

Aramaic linguistics

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An overview of Aramaic linguistics

In what follows, I have summarized the history of the Aramaic language and also something about the geographic distribution of some Aramaic dialects. Taken together, the linguistic history and geography throws light upon some of the quaint linguistic details and Aramaic remnants to be found in the New Testament. The Aramaic language underlies the whole of the New Testament. It is a fact that every book in the New Testament was written by a first century Jew, whose first language was Aramaic. Therefore, to understand the New Testament accurately it is essential to understand it from the perspective of an Aramaic speaking Jew. The four gospels and Acts have particularly strong Aramaic influence. It is becoming clear to me as I study it, that Mark's gospel was originally written in Aramaic and only later translated into Greek. Even Paul's letters and the other letters show the influence of Aramaic. In the case of Aramaic works like Mark's gospel, the original language breaks through the translation in many places. In the case of letters written in Greek by bilinguals, the Aramaic language is still evident because of *bilingual interference*. Bilingual interference manifests itself as traces of the author's Aramaic first language, (for example, Aramaic figures of speech, sentence structure, proper names etc.) conveyed using their Greek second language.

A brief history of the Aramaic language before Christ

The Aramaic language was originally the language of nomadic tribesmen inhabiting the regions around the Tigris river in around 1200 BC, [9]. These tribes were absorbed by the settled population, and the settled population in turn adopted their Aramaic language. The Aramaic language evolved further when it was adopted by the Assyrian empire in the 8th century BC. In Mesopotamia it was modified by Akkadian (an earlier semitic language written in cuneiform upon clay tablets) between 800 and 700 BC. This was about the time of the kings of Israel and the first Temple built by Solomon. Aramaic

was the language of the Assyrian empire and a language spoken by the learned elite of Jewish leaders in the Jerusalem of the first Temple period. We know this because in the 14th year of the reign of Hezekiah king of Judah, (and therefore in 716 BC since Hezekiah reigned from 729 BC until 687 BC) king Sennacherib of Assyria sent an envoy to Jerusalem to declare war, (see 2 Kings 18 v 17 - 26 and Isaiah 36 v 1 - 11). The Assyrian envoy begins to address the people listening on the wall of Jerusalem in the ancient Hebrew dialect, however, the local Jewish nobleman ask him to speak in Aramaic so that only they would understand what was being said, and the people on the city wall would not be able to understand. The Assyrian account of this war with Judah survives in a large cuneiform inscription called the Taylor prism, [2].

Later, Aramaic became the official language of the Persian empire from whence the Jews acquired it during their captivity in Babylon, (the adoption of Aramaic during the captivity pushed the use of ancient Hebrew into decline in Israel). We know this because the Torah, (the first five books of the Old Testament) had to be translated by Ezra and the other scribes as they read it to the people 'and made them understand' after their return from Babylon, (see Nehemiah 8 vv 2 - 8). Also, non biblical Jewish documents written in Aramaic are extant from the 5th century BC onwards. All this shows that Aramaic had become the lingua franca of the Jewish nation after their captivity in Babylon.

Aramaic and other languages of the Near East about the time of Jesus Christ

More Jewish documents have been found written in Aramaic dating at intervals between the 3rd century BC until the latter half of the 1st century AD. These include Aramaic documents found amongst the famous Dead Sea Scrolls. These finds show that Aramaic was the language that most Jews spoke in their everyday lives before, during and after the time of Jesus. Since Jesus preached to very ordinary people in Judea, Galilee and the regions of southern Syria, it follows that He definitely would have spoken in Aramaic. So Aramaic was the language in which His teachings and sayings were delivered and the language used to record His teachings by those who listened to Him. The fact that Jesus spoke in Aramaic, means that we should try to understand His sayings with reference to the Aramaic language, (not the Greek language) in the context of the Jewish culture of those times and localities, (not Greek or Western culture).

