings. Your faith will be battered by lower

textual criticism, higher textual criticism, Bible skeptics, humanists, pagan philosophies, and much more. The Aramaic New Testament is your anchor. The Aramaic New Testament will correctly stabilize your faith and re-root your beliefs back to the Semitic origins of the New Testament. The Aramaic New Testament will breathe new life into familiar passages, explain quirks and other obscure passages, and will withstand all the poison that Bible skeptics and critics can throw at it.

Read the Aramaic New Testament in the original Aramaic, and you will see an original beauty leap off the page that translations just do not have. It's like the difference between seeing a photograph of a loved one, and meeting them face to face.

Start learning Aramaic today, and put the Aramaic New Testament at the center of your Bible faith. Reconnect your heart and mind to the Holy Scriptures, breathed by the Living God, and forming the words of the Aramaic New Testament. A translation is just not the same, whether it be in Greek, Latin, English, or any other language.

Many will be unable to divorce themselves from the popular view that the New Testament was originally written in Greek. I was once like that. I dismissed out of hand any claims that the New Testament was originally written in Aramaic. But one day I looked into the evidence. And it scared me how much that evidence started to mount up. Slowly, the barriers came down, and I started to see that the Aramaic New Testament had to be the original text, and the Greek derived from it. Far from rocking my faith, and much to my surprise, my faith was enormously boosted and strengthened. When reading the Aramaic New Testament, it was like reading the Holy Scriptures without a veil, coming face to face with the words of the Holy Spirit, not seeing through a glass darkly or through the words of a translation.

Learn the Aramaic New Testament, dear Bible believer. Let yourself be guided by the Father, and you will see the words of the Living God, the pearl of great price. The wonders of the Aramaic New Testament await you. Open its pages and read!

# Armenian Bible – From Aramaic, not Greek!

**I**N CONSIDERING the question of how early the Aramaic New Testament is, and just how early on it was considered authentic and canonical, it is fascinating and very instructive to investigate the earliest translations of the Bible. When we do so, we invariably find that they were translated from the Aramaic New Testament (that is, what is often referred to as “The Syriac”). By “The Syriac” is meant the Syriac version of the New Testament, that is, the Aramaic New Testament, because Syriac is the Aramaic dialect in which it was written.

As an example, consider one of the earliest translations ever made – of the Bible into the Armenian language. Now, Armenia is the mountainous region stretching from Eastern Turkey to the west, Georgia to the north, Azerbaijan to the east, and Iran to the south. It is a very large area, with a proud and independent history. The Wikipedia article tells us that Christianity spread there as early as 40 A.D.

So, let us see... Just how far back does the Armenian Bible go, and what was it translated from?

Let us quote from the brief history of the Armenian Bible on Wikipedia:

“The Armenian Bible is due to Saint Mesrob’s early 5th century translation. The first monument of Armenian literature is the version of the Holy Scriptures. Isaac, says Moses of Chorene, made a translation of the Bible from the Syriac text about 411.”

Thus, we find that the Armenian Bible was produced in about 411

A.D., and was actually an instrumental step in the development of the Armenian language.

But astonishingly, we find that, as late as the fifth century A.D., the Armenian translation was made from *Syriac* (that is, the *Aramaic* New Testament) and NOT from the Greek New Testament, as might be expected.

The Syriac, or the Aramaic New Testament, was therefore in widespread, established use well before this time, in order for it to be regarded as canonical, authentic and authoritative, with an established written text from which translations could be made.

But the Wikipedia article does not tell us WHY the Armenian Bible was translated from Aramaic. For that, we have to go to historians of the Armenian Bible itself, where the reason is well documented and well known.

If, for example, we go to the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, an independent encyclopaedia which is well respected throughout the academic world, we find that **NO MANUSCRIPTS OF THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT COULD BE FOUND IN THE WHOLE OF ARMENIA!**

Let us quote from the ISBE article about the history of the Armenian Bible:

“A council of the nobility, bishops and leading clergy was held at Vagharshapat in 402, King Vramshapouch being present, and this council requested Isaac to translate the Scriptures into the vernacular. By 406, Mesrob had succeeded in inventing an alphabet--practically the one still in use--principally by modifying the Greek and the Pahlavi characters, though some think the Palmyrene alphabet had influence. He and two of his pupils at Samosata began by translating the Book of Proverbs, and then the New Testament, from the Greek. Meanwhile, being unable to find a single Greek manuscript in the country, Isaac translated the church chapters from the Peshitta Syriac, and published this version in 411. He sent two of his pupils to Constantinople for copies of the Greek Bible. These men were present at the Council of Ephesus, 431 AD. Probably Theodoret (De Cura Graec. Affect., I, 5) learned from them what he says about the existence of the Bible in Armenian. Isaac's messengers

brought him copies of the Greek Bible from the Imperial Library at Constantinople--doubtless some of those prepared by Eusebius at Constantine's command. Mesrob Mashtots and Isaac, with their assistants, finished and published the Armenian (ancient) version of the whole Bible in 436."

Lest any doubt that this is a reliable history of the Armenian Bible, this same historical account is confirmed by those who use the Armenian version – for instance, see the website:

[armenianbible.org](http://armenianbible.org)

Thus, we find that there were simply no copies of manuscripts of the Greek New Testament that could be used for the translation, and so the earliest translation of the Armenian Bible was made from the Syriac (Aramaic) Peshitta New Testament.

Although the earliest translations of the Armenian Bible were made from the Aramaic New Testament, later (subsequent) translations of the Armenian Bible were made from Greek, but for that to be possible, the translators had to go as far afield as Constantinople to even find copies of the New Testament in Greek!

This historical record demonstrates that the Aramaic New Testament had gained widespread acceptance, authority, and dominance right through the first few centuries. The Greek New Testament, by contrast, and according to the evidence, had not (at this early stage) gained dominance or widespread geographical acceptance. This, of course, should be no surprise if you have followed all the evidence provided in this book. If, on the other hand, the Aramaic New Testament is new to you, and you had previously assumed that the Greek New Testament arose in the first century and gained universal acceptance across the whole of Christendom, then the evidence provided by the history of the Armenian Bible will be puzzling and difficult to explain.

In fact, as we shall see when we examine the early history of the Arabic Bible, the Aramaic New Testament continued in widespread use right through for many centuries later, until Crusader times, when the Bible was first translated into Arabic.

However, the article about the Armenian Bible in the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia goes further. After explaining that

copies of the Greek New Testament were searched for and that later Armenian Bibles were translated from the Greek manuscripts, it goes on to say:

“In the 6th century the Armenian version is said to have been revised so as to agree with the Peshitta [Aramaic New Testament].”

Let us pause for thought and consider what this early history of the Armenian Bible is telling us. The earliest Armenian Bible was translated from the Aramaic New Testament because no copies of the New Testament in Greek could be found. Then, search was made for Greek New Testament manuscripts, but the search had to go as far afield as Constantinople to find any. Then, about a century later, the translation of the Armenian Bible was changed to agree with the Aramaic New Testament. So, what is that telling us?

In other words, after making a translation from the Greek copies of the New Testament, why would those translations be abandoned, in favour of a revised translation based (once again) on the Aramaic New Testament?

We are surely justified in drawing several conclusions from these historical facts:

- ➔ First, the conclusion must surely be that the Greek New Testament copies were regarded as unreliable. Why else would they be abandoned in favour of going back to the Aramaic New Testament?
- ➔ Second, it is obvious that the differences between the Greek copies and the Aramaic New Testament must have been significant enough to make the translation worth revising, in favour of the *Aramaic* New Testament.
- ➔ Third, we must also ask the question which, historically (Aramaic or Greek), was regarded as the most authoritative, most authentic, most reliable, version? Because in the history of the Armenian Bible, we have clear evidence that the Aramaic New Testament was there right from the beginning, already established and regarded as authoritative. No Greek New Testament manuscripts could be found in the whole of Armenia. Search had to be made, but they had to travel as

far afield as Constantinople, outside the vast region of Armenia, to find copies of the Greek New Testament. Even then, after copies from the Greek were made, about a century later, the translation from Greek was revised again, going back to authoritative manuscripts of the Aramaic New Testament itself.

Surely this tells us all we need to know about how highly regarded the Aramaic New Testament was in the early centuries after Christ.

We ignore the Aramaic New Testament at our peril. It has stood the test of time. It has proved itself reliable, authoritative, authentic, throughout centuries, across different sects, across different countries and jurisdictions.

We can trust the Aramaic New Testament. It is the inspired Word of God.

# The Arabic Bible – From The Aramaic New Testament!

**I**N THIS BOOK about Aramaic, the Bible's Second Holy Language, we have seen how extensive the history of Aramaic is, covering (as it does) a period of several millennia. We have seen that Aramaic was the language of the New Testament, and was the commonly spoken language of Jews in the land of Israel, and therefore of the disciples and Jesus himself. It is thus entirely natural that the New Testament would be written in Aramaic since, as we have seen, Greek was a foreign language to the Jews, and Josephus tells us that Jews were discouraged from even speaking it.

It is entirely natural, therefore, for the Aramaic New Testament to be the first written record of the documents that would become the New Testament. As we shall see, the Aramaic New Testament quickly established itself and gained universal acceptance and authority as the authentic Word of God in all churches in the Middle East, and later the church of the East. The Greek New Testament, of course, spread quickly in the West and soon gained dominance in the West, but the Aramaic New Testament remained the dominant New Testament in the East.

Given these facts about the early establishment of the Aramaic New Testament in the Middle East, in the chapter *The Armenian Bible – from Aramaic*, we saw that Armenia is the vast region of the Middle East, at its peak stretching from Turkey to Iran, and covering modern-day Lebanon and Syria.

But, in what may surprise many people, the Armenian Bible was initially translated from the Aramaic New Testament, because no Greek manuscripts could be found in the whole of Armenia! The

translators had to go as far afield as Constantinople to even find copies of the New Testament in Greek, and even then, about a century later, the Armenian translation was changed to bring it back into line with the Aramaic New Testament!

These facts show how well-entrenched the Aramaic New Testament was, in the Middle East, in the centuries following the first century A.D. In fact, the Aramaic New Testament continued in use and became the universal and authoritative New Testament used all throughout the East.

Nevertheless, in the chapter *From Aramaic to Arabic*, we saw that Arabic slowly started to become more popular than Aramaic as the spoken language of the Middle East. By the time of the Moslem conquests, at least in the areas that Mohammed's followers were located, Arabic was the more common spoken language. Hence, the Koran was written in Arabic.

Despite this, however, the Aramaic New Testament retained its foothold. For example, just as the early Armenian Bibles were translated from Aramaic, so too the early Arabic Bibles were translated (at least partly) from the Aramaic New Testament. This testifies as to how well established and authoritative the Aramaic New Testament was considered, in the Middle East, some 900 years after Jesus had preached.

Thus, if we examine the history of the early Arabic Bible translations, we find that Wikipedia confirms that the early Arabic translations were made (at least partially) from the Aramaic New Testament:

“Translations of the Bible into Arabic are known from the early Christian churches in Syria, Egypt, Malta and Spain. Some of these translations are from Syriac (the Peshitta), Coptic or Latin. The earliest fragment of the Old Testament in Arabic is a text of Psalm 77, found in the Umayyad Mosque, dating from the 8th century. The first Jewish translations of the Hebrew Bible, and the Bible translations by Roman Catholic clergy date from c. A.D. 1000. One of the oldest Arabic Bibles was discovered in the 19th century at Saint Catherine's Monastery. The manuscript called Mt. Sinai Arabic Codex 151, was created in AD 867. It includes the Biblical text, marginal comments, lectionary notes, and glosses, as found in the manuscript.”

This historical account is interesting because it shows that the earliest translations into Arabic were made from the Syriac (Aramaic New Testament), the Coptic and the Latin. The Coptic, of course, is not surprising because it was an early Bible translation made in Egypt. A translation from Latin is also not surprising, given that the Vulgate was very popular in the West by this time, especially as there was a widespread Arab population in Spain, where the Catholic Church held universal dominion, and the Latin Vulgate was held in high regard.

But note, that in these early translations of the Bible into Arabic, Greek is noticeably absent! Later Arabic translations from Greek were made, but not these early translations! Instead, other than translating from existing popular translations such as Coptic and Latin, the early Arabic translations were all made from the Aramaic New Testament, just as the earlier Armenian Bible had been...

Surely, this, once again, demonstrates how respected and trusted the Aramaic New Testament was. Nearly a full one thousand years after Jesus preached, the earliest Arabic translations were made from the Aramaic New Testament – even in Europe (Spain), thousands of miles away from the Middle East. This demonstrates how reliable and authentic the Aramaic New Testament was regarded. It demonstrates how early, and how widespread, the Aramaic New Testament had gained respect across a wide geographical area. It was not just restricted to the East. Even in the West, extending through Moslem times, into the Arab kingdoms, and into Crusader times and beyond, the Aramaic New Testament was understood, venerated, respected and canonized – regarded as something which could be trusted, respected and authentic. In other words, the Word of God.