About 80 of the Dead Sea Scrolls were written in the vernacular Aramaic of Judea used before during and after the time of Jesus earthly life. This Judean or Palestinian Aramaic is so similar to Syriac that *it is readily possible to read the Aramaic scrolls as Syriac written using Hebrew letters*. The multitude of Aramaic documents amongst the Sea Scrolls, written 200 BC to 70 AD show the same words and syntax as other extant writings and inscriptions in Aramaic dialects over the same period found in other nearby geographies to the north and east, like the dialects spoken in Samaria, Edessa, Palmyra and Nabatea, [4]. Therefore, because these Aramaic dialects surrounding Galilee were all very similar, it follows that the dialect of Aramaic spoken in Galilee must

also have been very similar to those of surrounding areas. Anyway, the similarity of the Galilean Aramaic dialect to those other Aramaic dialects spoken nearby in Judea and Syria is implicitly attested in the gospels. For example:

- Jesus had no difficulty engaging a Samaritan women in a very sophisticated conversation at the well near Sychar, (John 4). Therefore, we can safely infer that the Samaritan and Galilean dialects were sufficiently similar to permit such a conversation.
- According to the gospels, Jesus grew up in Galilee. He also engaged in many complex discussions about the meaning of the Old Testament with Jewish people in Jerusalem who spoke the same Aramaic dialect as was used to write the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran.

Firstly, we have noted the similarity of the Aramaic dialects surrounding Galilee and deduced that the Galilean dialect would therefore have been similar to its surroundings. Secondly, it was shown from the gospels that fluent and complex dialogue existed between speakers of the Galilean dialect and speakers of the surrounding Aramaic dialects. Now I would like to quote some remarks by William Cureton the eminent 19th century oriental scholar. Cureton cautiously remarked that insufficient evidence existed at that time for him to be certain, but... [5]:

"Generally it may be observed that the language used by our Saviour and his apostles being that ordinarily employed by the Hebrews in Palestine at the time, and called by St. Luke (Acts xxi. 40, xxii. 1), Papias, and Irenaeus, the Hebrew Dialect, is so very similar and closely allied with the Syriac of the New Testament, called the Peshitto, that the two may be considered identical, with the exception, perhaps, of some very slight dialectical peculiarities. These facts are so well known to all who have given attention to this subject, that it is not necessary for me to enter into any proof of them in this place."

Since Cureton wrote these words, many important Aramaic documents have been discovered amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls that originate from Palestine at the time of Christ. These finds have demonstrated the truth of Cureton's view that the Syriac language of the Peshitta is very close indeed to the language and idiom spoken by Christ and the apostles. Scholarly remarks within the last two years serve to make the same point based on much greater evidence, (Casey [1], page 254, quoted with permission):

"Moreover, the problem of dialect has been much less serious than it seemed previously. Previous attempts to use 'Galilean' Aramaic suffered badly from the late date and corrupt nature of the source material, and invariably used a high proportion of material which was not Galilean at all. Now, however, most of the words in the dead sea scrolls have turned out to be used in other dialects too. This means they are not specific to the dialect of Judea as opposed to anywhere else, and can reasonably be used to reconstruct the Galilean Aramaic of Jesus."

As Casey says, there is no real point looking for some strange and different Galilean dialect, since the Dead Sea scrolls and other finds have demonstrated that mutually intelligible Aramaic dialects closely akin to Syriac were in use in the whole region of Judea, Galilee, Syria and Mesopotamia at the time of Jesus.

Other languages were also spoken in Palestine at the time of Jesus. Ancient Hebrew was in decline, but still in use by the priests and the learned elite of Israel, (reversing the linguistic situation current at the earlier time of king Hezekiah). Also, Greek was used by the Hellenized, non-Jewish ruling class connected with Herod I and his descendants, including Herod Antipas who was one of those involved in the trials and crucifixion of Jesus. Although Greek was the language of trade and commerce in the eastern Roman empire at the time of Jesus, it was not the language spoken by ordinary Jews in Palestine. In fact, as I have shown above, Greek has never been used by the ordinary people of Palestine. Greek was the language used by the Herodian dynasty in Judea, (the Herodians mentioned in the New Testament) and the language of collaborators with the hated forces of Roman occupation, as well as a second language studied by some learned Jews, (like Saul, later Paul or Tarsus who studied under the Jewish rabbi Gamaliel I, see Acts 22 v 3). A large Greek inscription, a notice to non-Jews, was placed at the entrance of the inner area of the Temple warning Gentiles not to enter on pain of death. This inscription has been found, demonstrating that Greek was considered as the language of foreigners. In addition to Greek, some members of the Roman administration of Judea and the Roman military stationed there would have spoken Latin, certainly Pontius Pilatus' famous inscription at Caesarae Maritima is written in Latin.

Where the Syriac and CPA Aramaic dialects fit into the linguistic landscape

Mesopotamian **Syriac** is one of this ancient group of Aramaic dialects which included the Galilean dialect that Jesus spoke. Syriac was spoken in south western Mesopotamia in the small kingdom of Osroene with its capital at Edessa. The earliest dated Syriac writings are from this kingdom. They are in the form of inscriptions found at Birecik, (near Edessa) dating from 6 AD, (see [12] pp. 1-2, Maricq 1962, and Pirenne 1963) and another inscription at Serrin dated AD 73 (see [12] pp. 2-3). These early Syriac inscriptions demonstrate that the Syriac language and the Estrangela Syriac script existed just before and just after Jesus' ministry. Another first century Syriac inscription was found in Jerusalem and dates from about 49 AD, [6] [7]. This demonstrates that Syriac was also known in Palestine in the first century AD. Many second century pagan Syriac inscriptions have also been discovered in Mesopotamia, [6] [7] [12]. Three legal documents have been discovered which were written in the Euphrates valley in the mid third century AD, (see [12] pp. 54-57, Brock 1991). These were written on parchment and dated: 28th December AD 240, 1st September AD 242 and AD 243. We also have the evidence of other early dated manuscripts written in Syriac. The earliest known literary Syriac manuscript was written in Edessa and is dated AD 411 [11]. Many other Syriac manuscripts survive which are dated between AD 411

and the present day. Ancient Syriac continues to be used today in the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Melkite Chalcedonian Church and the Church of the East. Therefore, Syriac is an ancient language which has been used for at least 2000 years, and it is still used today.

Syriac was not only spoken in Mesopotamia, it was also spoken in Antioch and northern *Palestine*. In fact, Syriac was still spoken by the ordinary people of Palestine many years after the time of Jesus. Several historical data points demonstrate this remarkable fact.

In about AD 385, a woman called Egeria ([9], pp79 - 80) wrote in her middle-eastern travel diary:

"In this province [Palestine] there are some people who know both Greek and Syriac, but others know only one or the other. The bishop may know Syriac, but never uses it. He always speaks in Greek, and has a presbyter beside him who translates the Greek into Syriac, so that everyone can understand what he means. Similarly, the lessons read in church have to be read in Greek, but there is always someone in attendance to translate into Syriac so that the people can understand."

This report, (confirmed by another similar one in Eusebius' history of the martyrs of Palestine which was written earlier, at the beginning of the 4th century AD) shows that the Syriac language continued to be used in the areas of northern Palestine where Jesus had actually taught, 300 to 350 years after His ministry.

The remarkable survival of Aramaic in Palestine is reinforced by further historical evidence from much later. The Byzantine emperor Justinian, as part of his strategy to Hellenize the orient, founded a new Syriac speaking catholic sect which was later called Melkite (see [9], p. 213 and [10], p. 77). However, in order to operate effectively, the Melkites found it necessary to translate their Greek scriptures into the local Western Aramaic dialect then used in Palestine. This spawned a large translated literature in **Christian Palestinian Aramaic** (CPA) which included the bible and many other writings [4] [11]. Enough of this CPA literature survives to demonstrate that between about AD 530 and AD 1118, large numbers of people of Palestine still spoke a Western Aramaic dialect, more than a millennium after Christ.

Conclusion

Some very important conclusions can be drawn for the study of the New Testament from the linguistic information:

- The Syriac versions of the New Testament are written in the language that Jesus actually spoke, (only the dialect is different).
- The extant Syriac manuscripts of the New Testament are very old, at least as old as many ancient manuscripts written in Greek.

- The sayings of Jesus were spoken in Aramaic. Therefore, the best way to understand them is to read them in Aramaic.

From the ancient linguistic evidence, I have demonstrated that Aramaic was the language of Jesus and so it was the language He used to teach. Given that our Lord's followers were ordinary people from the same region as He was, it also follows that the early apostles and disciples spoke, taught and wrote in Aramaic as well. I have also shown that Greek, Hebrew and Latin were languages spoken by those who opposed our Lord during His ministry. The Hellenistic world we live in today in western Europe and in the USA would like to think that our Lord was a westerner too, but I have demonstrated that this is a fantasy. Instead, history tells us that our Lord chose to dwell in an eastern culture and to express Himself in Aramaic.

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