Since the Aramaic New Testament has stood the test of time, since it has been venerated over such a wide geographical area from such early times, we would do well to understand its history. We would do well to treat the Aramaic New Testament with the respect it deserves, as the living Word of God.

And so, we have seen that the Armenian Bible was translated from the Aramaic New Testament.

And the early Arabic translations were translated from the Aramaic

New Testament.

But why not bypass translations altogether, and study the Aramaic New Testament for yourself? Drink from the very fountain of the Water of Life itself, and leave aside the muddy pool of translations, with man-made biases and opinions, and in doing so, you will have rest for your soul, and your heart will know that it has come home...

## From Aramaic to Arabic

**I**F YOU HAVE followed thus far on these chapters about Aramaic, the Bible's Second Holy Language, you have seen that Aramaic has a very long history indeed. Aramaic's journey starts nearly at the beginning of Creation, in the very opening pages of the book of Genesis, and continues through the Assyrian, Babylonian, Greek and Roman Empires.

We have carefully traced the use of Aramaic around the time of the New Testament, and seen that Aramaic was the common spoken language at the time of Jesus. Indeed, after the Maccabean Revolt, when Jews rebelled against Greek culture and the Greek language, Aramaic only strengthened in importance. Josephus provides testimony that Aramaic was the generally spoken language at the time, in distinction to Hebrew, and the New Testament itself testifies that Aramaic was the spoken language of the inhabitants of Jerusalem. In fact, as we saw in the chapter about Aramaic in the New Testament, the New Testament provides a great deal of information about the use of Aramaic at this time.

And as we continue our journey through time in the centuries after the New Testament, Aramaic continued constantly in use. However, slowly, Arabic started to become more popular across the Middle East, and Aramaic steadily started to lose its foothold. And so, if we examine every history and grammar of Arabic, we find that they all, universally, explain that Arabic took over from Aramaic – in other words, Aramaic was the language spoken across the Middle East right up until the time that Arabic started to gain the ascendancy. If you have read through all the chapters of this book, that of course should come as no surprise. However, just to make the point, consider a few examples from independent, authoritative sources:

The Wikipedia article on the Arabic language:

“The most important sources of borrowings into (pre-Islamic) Arabic are from the related (Semitic) language Aramaic, which used to be the principal, international language of communication throughout the ancient Near and Middle East...”

Encyclopedia Britannica online, article on Aramaic Language:

“Aramaic continued in wide use until about A.D. 650, when it was supplanted by Arabic.”

And so, while Aramaic continued in widespread use across the Middle East for hundreds of years after the New Testament was written, by the time we come to the Moslem conquests in the seventh century A.D., we find that Arabic was becoming the dominant spoken and written language – at least by the followers of Mohammed. Thus, we find that the Koran was written in Arabic, rather than Aramaic.

However, a spoken language across a wide geographical area is not displaced by another language easily, and the process takes hundreds of years. Thus, while Arabic was the Middle East’s dominant language by Islamic times, Aramaic still continued in use long after that. In fact, the language of the Koran has been extensively studied, and there are still traces of Aramaic in it.

For example, the book, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran*, by Christoph Luxenberg, shows that many words and phrases in the Koran can be better understood as Aramaic, rather than Arabic. Although this book is controversial amongst Moslems because it implies that the Koran was not written entirely in classical Arabic, in some ways, it should not be controversial at all. Aramaic and Arabic were both spoken languages at the time, and because they are both Semitic languages, they have a great deal in common. It would be natural for many words to be shared, and for many words to be understandable as either Aramaic or Arabic. Thus, having Syriac or Aramaic words in an otherwise Arabic Koran, should be natural, rather than surprising. The same process happens in the New Testament, where some (but not all) of the phrases of Christ could be understood as either Hebrew or Aramaic.

In fact, as you study the Aramaic Alphabet video lessons that are available at [JesusSpokeAramaic.com](http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com), you will start with the

'Hebrew' Ashuri script (originally Aramaic!), then progress to the Estrangela script, then to the Serta script, and then to the Swadaya script. As the Aramaic Alphabet progresses from one script to the next over a period of centuries, it starts to change. The letters start to join on to each other – slowly and only sometimes in the case of Estrangela, then systematically in the case of Serta. Written Arabic is a step further on from Serta, with letter forms being systematically joined to the letters before and after, in standardised ways, leading to the beautiful calligraphic script that Arabic is known for. We see in Arabic, therefore, the Estrangela and Serta scripts taken one step further. But again, this emphasises the steady evolution from Aramaic to Arabic in both the spoken language, as well as the written language.

However, although Arabic started to gain a foothold over Aramaic, it was still a slow process. Entirely supplanting one language with another often never really happens entirely, and the supplanted language manages to retain a foothold. The same happened with Aramaic. Aramaic refused to die, and continued to be spoken throughout the Middle East, albeit in smaller and smaller numbers, to the present day. As we shall see in the chapter *Aramaic Still Spoken Today*, Aramaic still continues to be spoken in scattered villages across various countries in the Middle East today.

In fact, Lebanese Arabic is different from other dialects of Arabic in the Middle East, and Lebanese speakers have repeatedly told me that it is very close to Aramaic.

In any case, consider the continuity that Aramaic has had across the Middle East. It was the official spoken language across all the Assyrian, Persian and Babylonian empires, it was spoken right down through the period between the Old and New Testaments, it was widely spoken in Israel (both in Galilee and in Jerusalem) in the first century A.D., it continued many centuries after that, and it was the spoken language right up through, and beyond, the Moslem conquests until it gave way to Arabic. Given all the other chapters about Aramaic in this book, the longevity and continuity of Aramaic makes perfect sense, since it is the Second Holy Language of the Scriptures.

But those who believe that Greek was the “lingua franca”, or commonly-spoken language, in the Middle East as a result of

Alexander the Great's expeditions, and that Greek was the normal spoken language in Israel in the first century A.D., and that Jesus (as a religious Jew!) would have spoken Greek, have an extreme difficulty at this point. They have a cultural and historical anomaly on their hands that cannot be explained.

Because if Greek was the normally spoken language in the first century A.D., spoken widely enough by the common people that even Jesus spoke it, then we have a bizarre situation... It would mean that Aramaic was the widely spoken language across the Middle East in the centuries leading up to the first century A.D., only to be supplanted entirely by Greek in the first century A.D. for Jesus to speak Greek, only for Greek itself to be supplanted entirely once again by Aramaic so that Aramaic could be the language that history tells us came just before Arabic.

Aramaic, then Greek, then Aramaic again? That is impossible. Instead, the only reasonable explanation is that, while Greek *was* spoken amongst minority groups of people, referred to as Grecian Jews in the New Testament, Greek is so different from Hebrew, Aramaic or Arabic, that it simply never became *widely* spoken enough amongst mainstream Jews for it to replace Aramaic.

That is why Aramaic continued to be spoken right up until Arabic supplanted it by the time of the Moslem conquests. As the title of this chapter says, *From Aramaic to Arabic* – not “from Aramaic, to Greek, then to Aramaic again, then to Arabic...”

# Aramaic into Crusader Times

**I**F YOU HAVE been following thus far on these chapters on Aramaic, the Bible's Second Holy Language, you will have seen that Aramaic has a very long history indeed. We have traced through Aramaic's journey nearly at the beginning of Creation, all the way through the Assyrian, Babylonian, Greek and Roman Empires. For several thousand years, Aramaic continued its journey down through time. It was the language used by all the nations surrounding Israel, throughout the pages of the Holy Bible.

Let's provide a timeline of Aramaic as it became increasingly important, following the Babylonian exile.

- ➔ 586 B.C., Jerusalem captured and the Babylonian exile starts. Jews, in large numbers, are exported to Babylon and across the Babylonian Empire, where they are forced to learn Aramaic. But they are well treated, and because of the similarity of Aramaic to Hebrew, there is little resistance to Aramaic and the task of learning it is not difficult.
- ➔ Seventy years later, according to Jeremiah's prophecy, Jews return to Jerusalem again, establish the Temple worship again, and re-build the walls of Jerusalem under Ezra and Nehemiah. Aramaic and Hebrew are now both spoken, although Aramaic starts to become dominant, and Aramaic is still spoken by Jews outside of Israel.
- ➔ Meanwhile, in the Persian Empire, Aramaic continues to be used.
- ➔ In 168 B.C., the Maccabean Revolt takes place, where Jews

rebel against the imposition of Greek rule, Greek language and Greek customs across Israel. Aramaic is the spoken language. Jews in Israel do not want Greek – although many *do* adopt Greek customs.

- The Roman Empire extends to Israel. Aramaic continues to be spoken by the common people, although Hebrew is still a minority spoken language, especially amongst religious Jews.
- Jesus of Nazareth is born.
- Around the time of Jesus and living through the Jewish wars against the Romans in A.D. 70, Josephus the historian writes his many detailed and long histories – *The Antiquities of the Jews* and *The Jewish Wars*. Josephus documents that Aramaic is “the language of our country”, i.e. the dominant language of Israel. His history was initially written in Aramaic, but then translated into Greek – a foreign language which Josephus says that he struggles with, and still can’t pronounce properly.
- A.D. 70. The destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple takes place. Many important manuscripts are smuggled out of Jerusalem and taken to safety to the Dead Sea. In addition to the books of the Hebrew Bible (obviously in Hebrew), there are a combination of Aramaic and Hebrew manuscripts, showing the continued use of Aramaic during this time.
- A.D. 135, the Bar Kokhba Revolt takes place. Aramaic is still the dominant language in Israel now, although religious Jews and Zealots no doubt wanted a resurgence of Hebrew.
- Second to fourth centuries A.D., the Talmud is composed by the Jewish authorities, both in Israel (the Jerusalem Talmud) and in Babylon (the Babylonian Talmud). The oral traditions of the Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes, which Jesus preached against, are recorded in written form. The Mishnah is in Rabbinic Hebrew (heavily influenced by Aramaic), while the Gemara (the commentary on the Mishnah) is written in Aramaic, showing the importance of Aramaic for discussions and conversations.

- ➔ Meanwhile, around the third to fourth centuries A.D., at a time when Constantine becomes a 'Christian' emperor, Greek manuscripts of the New Testament start to become available, especially in Alexandria in Egypt, which is a hotbed of Gnostic and other heretical views. In Europe, Greek manuscripts of the Bible become more common, but the Aramaic New Testament is very much still available!
- ➔ In the west, in Europe, towards the end of the fourth century A.D., Jerome produces the Latin Vulgate translation, and this is pushed by the ruling religious authorities above all other versions – above the Hebrew Old Testament, above the Greek New Testament, above the LXX (or Septuagint), and above the Aramaic New Testament.

In this brief timeline, then, we have seen that Aramaic has a continuous connection with Jews and the Land of Israel, with Jesus, with Josephus, and across the whole of the Middle East and beyond, all the way from the very beginnings of history, all the way through to the fourth century, when Jews are busy writing the voluminous records of the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds (both of which are in Aramaic!).

And so, by the time that Jerome translated the Latin Vulgate, we see a clear split between Aramaic STILL being used by Jews in Israel, and Aramaic being used across the Middle East and beyond (further east), and Greek and Latin now becoming the preferred languages in Europe, as decreed by the Roman Catholic Church.

But let's continue our timeline. We will see that Aramaic continued to be used!

- ➔ First, one of the earliest translations of all – the Armenian Bible in the early fifth century – was made from Aramaic, and not Greek! As we saw in the chapter on the Armenian Bible, in the whole of the land of Armenia, not a single Greek New Testament manuscript could be found. The Aramaic New Testament was all there was.
- ➔ Later, we come to Arabic Bible, starting around the 8th century A.D. Like the Armenian Bible before it, yet several centuries later, the Arabic Bible too was translated primarily from the Aramaic New Testament and Aramaic sources.

We see, then, an entire continuous history of Aramaic across the Middle East, certainly in Israel, but across the whole Middle East and beyond, all the way from Armenia (Turkey, or Asia Minor) through to India and beyond. Even by the time that Christianity is being introduced in China and Mongolia, around the time of the Armenian and Arabic Bibles, the Aramaic (or Syriac) is what was used, and what was preached.

Greek and Latin may have become dominant in Europe due to the influence of the Roman Catholic Church and their desire to create a translation which they could control, influence and change to suit their doctrinal perspectives. But outside of Europe, outside of the limits of the Roman Church, Aramaic was all there was. Aramaic was the language used to preach the Gospel message, from the time of Jesus onwards.

But Aramaic did not stop there. Aramaic was used all throughout the Middle East for almost one and a half thousand years after the birth of Jesus of Nazareth.

We have seen that Aramaic was very much still in use when the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds were written in Aramaic (second to fourth centuries A.D.), when the Armenian Bible was created (early fifth century A.D.), and when the Arabic Bible was created (around the 8th century A.D. onwards).

But what happened in history after that?

Well, mainly in Galilee in Israel, we have the Massorettes, that faithful generation of Karaite Jews who meticulously, and very faithfully, copied and preserved the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament. History tells us that they worked from around the sixth century to beyond the 10th century. The Aleppo Codex, that great exemplar of Massoretic tradition, was made around 850 A.D. The famous Leningrad Codex, the oldest known COMPLETE edition of the Hebrew Bible, dates to around 1008 A.D. These are beautiful and high quality Hebrew Old Testaments, facsimile editions of which are still available today.

The Massorettes preserved the Hebrew Bible, but their marginal notes and references were all written in Aramaic. They clearly thought in Aramaic, or at least recorded in Aramaic, as well as knowing Hebrew.

So what happened to the Massoretes after the tenth and eleventh centuries? Why do we not hear more from them? What happened after the Arabic Bible was translated from Aramaic?

What happened next in history?

Tragically, the next major event, or series of events, was the Crusades. The Crusades, alas, were devastating, and brought an end to the work of the Massoretes.

Let us quote the introductory paragraph from the Wikipedia article on the Crusades:

“The Crusades were military campaigns sanctioned by the Latin Roman Catholic Church during the High Middle Ages and Late Middle Ages. In 1095, Pope Urban II proclaimed the First Crusade with the stated goal of restoring Christian access to holy places in and near Jerusalem. Following the First Crusade there was an intermittent 200-year struggle for control of the Holy Land, with seven more major crusades and numerous minor ones. In 1291, the conflict ended in failure with the fall of the last Christian stronghold in the Holy Land at Acre, after which Roman Catholic Europe mounted no further coherent response in the east.”

Thus, just a few short decades after the Massoretes had written the Leningrad Codex, no doubt while the Massoretes were still alive and well, their work was brought to a sudden and dramatic end by the Crusades.

- ➔ The First Crusade (A.D. 1096–1099) started shortly after the Leningrad Codex was written. Immense numbers of foreign invaders spilled into the Middle East, ready to kill Jews and Moslems alike wherever they could be found, at the behest and blessing of the Roman Catholic Church.
- ➔ The Second Crusade was from A.D. 1147–1149. A combination of French and German armies marched towards Jerusalem.
- ➔ The Third Crusade, from A.D. 1187–1192, featured the famous Moslem leader Saladin, who created a single powerful Moslem state and defeated the Crusaders, re-taking Jerusalem in 1187. The equally famous Richard I of

England, known as Richard The Lionheart, organised the Crusader forces.

Many other Crusades followed. It is generally acknowledged that there were nine Crusades in total, lasting until almost A.D. 1300. That does not include a number of smaller, perhaps “less official” Crusades. Christianity and Islam battled each other, with Jews (and Aramaic) caught in the middle.

The history of the Crusades are both fascinating and tragic for all manner of reasons. They are well documented in a number of histories.

However, in our journey into the world of Aramaic, the Bible's Second Holy Language, what is the importance of the Crusades in connection with Aramaic?

Consider that Josephus, a Jew in first century Israel, wrote his famous history of first century Israel in the Aramaic language. Well, what language would you expect to be used to record the history of the Crusades?

Would it surprise you to learn that much of the contemporary history of the Crusades was written in Aramaic (in Syriac)? We see from this just how important, and extensive, Syriac is. It is the most widespread and dominant dialect of Aramaic. By the time of the Crusades, Syriac was still being used extensively.

One of the most important historians at the time of the Crusades was Gregory Bar Hebraeus. Bar Hebraeus was a very famous historian and convert from Judaism to Christianity. Articles about him can be found in all the major encyclopaedias. And he was a convert to Syriac, or Aramaic, Christianity.

Let us read what Wikipedia says about him:

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bar\\_Hebraeus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bar_Hebraeus)

“Gregory Bar Hebraeus (A.D. 1226-1286) was a bishop of the Syriac Orthodox Church in the 13th century. He is noted for his works addressing philosophy, poetry, language, history, and theology; he has been called “one of the most learned and versatile men from the Syriac Orthodox Church” (Dr. William Wright).”

“He collected in his numerous and elaborate treatises the results of such research in theology, philosophy, science and history as was in his time possible in Syria. Most of his works were written in Syriac. However he also wrote some in Arabic, which had become the common language in his day.”

The New Advent Catholic Encyclopaedia also contains an article about him:

[www.newadvent.org/cathen/02294a.htm](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02294a.htm)

“[Bar Hebraeus was] a Jacobite Syrian bishop, philosopher, poet, grammarian, physician, Biblical commentator, historian, and theologian, born at Meletine (Malatia), Asia Minor, 1226; died at Maragha, Persia, 1286. He was the son of a Jewish physician, Aaron, a convert to the Jacobite faith; hence his surname of Bar ‘Ebraya (Bar Hebræus), “Son of the Hebrew”. Under the care of his father he began as a boy the study of medicine and of many other branches of knowledge, which he pursued as a youth at Antioch and Tripoli, and which he never abandoned until his death. In 1246 he was consecrated Bishop of Gubos, by the Jacobite Patriarch Ignatius II, and in the following year was transferred to the See of Lacabene. He was placed over the Diocese of Aleppo by Dionysius (1252) and finally was made Primate, or Maphrian, of the East by Ignatius III (1264). His episcopal duties did not interfere with his studies; he took advantage of the numerous visitations, which he had to make throughout his vast province, to consult the libraries and converse with the learned men whom he happened to meet. Thus he gradually accumulated an immense erudition, became familiar with almost all branches of secular and religious knowledge, and in many cases thoroughly mastered the bibliography of the various subjects which he undertook to treat. How he could have devoted so much time to such a systematic study, in spite of all the vicissitudes incident to the Mongol invasion, is almost beyond comprehension. The main claim of Bar Hebræus to our gratitude is not, however, in his original productions, but rather in his having preserved and systematized the work of his predecessors, either by way of condensation or by way of direct reproduction. Both on account

of his virtues and of his science, Bar Hebræus was respected by all, and his death was mourned not only by men of his own faith, but also by the Nestorians and the Armenians.”

From these and other similar articles in encyclopaedias, it is clear that Bar Hebraeus was a historian and scholar of immense importance at the time of the Crusades. He documented a great deal of the history of his time and earlier. He is regarded as a saint by the Syriac Orthodox Church, who hold his feast day on July 30 each year.

But, importantly, Bar Hebraeus was important in Aramaic Christianity. He lived in the Middle East, demonstrating once again that, even as late as the Crusades, Syriac (or Aramaic) was the normal spoken and written language at the time, across an immense landmass from Israel, Syria, across to Iraq and Iran, and beyond even as far as India.

In fact, many Syriac grammars have reading exercises where the writings of Bar Hebraeus are studied. The Chrestomathy (Reading Exercises) often cover the work of Bar Hebraeus as well as Biblical texts such as the Aramaic Old Testament and the Aramaic New Testament.

Consider, then, how important Aramaic continued to be – all the way from the time of Jesus, onwards through the centuries when the Talmud was written, through the centuries of the Massorettes, through Moslem times, through to the Crusades, and beyond.

And Aramaic is still used today. It is still a liturgical language in many churches across the world. The Aramaic Bible is still studied, read and used.

Surely it is time to give Aramaic the reverence it deserves. It is time to make sure that Aramaic regains its rightful place, first and foremost in Biblical studies in the west, a place which it already has in the east.

Without understanding Aramaic and the Aramaic background to the Holy Scriptures, we wander around in the dark, like the blind leading the blind. Without Aramaic, we have detached ourselves from the Rock of salvation. Without Aramaic, we become like a ship without an anchor, adrift across a tempestuous sea, cast about by

every wind of doctrine.

But, rooted to the Aramaic background of the Bible, we arrive at a safe harbour. Our souls will find rest in understanding the Holy Scriptures in the context in which they were originally given.

And that, at the end of the day, is the only way we will ever understand God's inspired Word.

Let our focus our minds on Aramaic, therefore.

Let us make sure we arrive at a safe harbour, and not be cast adrift at sea. Our eternal salvation is at stake.

# Aramaic (and the Gospel) Spread EAST

**I**N THIS chapter, we would like to take a look at the idea that the Gospel – that is, the spread of Christianity – spread EAST, as well as west.

Now, for some people reading this chapter, that (at first) will seem like a very strange subject to discuss. For many Christians, a statement saying that the Gospel spread East is so incredibly obvious that it is hardly even worth mentioning, let alone having an entire chapter about it.

But for other people reading this chapter, some of the ideas presented to you will be a revolution – something you might never, ever have considered before.

So let's give a very quick summary of what this chapter is all about...

Everyone brought up in the west (that is, in the developed world, in Europe, Britain, America, Australia and so on) will be very familiar with the history of how the Gospel message, and therefore Christianity, spread *west* – from Israel, through Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), then *west* into Europe under the Roman Empire.

These events are well known, and they are recorded in the New Testament. They are described, for instance, in Paul's missionary journeys in the book of the Acts of the Apostles. Paul's letters – Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Thessalonians) were written to the early congregations of believers in Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae and Thessalonica, as Paul embarked upon his first, second and third

missionary journeys. The Book of Revelation contains letters, or epistles, to seven of the early churches, or congregations, across Asia Minor.

In summary, Christianity spread across Turkey (or Asia Minor at the time) into the various countries of Europe. The Roman Empire ultimately converted to Christianity. Christianity spread into Britain and Ireland and many other countries on its way across Europe. From there, much later, Christianity spread to America. This is all well-researched and well-documented history.

But that is just one half of Christianity. The other half of the story is that Christianity also spread east. The Gospel spread *east* of Israel, just as readily as it spread *west* of Israel into Europe. In fact, the Gospel message was taken very far east, very quickly. The Gospel message was taken as far as India by as early as A.D. 52, where early congregations were established. It went even further, into China and Mongolia – again, very early on.

Now, here is where it gets interesting. **Most people in the west have absolutely no idea at all that Christianity spread east.** It is an untold story. We are so familiar with our own world – with Christianity in the west – that we simply have no idea that the Gospel message spread very quickly to the rest of the known world.

But here is where it gets even more interesting. **As the Gospel message was taken east, it was the Aramaic New Testament that was taken east.** It was *not* the Greek New Testament! Even to this day, those Churches in the east trace their early history back to the **Aramaic** New Testament, to the disciples who brought it to them. This is completely new to the vast majority of people in the west today! Most people in the west today don't know anything about the Gospel spreading east! Half the story is blanked out!

In the west, the history is a little more blurred. The early history, as we shall see all throughout this book, is very much that the **Aramaic** New Testament was what was **originally** available. But very early on, the Aramaic was translated into Greek. And since then, the west has become so familiar with the *Greek* New Testament, that most people in the west in these last days, simply have no idea that an *Aramaic* New Testament even exists!

But as we trace the history of the Gospel and early Christianity

spreading east, it is always a history of *Aramaic* and the *Aramaic* New Testament spreading east. We are therefore forced to come to the conclusion that the *Aramaic* New Testament is the earliest and most reliable form of the text... That might be a new concept for many in the *west*, but in the *east* – well, in the east, the Aramaic New Testament is all they have ever known!

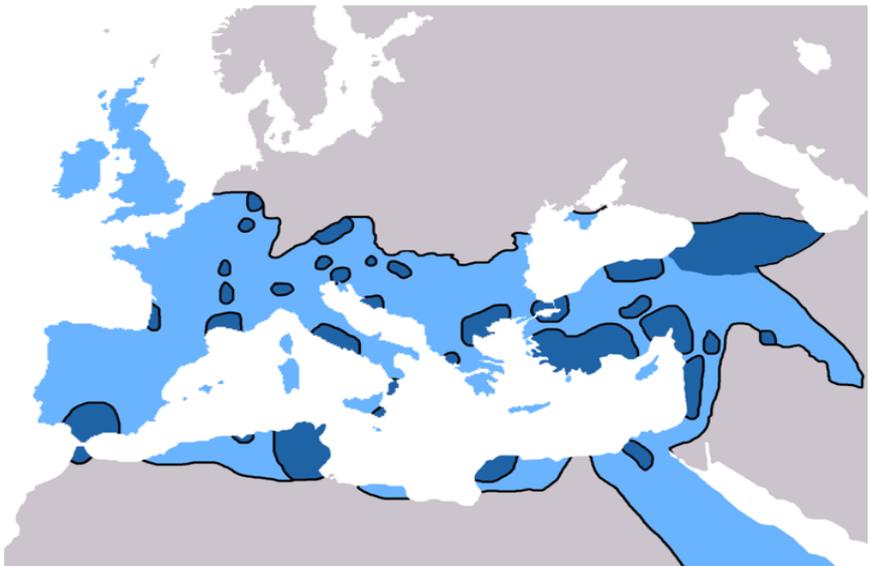
And so, with that introduction, let's retrace our steps and look at the "official story" of how Christianity spread – that is, how the Gospel spread, by the disciples, after the death of Jesus.

As the perfect place to start, because it illustrates the problem perfectly, let's start by looking at one of several Wikipedia article on the spread of Christianity.

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Christianity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Christianity)

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early\\_Christianity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early_Christianity)

These articles have a map showing how Christianity spread in its early history. Here is the map:



■ Spread of Christianity to AD 325   ■ Spread of Christianity to AD 600

*Map of the spread of Christianity, Courtesy of Wikipedia*

While the map, and the articles, are no doubt historically accurate and not *wrong*, **it is strikingly notable that the map is just one half of the story.**

The map, after all, is supposed to show *the* history of early Christianity, how Christianity spread outwards from Apostolic times. Did you spot anything wrong, or strange, about this map?

Well, it only shows Christianity spreading *west* – that is, through Turkey (Asia Minor) into Europe, as far as Britain. Did Christianity not spread anywhere else? Was there an Iron Curtain that stopped Christianity spreading in any other direction? Was there a Berlin Wall that stopped the apostles and disciples going in any direction other than west? Did a barbed wire fence thousands of miles long prevent them going east? Did their legs suddenly stop working if they walked east? Was west the only direction they could travel?

The answers to all these questions is No.

But, “history is always written by the winning side”. The history of Christianity is largely the history of the dominant western empires that make up Europe. Everything else is either forgotten or air-brushed out of history, as though it was unimportant and did not exist.

This lop-sided view of history, that Christianity only spread west and in no other direction, may be because the writings of the New Testament largely contain the experiences of Paul the Apostle and his missionary journeys in the Book of Acts, plus the epistles to the early congregations, written by him and brought with him on his journeys.

So let’s take a closer look at Paul’s missionary journeys, so that we can clearly see that Paul went west in his journeys. These journeys are so well known from Bible studies that we may be forgiven for getting the impression that the Gospel message only spread west, taken there by Paul and his companions.

And so, we have seen that the dominant history of the west records that Christianity spread west. Paul the Apostle spread Christianity west on his missionary journeys. This is well documented and well known history. It is repeated in every Sunday School, and taught in every Bible seminary and church. It is so well known, in fact, that

most people do not realize that there is a whole other side of Christianity, one in which Christianity spread EAST, just as far and as fast as it spread west.

That history is perhaps not as well known, but it is known, and it is historically documented, for those who care to look, and to investigate.

In fact, if we “read the small print” on some of the many articles in Wikipedia, for example, we find that the documented history of Christianity spreading east is a history that is told, known, and documented. It is a history that most people do not know, but it is real nevertheless.

In fact, if we go back to the Wikipedia article on the History of Christianity:

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Christianity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Christianity)

We find a small and apparently unimportant section recording that Christianity did spread *east* as well.

And in fact, it spread *all the way* east – literally *all the way*, all the way east across the entire Middle East, as far as India, and even further into China and Mongolia. Most people in the west have absolutely no understanding of the history of Christianity spreading east. It is completely unknown to them. It is not the history of the dominant Roman Catholic Church and the dominant European Empire, so the history is forgotten, downplayed or ignored, as though it did not exist.

But, as we investigate further, we find some fascinating facts.

That whole movement of the Gospel message, and the Aramaic New Testament, to the east (not just to the west) is well known in history. There are many Wikipedia articles on the subject. For example, there is a whole article on Syriac Christianity, explaining how Christianity spread east, through the spread of the Aramaic New Testament:

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syriac\\_Christianity](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syriac_Christianity)

Interestingly, as Christianity spread east, that whole history is largely a history of how *Syriac* – that is, *Aramaic*, the Aramaic New Testament – spread east. Right from the middle of the first century A.D., the Aramaic New Testament was taken east, preached as far as

India and beyond, and Aramaic has been used ever since then.

That history is one of the *Aramaic* New Testament – *not the Greek* New Testament. Who knew? If *you* didn't know that already, half the story of how Christianity spread east, taking the Aramaic New Testament with it, has been withheld from you. It is the unknown, untold story. The *Greek* New Testament isn't the only show in town...

Let's take a look at some quotes from other Wikipedia articles.

For example, here is the article on the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church [of India]:

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syro-Malabar\\_Catholic\\_Church](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syro-Malabar_Catholic_Church)

It says:

“The Syro-Malabar Catholic Church or Church of Malabar Syrians is a Major Archiepiscopal Church in full communion with the Catholic Church... The members of the Church are known as Mar Thoma Nasranis or Syrian Catholics. It is the largest of the Nasrani denominations with around 4.6 million believers and traces its origins to the evangelistic activity of Thomas the Apostle in the 1st century.”

In other words, this is a *mainstream* Church in communion with the Catholic Church. It is large, with 4.6 million believers. They trace their history to the disciple Thomas, in the first century. It was founded on the Aramaic New Testament, not Greek or any other language. Their liturgy is still conducted in Syriac, in Aramaic, to this very day. They have been faithful to that Aramaic New Testament that was preached to them in A.D. 52 by Thomas himself.

In fact, if we investigate further, we find that Thomas is the Patron Saint of Christianity in India. He reached there as early as A.D. 52.

Here is the Wikipedia article on Thomas the Apostle:

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas\\_the\\_Apostle](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_the_Apostle)

We read:

“Thomas the Apostle, (called Didymus which means “the twin”), was one of the Twelve Apostles of Jesus Christ, according to the New Testament. He is informally called doubting Thomas

because he doubted Jesus' resurrection when first told, (in the Gospel of John), followed later by his confession of faith, "My Lord and my God", on seeing Jesus' wounded body."

"Traditionally, he is said to have traveled outside the Roman Empire to preach the Gospel, traveling as far as India. According to tradition, the Apostle reached Muziris, India in AD 52 and baptized several people, founding what today are known as Saint Thomas Christians or Nasranis."

Thus, as the Gospel message spreads East, we find that *Syriac* (*Aramaic*) is the language that was preached. It was the *Aramaic* New Testament that was preached. *Quite apart from a multitude of other evidence, this alone proves that the Aramaic New Testament is the earliest gospel that was preached – in Aramaic, in A.D. 52, as far as India.*

Is that not truly amazing? It is a fascinating story which is almost entirely unknown in the west. And that story is intimately tied up with the Aramaic New Testament, the same Aramaic New Testament that is used by those churches today.

Wikipedia also has a number of fascinating articles about the early history of how Christianity spread into China and Mongolia:

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity\\_in\\_China](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_in_China)

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church\\_of\\_the\\_East\\_in\\_China](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_the_East_in_China)

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity\\_among\\_the\\_Mongols](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_among_the_Mongols)

We find that, just a few centuries after the Gospel spread into India by Thomas, as early as A.D. 52, Syriac Christianity – that is, the Aramaic New Testament – had started to spread further east into China and Mongolia.

Now, if you have been following the story so far, what language would you expect the Gospel message to be preached in, to those early converts in China and Mongolia? Not Greek. Not the Greek New Testament. Instead, we find that, just as Aramaic was preached to the early believers in India, so too, Aramaic was preached to the early believers in China and Mongolia. As late as the 7th to 11th centuries, the Aramaic New Testament was still being preached in those countries far away in the east.

Does that not suggest that the Aramaic New Testament was the

earliest form of the text – the form that was preached right from the very beginning, from the first century, as early as A.D. 52 in India, and right through to the 12th centuries?

We read:

“The first documentation of Christianity entering China was written on an 8th-century stone tablet known as the Nestorian Stele.”

It was called the Nestorian Stele because the Nestorian Church was the first contact with those Chinese and Mongolians. The Nestorian Church used the Aramaic New Testament.

The Wikipedia article goes on to say:

“Some modern scholars question whether Nestorianism is the proper term for the Christianity that was practiced in China, since it did not adhere to what was preached by Nestorius. They instead prefer to refer to it as “Church of the East”, a term which encompasses the various forms of early Christianity in Asia.”

Whether the correct term was the Nestorian Church or the Church of the East, either way, the fact remains that both the Nestorian Church and the Church of the East both used the Aramaic New Testament, and continue to use it right down to the present day. They simply never used the Greek New Testament.

In the Wikipedia article on the history of Christianity amongst the Mongolian tribes, the article says:

“The Mongols had no churches or monasteries, but claimed a set of beliefs that descended from the Apostle Thomas, which relied on wandering monks. Further, their style was based more on practice than belief.”

“The Mongols had been proselytised since about the 7th century. Many Mongol tribes... were Nestorian Christian.”

We have seen, then, that starting from the first century onwards, the Gospel spread west under the missionary journeys of Paul the apostle. But the Gospel also spread east – just as far and fast as it spread west. That history, of Christianity spreading east, is almost entirely unknown and ignored in the west today, with its bias on the west and Paul’s missionary journeys.

But as early as A.D. 52, Thomas the disciple went as far east as India, preaching and converting as he went. He certainly reached India by that date, and established congregations of believers that have remained there to this day. And from India, within a few centuries, Aramaic Christianity had reached China and Mongolia – as far east as it is possible to get.

But the most interesting fact of all, and one that is undeniably true, and established in history after history, is that the early history of Christianity spreading in the east is almost exclusively the history of Syriac Christianity, of the Aramaic New Testament spreading east, and Syriac and the Aramaic New Testament together being the vehicle for that early preaching of the Gospel.

Whether it was Thomas the disciple arriving in India as early as A.D. 52 with the Aramaic New Testament, or whether it was that same Gospel being preached in Aramaic in China and Mongolia many centuries later, the fact is that Aramaic was what was preached.

That surely tells us that Aramaic is the earliest form of the text, and that it was still in use, and still being preached, one thousand years later. All those early Churches of the East used Aramaic in their liturgy, even although Aramaic was not the normal everyday language of India, China or Mongolia. Why? It can only be because that was the language in which that the early preaching was done, and so Aramaic was the language they used ever since. There is no other reasonable explanation.

But, many people will ask if there is any evidence for this in the New Testament. There is indeed.

For example, while Paul, Silas and Barnabas are known for being the apostles to the Gentiles because they went west into Asia Minor and Europe, Peter and many of the other disciples were the apostles to the Jews. They went east, preaching the Gospel to communities of Jews scattered in the diaspora, scattered far and wide after the Babylonian exile and other events. Because those Jewish communities had Aramaic as the language that united them historically over time, because the disciples themselves in Israel spoke Aramaic, and because those scattered Jews now spoke Aramaic as a result of the Babylonian exile, it was entirely natural for Aramaic to be the language for the preaching to be done. The

Gospels were first written in Aramaic, and Aramaic was the language used for Paul's epistles and the other New Testament writings.

It is therefore entirely natural for Aramaic to be the language that Thomas preached in, as he went to the communities of Jewish believers along the way, finally ending up in India. In turn, those early believers would continue their preaching and liturgy in Aramaic to the early converts. It has remained that way ever since, with Aramaic still being the language they use today.

And so, in Peter's first epistle, as Peter himself went east to the Jewish communities to preach, we find that an early community had formed either in or near Babylon:

**1Pet. 5:13;** "The church that is at Babylon, elected together with you, saluteth you; and so doth Marcus my son."

We also find that, while Jesus lived, in addition to the twelve disciples, Jesus appointed an additional seventy who went out preaching:

**Luke 10:1-16;** "After these things the Lord appointed other seventy also, and sent them two and two before his face into every city and place, whither he himself would come. Therefore said he unto them, The harvest truly is great, but the labourers are few: pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he would send forth labourers into his harvest. Go your ways: behold, I send you forth as lambs among wolves. Carry neither purse, nor scrip, nor shoes: and salute no man by the way. And into whatsoever house ye enter, first say, Peace be to this house. And if the son of peace be there, your peace shall rest upon it: if not, it shall turn to you again. And in the same house remain, eating and drinking such things as they give: for the labourer is worthy of his hire. Go not from house to house. And into whatsoever city ye enter, and they receive you, eat such things as are set before you: And heal the sick that are therein, and say unto them, The kingdom of God is come nigh unto you. But into whatsoever city ye enter, and they receive you not, go your ways out into the streets of the same, and say, Even the very dust of your city, which cleaveth on us, we do wipe off against you: notwithstanding be ye sure of this, that the kingdom of God is

come nigh unto you. But I say unto you, that it shall be more tolerable in that day for Sodom, than for that city. Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works had been done in Tyre and Sidon, which have been done in you, they had a great while ago repented, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the judgment, than for you. And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted to heaven, shalt be thrust down to hell. He that heareth you heareth me; and he that despiseth you despiseth me; and he that despiseth me despiseth him that sent me."

**Luke 10:17-20;** "And the seventy returned again with joy, saying, Lord, even the devils are subject unto us through thy name. And he said unto them, I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven. Behold, I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you. Notwithstanding in this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you; but rather rejoice, because your names are written in heaven."

While the New Testament itself does not record the details of those journeyings, it is clear from history that the seventy disciples went both east and west, as we have seen. They went primarily to the Jewish communities scattered around the then-known world, to the lost sheep of Israel, and Aramaic was the natural common language for all those communities of believers. After the death of Jesus, as we have seen in the case of Thomas the disciple, they went again on other preaching missions, going even further east. And Aramaic, once again, was the language that was used. The Aramaic New Testament was what was preached.

Thus, in the text of the Aramaic New Testament, we find the earliest form of the text. It was all that those early believers knew. The Syriac, or Aramaic text, was what was brought to them.

It is to the Aramaic New Testament that we must look, therefore, if we want to find the earliest, original, and most authentic form of the New Testament text. That is what the external evidence suggests. But as we come to examine the Aramaic New Testament itself, and compare it with the Greek New Testament, that is when things get really exciting. Over and over again, the internal evidence suggests (once again) that the Aramaic New Testament is the original, from

which the Greek New Testament afterwards arose.

We shall examine that evidence minutely in the many video lessons on the Aramaic New Testament that are available to subscribers of [JesusSpokeAramaic.com](http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com).

It is a story that deserves to be told.

# The (Aramaic) Church of the East

**I**N THE LAST chapter, we saw that the Gospel – that is, Christianity – spread EAST, as well as west. We saw that the Gospel message, and the Aramaic New Testament, had spread as far east as India, as early as A.D. 52. It was taken there by the disciple Thomas, who became the patron saint of Christianity in India. From there, it spread even further east, into China and Mongolia, just a few centuries later.

In this chapter, we take a closer look at the Church of the East. We will see that while *in the west*, Christianity has a mixed history of Aramaic (Syriac), Greek and Latin, in the east (by contrast), there is really only one history. It is the history of Aramaic, of the Aramaic New Testament – not Greek, and not Latin.

So let's start this chapter by explaining a little more about what we mean by 'west' and 'east'. This is very important, because the terms are used differently by different people, in different contexts, in different time periods.

Put very simply, in the history of Aramaic and the Aramaic New Testament, think of 'west' as being everything west of Israel. Think of 'east' as everything east of Israel. Jerusalem, after all, is the centre of the world, both geographically and religiously.

Now, let's first think about what we mean by Christianity spreading 'west'. It is, of course, very well known that the Gospel message spread west. 'West' means west of Israel – that is, the Gospel spread west into Asia Minor (now Turkey) and further west into Europe (Greece, Macedonia and Italy). This all happened very early on –

within the first century, under Paul's missionary journeys, as well as the journeyings of other apostles after the death of Jesus. As we saw in the previous chapter, this history is repeated again and again, in all Sunday School chapters, in all churches. It is the history that is recorded in the New Testament itself, in the Acts of the Apostles, and Paul's many epistles.

But the idea that the Gospel spread east is not so well known. This is partly because that history is only mentioned in passing in the New Testament. But it is also because history is always the history of the dominant, or winning side. And the Roman Catholic Church has been the dominant and winning church throughout most of the history of Christianity. Therefore, the history of Christianity has a tendency to be the history of western Christianity, that of the Roman Catholic Church.

And so, when many people think of the history of *eastern* Christianity, most people will immediately think of the Eastern and Western legs of the Roman Empire. Again, from history, it is well known that ultimately the Roman Empire was split into two parts. The western half of the Roman Empire was centred in Rome, to become the Holy Roman Empire. The eastern half of the Roman Empire later became centred around Constantinople, around the time of the Emperor Constantine – in fact, Constantinople (or 'City of Constantine') was named after Constantine 'The Great'.

These two parts of the Roman Empire – the western and eastern legs of the Roman Empire – are familiar to many because of Daniel's prophecy in chapter 2, which we have already looked at in earlier chapters. In Daniel's day, in Babylon, king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had a dream, which was actually a prophecy of empires that would follow his own. The huge statue which he saw in his dream had a head of gold (signifying king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon), arms of silver (signifying the two 'arms' or powers of the Medo-Persian Empire), belly and thighs of brass (signifying the brazen-coated Greeks under the Greek Empire) and legs of iron (signifying the two legs, eastern and western, of the iron might of the Roman Empire).

And so, when many people think of an eastern Church, or the Church in the east, they will probably think of the eastern half of the Roman Empire, ruled over from Constantinople. This is known as

the Byzantine Empire, and a very important Empire it is too.

But this is *still* not what is meant by “the Church of the East”. Let’s illustrate this by looking again at a map of the world.



If we draw a vertical line through Israel, we will call everything west of Israel ‘the west’. And we will call everything east of Israel ‘the east’.

What we call ‘the west’ consists of the territory largely included in the Roman Empire. This includes all the territory included in Paul’s missionary journeys as he spread Christianity west through Asia Minor and further onwards into Europe, as far as Greece and ultimately to Rome itself, when Paul appealed unto Caesar.

Ultimately, Christianity spread all throughout Europe and further westwards. It had spread as far as Gaul (France) and Britain by the first century. Therefore, as early as the first century, under the Roman Empire, Christianity had already spread several thousand miles west of Israel, into Britain. Why should it be surprising, therefore, if Christianity had spread an equal distance (several thousand miles) in the opposite direction (east)? It should not be surprising at all. Indeed, it would be surprising if the Gospel message had *not* spread in both directions. This, after all, was the whole point of Christ’s preaching mission to the disciples and apostles:

**Matt. 24:14;** “And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness **unto all nations**; and then shall the end come.”

**Matt. 26:13;** “Verily I say unto you, Whosoever this gospel shall be preached **in the whole world**, there shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her.”

**Mat 28:18-19;** “And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach **all nations**, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:”

**Mark 13:10;** “And the gospel must first be published among **all nations**.”

The disciples were told to *go into the whole world*, to teach *all nations*, not just those in the west. The Gospel was to be preached *in all the world*, not just in the west.

And this is exactly what happened – very early on, but certainly during the first century. In Romans, Paul writes that their faith was spoken of throughout the whole world:

**Rom. 1:8;** “First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of **throughout the whole world**.”

If we look back at the Roman Empire, and look at the split between the ‘western’ and ‘eastern’ legs of the Roman Empire, we see that both the western and eastern halves of the Roman Empire *are still the west*. That is, under our definition of ‘west’ being ‘west of Israel’, both the traditional western Roman Empire and the Byzantine Empire are still ‘the west’.

If we go back to our map of the world, then, we see that ‘the west’ consists of everything west of Israel – basically the Roman Empire under its western and eastern extent. And ‘the east’ consists of everything east of Israel.

Now, it starts to get *very* interesting when we look at the language in which the New Testament is best known, in ‘the west’ and ‘the east’.

In the comprehensive video lessons on the history of the Aramaic New Testament that are available at [JesusSpokeAramaic.com](http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com), we carefully trace through the history of the Aramaic New Testament in

intricate and amazing detail. We find that the Aramaic New Testament has always been there. It has been around from the very beginning. It was the version of the New Testament that was used for the early translations, such as the Armenian Bible – because no Greek New Testaments could be found in the whole of Armenia, even several centuries after Christ. The Aramaic New Testament was the main source of the Arabic Bible – around the 7th to 9th centuries A.D. As we trace through the history of the Aramaic New Testament in the west, we find that it has always been around, has always been held in the highest esteem, and has always been regarded as authentic and high quality.

But, in the west, the Greek and Latin New Testaments have generally become the dominant versions. The Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint) has also become dominant in the west, even although it is only a translation of the Holy, inspired, God-breathed Hebrew Old Testament. And the Latin Vulgate – even although it is merely a translation and not a God-breathed inspired original – itself became dominant in the west for around 1500 years.

Thus, the history of ‘the Bible’ in the west is mixed. The Aramaic New Testament has always been there throughout recorded history. But both the Greek and Latin New Testaments, the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint) and the Latin Old Testament, have together become more dominant, or more *popular*, in the west.

In the series of video lessons on the Aramaic New Testament that are available at [JesusSpokeAramaic.com](http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com), we carefully and painstakingly present an abundance of evidence that the Aramaic New Testament is the original New Testament from which the Greek was translated, *not* the other way round as many in the west might suppose. The Latin New Testament was itself a translation from the Greek. And the Greek Old Testament and Latin Old Testament were both translations of the inspired, original Hebrew Old Testament.

The dominant Roman Catholic Church in the west, therefore, has a known history of making translations from God-breathed original inspired Holy Scriptures, and passing these off as the version to be used officially, degrading the God-breathed inspired originals to an inferior place, and promoting the man-made translations as the official version to be used. That is a harsh and maybe controversial assertion, but it is nevertheless what has happened. History proves

it. Examining the different versions in detail will also prove it.

In the west, *translations* of the Bible became dominant, and not the God-breathed inspired originals. It was the case in ancient times, and it is still the case today. Mostly all Christians in the west use translations these days. If you live in the west and don't believe me, just look at the version of the Bible you use! The chances are that it is a KJV, an NIV, or one of a number of other modern translations.

The history of Christianity in the west, therefore, has a mixed history of Aramaic, Greek and Latin, and later English. The Greek and Latin translations became more popular. They became dominant. Today, English translations have become more popular. They have become dominant. The west has always loved translations.

But... in the east, it is an entirely different story. In the east, meaning 'east of Israel', the history of Christianity is almost exclusively the history of Aramaic, and of the Aramaic New Testament. Everywhere we go, right from the very beginning, it was always the Aramaic New Testament that was used. Except maybe in relatively recent times, the Greek New Testament and the Latin New Testament have both been conspicuous by their absence. In modern times, of course, translations have subsequently been introduced. But the Aramaic New Testament was always what churches across the east used, right from the beginning, across thousands of miles of unrelated countries.

Does that not tell us everything we need to know about the importance and authenticity of the Aramaic New Testament? In the east, the Aramaic New Testament is all there has ever been. In the west, other translations such as Greek and Latin became dominant, became popular, but the Aramaic New Testament has always been there, and has always been highly regarded. The Aramaic New Testament is the common denominator. It is the original, from which others derive. Churches in the east have been more conservative, more likely to stick to that Aramaic gospel that was first preached to them. The west is more liberal, abandoning the Aramaic gospel that was preached to them, and adopting first the Greek New Testament, and later the Latin New Testament, and soon after just about any other translation, English or otherwise, in preference to that original Aramaic gospel that was once preached by the disciples and apostles.

What should that tell us? Should we not recognise the importance, originality and authenticity of Aramaic, and especially of the Aramaic New Testament? Should we not stick to the Aramaic, even if it takes time and effort to learn it? Should we abandon the inspired, God-breathed original language and adopt a man-made translation, or should we cleave unto what God has given us? Surely we should make the time and effort to study what Almighty God has given to us. If Aramaic was good enough for Jesus and the disciples and apostles, should it not also be good enough for us?

But let us return to the focus of this chapter, to the Church of the East. In our previous chapter, we saw that the gospel in Aramaic was taken as far as India, as early as A.D. 52, by the disciple Thomas. From there, it spread further east, to China and Mongolia. The Aramaic New Testament was what was taken to those places. The history of Christianity in the east is the story of the Aramaic New Testament.

While the history of the church in the *west* is well known, the history of the church in the *east* is less well known. It is *not* the history of Byzantine Christianity, because that is *still* the history of *western* Christianity under the Roman Empire.

Instead, the history of the church in the east is completely different. It is well documented, but just less well known by people in the west.

Wikipedia is a good place to find out more. It has a whole article about The Church of the East:

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church\\_of\\_the\\_East](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_the_East)

As we read through this article, we see that it is the history of Christianity spreading east, taking Aramaic (or Syriac) with it. It is the history of the Aramaic New Testament, spreading all the way east, as far east as it is possible to go, very early on.

Despite the huge time periods involved, of two thousand years, despite the immense geographical land mass included, despite the ravage of wars and empires coming and going, despite the different countries involved, despite people of many different types and temperaments being involved, despite the west undergoing its own history, despite the inevitable splits in beliefs and practices, the

history of the east has always had one thing in common – Aramaic, and the Aramaic New Testament.

As we follow through the related Wikipedia articles, we find a whole wealth of detailed articles about the history of the Church of the East, and Eastern Christianity, that is largely unknown or disregarded in the west today. It is all the history of Syriac, or Aramaic, Christianity.

Let us look at some quotes from Wikipedia's article on the Church of the East:

“The Church of the East, also known as the Nestorian Church, is a historical Christian church within the Syriac tradition of Eastern Christianity. Originating among early Christian communities in Assyria (Parthian ruled Athura [or Assyria]), it was the Christian church of the Persian Sasanian Empire (224 AD to 651 AD) (although the Persians themselves were largely Zoroastrians), and quickly spread widely through Asia. Between the 9th and 14th centuries it represented the world's largest Christian church in terms of geographical extent, with dioceses stretching from the Mediterranean to China and India. Several modern churches claim continuity with the historical Church of the East, notably the Assyrian Church of the East, which remains unaffiliated with other Catholic or Orthodox Christian Churches, as well as the Chaldean Catholic Church, in communion with the Catholic Church.”

Thus, the Church of the East was, for centuries, the largest Christian church in terms of geography, and possibly numbers too. It goes back to Assyria, and was the Christian church of the early Persian Empire. It has remained faithful to its Aramaic heritage ever since, still using the Aramaic New Testament in liturgy and worship today.

We go on to read:

“The Church of the East was headed by the Patriarch of the East, continuing a line that, according to tradition, stretched back to the Apostolic Age.”

In fact, if we read the article on the Patriarch of the East, we find that the Church of the East traces its earliest history back to the disciples of Jesus:

From the Apostolic Age, we have:

- Shimun Keepa (Saint Peter) (33–64)
- Thoma Shlikha, (Saint Thomas) (c. 33–c. 77)
- Tulmay (St. Bartholomew the Apostle) (c. 33 – ?)
- Mar Addai, (St. Thaddeus) (30–45)
- Aggai (Mar Aggai) (c.66–c.87 / 120–152 AD)
- Saint Mari (Mar Mari) (c. 87–c. 120 / 152–185 AD)

Thus, while Paul, Silas and Barnabas went west and took the Gospel west into Asia Minor and Europe, as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, we find that the other disciples went the opposite direction. Peter, Thomas, Bartholomew and Thaddeus went east, taking the Gospel all across the east all the way to India in their own lifetimes, and even further east later. Aramaic was the language they preached. In those days, it was the only language they needed. They no doubt went initially to Jewish communities as they went, who, following the Babylonian exile, also spoke Aramaic.

We see, therefore, that the history of the Church of the East is the history of both Aramaic, and the Aramaic New Testament. It is the history of Syriac, or Aramaic, Christianity. While Aramaic spread in the east under the direct command and knowledge of the disciples of Jesus, in the west, Aramaic was also spread – but the west soon replaced the Aramaic New Testament with first Greek, then the Latin New Testament, then other vernacular translations, before ending up with the hundreds of translations that we have in the west today.

Instead, why don't we be faithful to the Aramaic gospel that was first preached by Jesus, then by his disciples and the apostles? Why don't we cleave to the original message that God delivered unto his saints? We need nothing else. Why turn to the right hand, or to the left hand, as we search for Truth? Why not follow the narrow path that leads to life, rather than the broad path that leads to destruction? Why have a translation, when we can have an original?

The Church of the East, then, has remained largely faithful to that original Gospel message that was preached in Aramaic. They preserved that Aramaic, revered it, and have used it ever since.

While the detailed history of the Church of the East is interesting,

examining it more fully is outside the scope of this book. However, for those wishing to know more, searching for “Church of the East” in book stores such as Amazon, will produce a number of excellent and informative histories.

These all confirm that Aramaic (or Syriac) and the Aramaic New Testament, are all intertwined with the history of the Church of the East. And a fascinating history it is, too, one which is almost completely unknown in the west. But its roots lie with Aramaic, and with the very disciples and apostles of Jesus themselves.

For the roots of the Gospel message, it is to Aramaic that we must turn.

It is to Aramaic that we must cleave if we wish to uncover the true, authentic and original message of the Bible. The Aramaic New Testament is of the utmost importance to all those wishing to be faithful to Jesus, and to the Gospel message. Translations, however good, are just not the same as an inspired, God-breathed original.

## Dialects of Aramaic

**A**S WE HAVE SEEN throughout these chapters on Aramaic, the Bible's Second Holy Language, Aramaic has a long history, down through many centuries. It touches entire world empires. Aramaic has been the dominant language of the Middle East for millennia, as well as touching both the people of Israel and the nations surrounding Israel.

But throughout this time, although Aramaic has remained a single recognisable language, no language can remain completely unchanged for such a long period of human history, and Aramaic is no exception. Aramaic has been spoken across an immense geographical area, it has spanned nations, countries and empires, it has survived wars and revolutions, and it has been spoken by friends and foes alike. But in all those centuries, over such a huge expanse of time, several acknowledged dialects have emerged, or been identified – although Aramaic has still remained a single coherent language, despite these dialects.

In this chapter, therefore, we examine the main dialects of Aramaic that are important to a study of the Holy Scriptures today, and we provide some additional background by looking at some of the other dialects of Aramaic.

But before we do that, let's first investigate two critical questions. First, what exactly is meant by a *dialect* of a language? And what is the difference between a *dialect* and a *language*? In other words, when do variations in a language qualify as a dialect, and when do those changes become a separate language altogether?

While linguists no doubt use more formal definitions, for the purpose of these chapters, the following explanations are accurate and helpful:

- ➔ DIALECTS are variations, or flavours, of a language, such that the dialects are all mutually understandable, even if (at times) they use different words, or different phrases, and even if it is sometimes difficult to understand each other.
- ➔ LANGUAGES, on the other hand, are NOT mutually intelligible – that is, they are so different that a native speaker of one language would not automatically be able to understand the other language.

To make this clearer, let's illustrate the differences between dialects and languages by looking at a few examples.

Take Spanish, for instance – a language that is spoken in Spain (obviously), but also across several countries in South America. The United States also has a very extensive Spanish-speaking population. Although they can all speak Spanish and can therefore make themselves understood, there are differences (sometimes significant differences) between the Spanish spoken across these locations. Spanish, as spoken in Spain, is pronounced differently and has many words and phrases that would not be used elsewhere. Similarly, even within Spain, there are many variations and dialects. Spanish in South America is significantly different from the Spanish spoken in Spain, with each country having its own variants (or dialects). In fact, there is a whole article on Wikipedia explaining the dialects of the Spanish language and giving examples of pronunciation differences, different words and phrases, and so on.

This, then, is an example of dialects within a language. It is all Spanish, all recognisably the same language, but with variations depending on regions and countries. A different accent or dialect can even identify where you come from. But despite these differences, despite difficulties at times, Spanish is a single coherent language and Spanish speakers will all be able to make themselves understood.

Another example is the English language. English is spoken across whole swathes of the globe today – in the United Kingdom, in the Channel Islands, across the United States, in the Caribbean, throughout Canada, across Australia and New Zealand, in many other places, and as a second language across even more countries.

But even though English is a single language, in the sense that

everyone speaking English would understand each other, or make themselves understood, there are many differences between the English spoken across these various countries. Even across a single country such as the United States, there are many variations in pronunciation and accent, even down to the words and phrases used. Your use of English, and the way you speak, can easily tell people which part of the country you come from. The differences can be amusing sometimes, especially differences between US English and UK English. Many a standup comedian has based an entire performance on the differences between the flavours, or variations, or dialects of the English language. The differences sometimes lead to confusion or misunderstanding. But despite all these differences, English (like Spanish) is nevertheless a single, coherent language spoken for centuries across a very wide geographical area.

Just like Spanish and English, Aramaic, too, is a single, coherent language that was spoken for centuries (millennia!) across a very wide geographical area. And just like Spanish and English, there were pronunciation differences which would identify where someone came from, and words and phrases were used differently. Things were sometimes expressed in different ways. The dialects in Aramaic are important, potentially significantly different – but despite these many differences, Aramaic can be considered as a single coherent language, just like Spanish or English.

As an example of a dialect in Aramaic, consider a familiar passage from the gospels, on the fateful night when Jesus is betrayed by Judas. The shepherd is smitten, and the flock scatters. The disciples all go their separate ways. But Peter follows Christ as the mob leads him away to be interrogated, beaten, condemned and eventually crucified.

Peter warms himself by a fire in the cold night air of Jerusalem. A maid nearby accuses him of being with Jesus of Nazareth, and Peter denies – three times. But Peter, and Jesus, and the other disciples were from the Galilee, and they spoke Aramaic. In Jerusalem, they also spoke Aramaic, as we saw in the chapter *What does Josephus say?*. But the dialects they were using were different – although clearly they were able to understand each other. This incident is recorded in Mark 14:68-70.

Verse 70 says, “Surely thou art one of them: for thou art a Galilaeen,

and thy speech agreeth thereto.”

This verse shows that, while they both spoke Aramaic (Peter from the Galilee and the others in Jerusalem), they had different dialects. They were able to understand each other, but the maid knew (from the way he spoke) that Peter was not from Jerusalem, but from the Galilee. This illustrates the point that while dialects may sound different and have some rather specific differences, the different dialects of Aramaic still mean that Aramaic as a whole is a single language which can be mutually understood.

With this background, let us then investigate the most important dialects of Aramaic from the perspective of understanding the Holy Scriptures, the Word of God, in its entirety.

The first major dialect is Biblical Aramaic, or Aramaic as used in the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament). In the chapter about Biblical Aramaic, we saw that Biblical Aramaic mostly consists of several chapters in Daniel and Ezra, as well as isolated words, phrases and sentences in the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. Daniel and Ezra, however, form the bulk of Biblical Aramaic, an extensive enough body of work to study and write a grammar about.

Biblical Aramaic is often referred to as Chaldee, as in the classic reference work, *Gesenius' Hebrew & Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament*, or Davidson's *The Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon*. Although the Chaldeans were the ruling elite in Babylon at the height of the Babylonian Empire, it is not strictly accurate to call the Aramaic dialect spoken in Babylon as Chaldee or Chaldaic. However, the term was commonly used in Biblical reference works throughout the 1800s. The language of the Babylonian Empire is referred to as Imperial or Official Aramaic.

Next, we come to Palestinian Aramaic. This is the dialect of Aramaic which most of the Targums were written in, including Targum Onkelos and Targum Jonathan.

Although not directly the focus of this book, Babylonian Aramaic is the dialect of the Babylonian Talmud.

We also have the Syriac dialect of Aramaic. Syriac is one of the most important dialects of Aramaic, because it not only has a very extensive body of literature spanning centuries – and can therefore

be comprehensively studied – but it was the dialect of Aramaic which the Aramaic New Testament and the Aramaic Old Testament were written in. In fact, so important is Syriac that we have devoted an entire chapter to it.

These three main dialects of Aramaic (Biblical Aramaic, Palestinian Jewish Aramaic and Syriac) all have a number of their own, separate, dedicated grammars, dictionaries and lexicons written for them. Some of these are available to subscribers for free download on the JesusSpokeAramaic.com website. There would be no point in us writing our own grammars and lexicons when this has already been done by others.

We are on safe ground when we call these dialects of Aramaic, because they each have very extensive bodies of literature with entire chapters, even entire books and major historical works, written in them. This allows us to compare the grammar of these Aramaic dialects carefully, precisely enough for people to write an entire book on how these dialects differ.

However, on the JesusSpokeAramaic.com website, rather than treating these important dialects as if they were separate, independent, isolated, unconnected dialects, we feel that a better approach is to treat Aramaic as a whole, as a cohesive and integrated language. When we come to the series of video lessons on learning Aramaic that are available at JesusSpokeAramaic.com, we provide separate groups of lessons for Beginners, Intermediate and Advanced. We compare and contrast the differences between the main Aramaic dialects as we go along. Not only is this approach much more fun and interesting, but you will gain a much better understanding of Aramaic as a whole, because you will see where the dialects are different, and where they are the same. You will find that the differences tend to unify the Aramaic language, rather than driving a wedge between the different dialects.

Later, if you want to specialize in a specific Aramaic dialect, you can refer to the separate grammars and reference works which are available to subscribers for free download on the JesusSpokeAramaic.com website.

In this chapter, then, we have examined the main dialects of Aramaic which are important to studying the Word of God. If you want a

more comprehensive understanding of all Aramaic dialects, we recommend that you take a look at the second part of our video lesson, *A Brief History of Aramaic*, which is available on the JesusSpokeAramaic.com website, in which we look at the CAL, the Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon, which is an online lexicon of machine-readable Aramaic texts available for browsing and morphological analysis. The Aramaic texts are listed by dialect, providing you with a superb overview of the Aramaic dialects and what each of them consists of.

Attempts to form a comprehensive list of Aramaic dialects can be done by time period, or by geographical location, or a combination of both.

This will help you to better understand the dialects of Aramaic.

# The Syriac Dialect of Aramaic

**I**N THESE chapters on Aramaic, the Bible's Second Holy Language, we have seen just how long and distinguished a history Aramaic has. But in this chapter, we will take a closer look at the *Syriac* dialect of Aramaic, which must surely be the most important Aramaic dialect of all, as we shall see.

Aramaic is present almost at the very beginning of human history. Aramaic is there in the early chapters of the book of Genesis, in the Book of Beginnings. Laban spoke Aramaic to Jacob, and the patriarchs in Ur of the Chaldees would have known, and no doubt have also spoken, Aramaic.

Aramaic appears all throughout the Old Testament. It is present in the three major divisions of the Hebrew Bible – the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. It is the second Holy Language of Judaism.

Aramaic was the normal spoken and written language for nearly all the nations surrounding Israel. The Assyrians and the Babylonians all used Aramaic as their official language, as well as the ordinary spoken language of the everyday people. The pages of the Old Testament are full of records of the interactions between Israel (who classically spoke Hebrew) and the nations around Israel (who primarily spoke Aramaic).

Aramaic, then, has a very long history indeed. At the very least, it was a recognisable language, different to Hebrew but parallel with it, as early as the times of Abraham – around 2000 B.C. but almost certainly well before that. And as we go through the pages of the

Bible, we find that from the time of Abraham, Aramaic continued to be spoken through the four hundred years that the Israelites were in Egypt, through the coming out of Egypt, through the times of the Judges, through the times of the Kings of Israel and Judah, and through the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires (as we have seen on the chapters about those subjects).

In the Maccabean Revolt, mainstream Jews fought hard against the Greek language, and thus Aramaic continued to be spoken throughout this time. The Jewish Targums, the official translations of the Hebrew Bible, and the Aramaic Old Testament, were used around this time. As we approach the Roman Empire, Aramaic continued to be spoken – as we saw in our chapters about the historian Josephus and the language that was spoken in New Testament times. As we progress from New Testament times, the Talmud was written (in which the Gemara, or commentary on the Mishnah, is in Aramaic). And still Aramaic continued as a written and spoken language.

Centuries after Jesus of Nazareth, Aramaic continued in use. As we approach Islamic times around A.D. 600, we find that Arabic started to gain a foothold and eventually, after many hundreds of years, Arabic became the dominant language of the Middle East, supplanting Aramaic from its exalted position.

Nevertheless, Aramaic continued its journey onwards through time. As we approach Crusader times, some of the classic historians around that time recorded their histories in Aramaic, showing that Aramaic was still alive and well.

And Aramaic is still in use today, with many people in villages across the Middle East in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Israel still speaking Aramaic down to the present day. Aramaic is also the liturgical language of the many congregations and denominations that make up the Church of the East today, with the Aramaic New Testament being the language they use for worship and service.

Aramaic, therefore, has a consistent and recognisable history spanning at least 4000 years. Aramaic was spoken across a massive area of the Middle East, stretching as far as India and into Mongolia under the early Christian missionaries who went East. Clearly, no language can remain unchanged throughout that vast period of time

and distance. It was inevitable that differences would emerge. Biblical Aramaic, for example, is somewhat different to the Aramaic of the Jewish Targums.

Out of all the dialects of Aramaic, the most important is undoubtedly Syriac. On the one hand, Syriac is “just” one of the many dialects of Aramaic. But on the other hand, Syriac is one of the most important dialects – perhaps **the** most important dialect.

Syriac was the most important, the predominant, dialect of Aramaic across a vast swathe of the Middle East, from around 500 B.C. all the way through and beyond the times of the Crusades. Indeed, as we saw in the chapter *Aramaic in Crusader Times*, Syriac was the dialect of Aramaic in which many of the classic histories of the Crusades were written.

Syriac is also the dialect of Aramaic in which the Aramaic Old Testament (the translation of the Hebrew Bible) was written in, probably either around the time of Jesus, or with its origins potentially several centuries beforehand.

The Aramaic New Testament is also written in the Syriac dialect of Aramaic. And the Aramaic Old and New Testaments have been preserved carefully ever since. Many churches across the world still use and revere the Aramaic New Testament as the very original Word of God, personally handed down to them by the apostles and disciples themselves, and still read and used in the liturgy today.

Syriac then, is a critically important dialect of Aramaic. Let us examine a little more of the history of Syriac, as we seek to better understand its significance.

Let us provide some quotes from Wikipedia, a well-respected modern online encyclopaedia:

“Syriac was originally a 5th century BC local Assyrian-Akkadian influenced Aramaic dialect of Assyria in northern Mesopotamia that evolved under the influence of Assyrian Church of the East and Syriac Orthodox Church into its current form. Before Arabic became the dominant language, Syriac was a major language among Christian communities in the Middle East, Central Asia and Kerala, and remains so among the Assyrians and Syriac-Arameans to this day. It has been found as far afield as

Hadrian's Wall in Ancient Britain, with inscriptions written by Assyrian and Aramean soldiers of the Roman Empire."

Is that not amazing? In the Roman Empire, as we have already looked at in our chapter on the subject, Aramaic was still a spoken language – as far afield as Britain! Soldiers in Britain actually spoke and wrote Aramaic – Syriac in particular, the very language in which the Aramaic New Testament was written! Syriac was spoken all across the Middle East, but as far west as Britain, and as far east as Kerala in India! And Syriac also goes back in time as far as the fifth century B.C.! Its origins lie with the Assyrian Empire, just as we have seen in our chapters, as we walked through the use of Aramaic in the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires!

But let us continue to see what else Wikipedia says:

"Syriac, also known as Syriac Aramaic, is a dialect of Middle Aramaic that was once spoken across much of the Fertile Crescent and Eastern Arabia. Having first appeared as a script in 1st century AD Assyria after being spoken there as an unwritten language for five centuries, Classical Syriac became a major literary language throughout the Middle East from the 4th to the 8th centuries, the classical language of Edessa, preserved in a large body of Syriac literature. Indeed, Syriac literature comprises roughly 90% of the extant Aramaic literature."

Thus, with Syriac being such an extensive language, going back to the fifth century B.C., with it being in use over such a vast geographical area from Hadrian's Wall in Britain, at the farthest extent of the Roman Empire, all the way to Kerala in India and beyond, with it remaining in use as a written language well into Crusader times, with it still being spoken today, with the fact that 90% of existing Aramaic literature is written in Syriac, should there be any surprise at all that Syriac would be the dialect of Aramaic that the Aramaic New Testament should have been written in?

Syriac was clearly the normal, natural, everyday spoken language for hundred of thousands of people in the Middle East (and way beyond) at the time. Why would any other dialect of Aramaic be chosen by our Heavenly Father to preserve His Word in? Only Syriac makes sense. It is unmistakably Aramaic, yet remained in use, rooted in time, long enough for the Aramaic Old Testament, and especially

the Aramaic New Testament, to be both preserved for all of that time, and more importantly, actually used and read. It is no wonder that Syriac is the Aramaic dialect used in the Aramaic Old Testament and the Aramaic New Testament.

Quoting again from Wikipedia:

“From the 1st century A.D., Syriac became the vehicle of Syriac Christianity and culture, and the liturgical language of the Syriac Orthodox Church and subsequently Assyrian Church of the East, together with the later offshoots of the Assyrian Church; the Nestorian Church, Chaldean Catholic Church, Ancient Church of the East, Saint Thomas Christian Churches, and Assyrian Pentecostal Church. Syriac Christianity and language spread throughout Asia as far as the Indian Malabar Coast and Eastern China, and was the medium of communication and cultural dissemination for the later Arabs and, to a lesser extent, the Parthian Empire and Sassanid Empire Persians. Primarily a Christian medium of expression, Syriac had a fundamental cultural and literary influence on the development of Arabic, which largely replaced it towards the 14th century. Syriac remains the liturgical language of Syriac Christianity to this day.”

Indeed, as we look at the map in the Wikipedia article showing the extent of how far Syriac went, we see that it went as far East as India, and even into Mongolia and China with the early Christian missionaries, who took Syriac, and the Aramaic New Testament, with them. The early missionaries took the Aramaic New Testament, not the Greek New Testament!

Thus, once the Aramaic Old and New Testaments were preserved in Syriac, Syriac became intimately associated with Christianity. As the Aramaic New Testament spread, the script used to write it also changed. Whereas early on, the ‘Hebrew’ or (more accurately) the ‘Ashuri’ script, was used, the Estrangela script was soon adopted, and later Serta, and later still, Swadaya. We cover all these classic scripts, and show you how to read and write them, in the amazing video lessons on the Aramaic Alphabet that are available at [JesusSpokeAramaic.com](http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com).

This, then, provides an overview of the Syriac dialect of Aramaic.

Before you finish your consideration of Syriac, it is recommended that you go to the CAL, the Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon, to provide a flavour of just how vast and comprehensive Syriac literature is.

The web address of the Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon can be found at:

`call.cn.huc.edu`

# Aramaic is Still Spoken Today

**I**N THIS book on Aramaic, the Bible's Second Holy Language, we have seen that Aramaic has a history of more than 4000 years. It was already a recognised language in Ur of the Chaldees in Mesopotamia, when Jacob met Laban, right back in the book of Genesis, or the Book of The Beginning.

By contrast, English does not even come close, since in a mere 1000 years, English is almost unrecognisably different from the modern language spoken today. Nearly all the other world's languages have been ravished through time, either changing out of all recognition, being absorbed through assimilation, or otherwise disappearing into the mists of time.

But as the world's language graveyards fall into disrepair, littered with the corpses of ghosts of languages past, two languages in particular have outlived them all, outgrown them all, survived through several world empires, and watched them all go to their graves, to continue their own immortal journeys through time.

One of these languages is Hebrew. The other is Aramaic. Both languages, intertwined and growing alongside each other like a bride and bridegroom, like two vines growing together, are inextricably linked to the Holy Scriptures, to the inspired Word of God.

Just as Hebrew is still spoken today, so too, Aramaic is still spoken today, although its use has declined a great deal, as it clings for existence against an onslaught of English as the world's dominant language, and Arabic as the Middle East's dominant language.

But despite the pressure from other languages, small villages across the Middle East, in Syria, Iraq, Turkey, Iran and other countries, have tenaciously clung on to their Aramaic language despite the encroachment of Arabic. Pockets of Jews in Israel also, mainly those who have come from Arabic-speaking countries, have also fought to retain their Aramaic language and cultural.

One example of a village that still clings to Aramaic, and still uses the Aramaic New Testament for its worship to this day, is Ma'aloula. You can watch a video clip about Ma'aloula from YouTube using the link provided in this chapter.

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=JW6Q2wzCE1U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JW6Q2wzCE1U)

You can also listen to the Lord's Prayer being spoken in Aramaic at Ma'aloula using the link shown in the chapter:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxL9M8URu7o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxL9M8URu7o)

However, it is not just the Churches of the East and small villages in the Middle East that use the Aramaic New Testament. Steadily, the west is starting to wake up to the Aramaic New Testament's claim to be the original New Testament from which the Greek New Testament was derived.

More and more Bible believers long to get back to a more authentic and original form of Christianity, to a faith based more firmly on the gospel that was preached by Jesus and the disciples in the first century A.D., to a New Testament written in the language that Jesus and the disciples spoke, to phrases and idioms they would have used, to words they would have spoken.

The Aramaic New Testament is where you need to be if you want to get back to a more authentic form of Christianity, and base your beliefs on the sure foundation of the Bible and Aramaic. And Jesus Spoke Aramaic is your key and compass to the vast and exciting world of Aramaic and everything in it.

Let your journey into Aramaic begin today. Continue to walk in the way every day. Your understanding of Aramaic will grow day by day, here a little, and there a little.

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

# How Different are Hebrew and Aramaic?

**T**HROUGHOUT these chapters on Aramaic, we have frequently drawn comparisons between the Hebrew and Aramaic languages. We have seen that, in many ways, Hebrew and Aramaic are sister languages, and down through the centuries they have grown together like two vines as they interact with the Holy Scriptures, and with the Jewish and Gentile nations.

With such a close cultural connection between the Hebrew and Aramaic languages, the following questions are frequently asked:

- ➔ Are Hebrew and Aramaic different DIALECTS, or are they different LANGUAGES?
- ➔ How similar (fundamentally) are Hebrew and Aramaic?
- ➔ What do Hebrew and Aramaic have in common?
- ➔ What are the differences between Hebrew and Aramaic?
- ➔ How easy is it to learn Hebrew if you know Aramaic, or to learn Aramaic if you know Hebrew?
- ➔ What is the best (or easiest!) way to learn one language if you know the other?

In this chapter, therefore, let us explore the answers to these questions in more detail.

In the chapter *Dialects of Aramaic*, we first investigated what is meant by a “dialect” of a language. We explored what exactly a dialect is, and gave some examples. We saw that the various dialects of a language should, in general, all be mutually understandable. In

other words, there will be differences, and some of those differences could be significant, and they may even make it difficult for people speaking in those dialects to understand each other. But, nevertheless, dialects of a language mean that people using those dialects ultimately WILL be able to understand each other.

By contrast, two LANGUAGES will, in general, NOT be mutually understandable. There will be differences between them just like there are with dialects, but those differences are important and significant enough to mean that people will not understand each other. Under this definition, Hebrew and Aramaic are different LANGUAGES, not just different DIALECTS. If you learn one, it does not automatically mean that you will understand the other. You have to make a deliberate and conscious effort to actually LEARN the other language.

This is illustrated clearly in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), under the Assyrian Empire, when Sennacherib and his army come against Jerusalem to besiege and conquer it, in the days of king Hezekiah of Judah.

**2Kings 18:26-29;** “Then said Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, and Shebna, and Joah, unto Rabshakeh, Speak, I pray thee, to thy servants in the Syrian language; for we understand it: and talk not with us in the Jews’ language in the ears of the people that are on the wall. But Rabshakeh said unto them, Hath my master sent me to thy master, and to thee, to speak these words? hath he not sent me to the men which sit on the wall, that they may eat their own dung, and drink their own urine with you? Then Rabshakeh stood and cried with a loud voice in the Jews’ language, and spake, saying, Hear the word of the great king, the king of Assyria...”

We see from this passage that, as expected, the invading Assyrians spoke Aramaic (called “the Syrian language” in the above quotation from King James Bible). Although Eliakim, Shebna and Joah speak Aramaic and can therefore talk to the Assyrian army, the ordinary people in Judah (the Jews) only understand Hebrew (referred to as “the Jews’ language”) and do not understand the threatening words of the Assyrians. Eliakim wants the Assyrians to speak Aramaic so that the ordinary people will not understand the threats, but Rabshakeh deliberately (and provocatively) speaks Hebrew to make

sure that the ordinary people fully understand the threat they are facing.

This passage demonstrates that, in general, Hebrew and Aramaic were different languages and understanding one did not automatically mean that you would understand the other. Despite this, educated people such as Eliakim, Shebna and Joah had made the effort to learn Aramaic, and the invading general (Rabshakeh) had made the effort to learn Hebrew.

This passage, therefore, settles the question decisively. Hebrew and Aramaic are not just different dialects – they are different languages, and an effort must be made to learn each one. Being different languages, they are not mutually understandable – that is, someone who speaks or understands Hebrew would not automatically be able to understand Aramaic without studying it, and vice versa. Aramaic is not an ancient or archaic version of Hebrew, or the other way round.

To make the point more emphatically, consider the Hebrew Bible published in the 1990s by the British and Foreign Bible Society in Israel. The Aramaic section of the book of Daniel actually has a translation of Daniel (in Aramaic) into modern Hebrew, so that Israelis can understand it. Again, this shows clearly that educated, native Hebrew speakers do not automatically know Aramaic. The two languages are different enough to need a translation.

However, Hebrew and Aramaic are sister languages and have much in common, and a knowledge of one can certainly be leveraged to learn the other. The two languages are closely related, in much the same way that Italian and Spanish are related, or how English and Latin are related.

While at first Hebrew and Aramaic appear totally different, if you know one language well and start to study the other language, that appearance of being different and not understandable starts to evaporate. You begin to understand that the differences between the two languages are more at the surface level, rather than being fundamentally different languages. And once you start to chip away at the surface, to scrape away the veneer to find what makes Hebrew and Aramaic different, you can suddenly make enormous progress in better understanding and learning both languages.

Let us therefore take a closer look at the similarities (and differences) between Hebrew and Aramaic.

- ➔ First, they share a large pool of vocabulary that is common to both languages. Perhaps around a third of words are common to both Hebrew and Aramaic.
- ➔ Often there are systematic differences in certain letters which (at first) make words appear different – until you realize these words are an old friend in unfamiliar clothes.
- ➔ Perhaps about another third of the vocabulary in Hebrew and Aramaic is related, where there is a definite connection between two words, but those words have slightly different meanings which are related in some way.
- ➔ Maybe about a third of the vocabulary is new or different, or unique to one language, or not easy to relate between the two languages. Overall, the vocabulary differences make the two languages sound very different and not mutually understandable – at least at first, until the differences are pointed out.
- ➔ Aramaic and Hebrew share many features of their grammar, with the grammar working in a very similar way, with strong parallels in both languages. The shared grammar means that nouns, adjectives, verbs and tenses work in a similar way in both languages. While there are obviously differences in the grammar, the differences tend to be complimentary, where an understanding of Hebrew grammar is easy to apply to Aramaic – and vice versa.
- ➔ The structure of Hebrew and Aramaic is very similar, meaning that the word order, and the way you ‘think’ in both languages, has many obvious similarities.
- ➔ Both Hebrew and Aramaic, and Semitic languages in general, are based on roots with (typically) three letters.
- ➔ Both Hebrew and Aramaic have the same number of letters in their alphabets. Although the scripts are sometimes different, the letters of the alphabet correspond exactly, one-to-one.

Thus, once you get over how different Aramaic and Hebrew initially appear, learning one language with a knowledge of the other is relatively easy. For instance, it doesn't take long before someone who knows Hebrew makes massive progress in learning Aramaic. It is similar to meeting an old school friend after 25 years. At first you don't recognize them. You don't know who they are. Then slowly the penny drops and you realize you do know this person. Then you become fascinated by them, wondering if it really can be the same person. You become eager to hear what they have been doing for all those long years, and eager to remember old times, and to share memories. Soon you welcome your old school friend with open arms, the years melting away, and the differences between you becoming a point of interest. You are delighted to meet your old familiar friend again, whom you already know. After the initial awkwardness and learning curve, your memories carry you away, and it soon feels like you have always known this person, as though they have always been with you all through the intervening years.

If you know Hebrew, meeting an old friend is exactly what it feels like when you start learning Aramaic. It's a wonderful feeling. It's easy to understand why Jews felt it was easy to adopt Aramaic when they were exiled to Babylon, why they had no resistance to it, and why the Maccabees fought long and hard against the Greek influence, the Greek language and Greek culture.

It also explains why the Jews in Palestine never learned Latin, despite the Roman Empire being imposed on them for centuries. Greek and Latin, by contrast, are completely foreign languages and work in a totally different way. Their vocabulary and grammar are as different as different can be. And when something is different, it brings resistance.

But between Hebrew and Aramaic, there is no resistance – only harmony, and only joy.

# Glossary

**B**ECAUSE SOME of the words and terms used in this book may be new to some people, this Glossary is intended as a quick and helpful definition of words which will quickly bring you up to speed with the terminology used.

**Aramaic.** *Aramaic*, of course, is the subject of this book and the JesusSpokeAramaic.com website. As a Biblical language, Aramaic has stood alongside Hebrew for more than 4000 years.

**Aramaic New Testament.** The Aramaic New Testament, also called the *Peshitta*, is a version of the NT written in Aramaic, going back to the first century A.D., and universally held to be the original NT in the east and amongst many in the west.

**Biblical Aramaic.** The portions of the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, written in Aramaic.

**Chaldee.** Older grammars and lexicons referred to Biblical Aramaic as *Chaldee*, such as in Gesenius' *Hebrew & Chaldee Lexicon of the Old Testament*. However, Chaldee is simply Aramaic.

**Greek New Testament.** A version of the NT written in Greek, generally regarded in the west as the 'original' NT.

**Hebrew Bible.** Otherwise known as the Old Testament by Christians, including the Law (Torah), the Prophets and the Writings, and written in a combination of Hebrew and Aramaic.

**Old Testament.** The Old Testament, as opposed to the New Testament, is a term used by Christians. Jews refer to the 'Old Testament' as the *Tanakh* or *Hebrew Bible*.

**Peshitta.** In the context of the New Testament, the Peshitta is another term for the Aramaic New Testament. In the context of the Old

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Testament, the Peshitta is an Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible.

**Syriac.** Syriac is the word which the KJV and older reference works use for Aramaic; Syriac just means Aramaic. More accurately, however, Syriac refers to the most common and historically the most widely used dialect of Aramaic.

**Tanakh.** Another term for the Hebrew Bible; it is an acronym made up of *Torah* (Law), *Neviim* (Prophets) and *Ketuvim* (Writings).

**Targum(s).** The Aramaic translations of the books of the Hebrew Bible, translated and used by Jews.

## About Ewan MacLeod



**T**HE JesusSpokeAramaic.com website is run by Ewan MacLeod, B.Sc. Hons., M.Sc.

Ewan is an experienced Bible student who has studied the Holy Scriptures intensely since being baptised about 25 years ago. He took an immediate interest in the manuscripts of the Holy Bible and the Original Languages in which the inspired Scriptures were given, and is the director of the Bible Manuscript Society ([BibleManuscriptSociety.com](http://BibleManuscriptSociety.com)), a privately-funded organization specializing in the protection and preservation of the Holy Bible down through the centuries.

Ewan's main interests lie in Hebrew and Aramaic. He speaks modern Hebrew fluently, having studied Hebrew intensively at Ulpan Akiva in Netanya (Israel) for six months, followed by living in Israel for a further five years, and continuously studying Hebrew ever since.

In addition to a comprehensive knowledge of the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) and the Hebrew Massorah, Ewan's knowledge of Hebrew soon developed into a passion for Aramaic. As well as studying the Aramaic Targums and the Peshitta Tanakh (Aramaic Old Testament), he has a particular love for the Aramaic Peshitta New Testament as the inspired Word of God. JesusSpokeAramaic.com arose out of that love for the Peshitta, and the desire to share the benefits of Aramaic with the world.

In addition to creating JesusSpokeAramaic.com, Ewan has worked extensively in other areas of Hebrew and Aramaic (and, to a lesser

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extent, Biblical languages such as Greek and Latin). As well as studying Biblical manuscripts, working on transcriptions, and much more, he has worked with Bible Software companies such as BibleWorks to add new texts and modules. His knowledge and skills are available to work in these areas, or related work in connection with the Biblical languages and Bible manuscripts. He is also available for public speaking appointments in the field of Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic.

And be sure to check out Ewan's other book:

*Jesus Spoke Aramaic: The Reasons Why & Why It Matters*

Go to [JesusSpokeAramaicBook.com](http://JesusSpokeAramaicBook.com) for more information.

# Visit JesusSpokeAramaic.com

**I**F YOU REALLY want to know more about Aramaic and why you should learn it, and if you want to discover the Aramaic Bible and learn why Aramaic is revolutionizing and transforming the study of the Old and New Testaments, then be sure to visit **JesusSpokeAramaic.com**.

Go to the website and discover all the amazing reasons why YOU should subscribe to Jesus Spoke Aramaic TODAY!

Aramaic was the language of the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires, and is Judaism's second Holy Language, alongside Hebrew. The Aramaic language became dominant amongst Jews after the Babylonian exile, and was spoken by Jesus and the disciples. By learning the Aramaic language and studying the Aramaic Bible, you will get back to more authentic and original roots of both the Old and New Testaments.

Let **Jesus Spoke Aramaic** be your guide as you navigate the fascinating world of the Aramaic language, the Aramaic Bible, and better understand the Holy Scriptures.

*“My Son, let not the Aramaic be lightly esteemed by you as the Holy One, blessed be He, has seen fit to give it voice in the Torah and the Prophets and the Writings”*  
(Palestinian Talmud, Sotah 7:2)

As a subscriber to Jesus Spoke Aramaic, you will benefit from:

- ✔ Unrestricted access to all of our lessons and resources about the Aramaic Old and New Testaments, which are growing

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- ✔ Lessons on the Aramaic Bible suitable for all stages from beginner, intermediate to advanced Aramaic studies.
- ✔ Discover the amazing puns, plays on words and poetry of the Aramaic New Testament, and find out why the Aramaic New Testament resolves many problems, variant readings and inconsistencies in the Greek New Testament.
- ✔ Read our wonderful Aramaic Bible Study Guides – on The Lord's Prayer, with more coming!
- ✔ Fascinating lessons comparing the Hebrew and Aramaic languages, so if you know any Hebrew, you can leverage your existing knowledge to learn Aramaic even faster.
- ✔ Study our video lessons on the Aramaic Peshitta New Testament, Biblical Aramaic, the Aramaic Targums and the Aramaic Peshitta Old Testament.
- ✔ Interactive forums on the Aramaic Bible, where you can discuss the Lessons and Resources in a community of like-minded students who are also interested in Aramaic.
- ✔ Participate in our polls and online quizzes, to test your growing understanding of the Aramaic language and the Aramaic Bible.
- ✔ Exclusive additional material about Aramaic and the Bible, including several full-color PDF Hebrew Old Testaments, our special Partner Offers, and our unique collection of Rare and Out-of-Print Aramaic books – providing you with all the

tools, grammars, lexicons and dictionaries you will ever need to study Aramaic!

“Did you know that Aramaic is still spoken by communities throughout the Middle East and the diaspora today?”

**As well as offering literally hundreds of step-by-step video lessons, be sure to visit the Jesus Spoke Aramaic website to see what else we offer. We have:**

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- ▶ Aramaic Study Guides.
- ▶ Aramaic Workbooks, which accompany the DVDs and video lessons, or work stand-alone for individual study at home or in groups.
- ▶ Books about Aramaic.
- ▶ Audio books on CD.
- ▶ Exclusive Aramaic and Hebrew Bibles, available nowhere else.

**Jesus Spoke Aramaic** will further your knowledge of the Aramaic language and the Aramaic Bible through our exciting video lessons, and help you get back to true, original and authentic Aramaic Biblical roots.

**So why not Subscribe to Jesus Spoke Aramaic TODAY?**

Make sure you take a look at our Top Reasons to Subscribe, and find out what awaits you once you have your own access to this incredible and unique website.

*May God bless you as you study His Inspired Word.*

Ewan MacLeod, B.Sc. Hons, M.Sc.

**JesusSpokeAramaic.com**

# DISCOVER ARAMAIC

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Ewan MacLeod

INTERNATIONAL AUTHORITY ON ARAMAIC

*“Discover Aramaic and find out why Aramaic is so central to the study of both the Old and New Testaments.”*

Ewan MacLeod is an Award-winning author, visionary, and creator of the website [JesusSpokeAramaic.com](http://JesusSpokeAramaic.com). His vision is to bring Aramaic to a mainstream audience and work towards making Aramaic center-stage in the field of Biblical studies. Few today understand the incredible heritage that Aramaic has to offer Bible students of all levels. Ewan's mission in life is to change all that, to ensure that Aramaic is better known and understood by today's generation of Bible students, and that it regains its rightful place at the heart of the study of God's Word.

