

## INTRODUCTION

### A Brief History of the Aramaic Language

The Aramaic language has its beginning with the sons of Noah. The first biblical clue to the origin of Aramaic is found in Genesis 10:22, which informs us that Aram was the youngest son of Shem. What Aram spoke has been called “the Mesopotamian language.” This was the language that was then transmitted down to Abraham. It is the precursor of all the Semitic languages.

Abraham left his home in Ur of the Chaldeans and traveled with his father Terah and his brother Nahor to Haran in Syria. The son of Nahor was also called Aram (Genesis 22:21). This area of land in Syria became known as the land of the Arameans, or Aram. By 1000 BC, the people lived in strong city-states and had developed a cursive version of the North Semitic alphabet. The language and alphabet has continued in use until the present.

Abraham left Haran and crossed the Euphrates River and traveled to Canaan. There is a reference to Jacob as a “wandering Aramean” in Deuteronomy 26:3. His descendants were called “Hebrews,” a term derived from the Aramaic word *abar*, meaning, “to cross over.” Gradually, a unique dialect and script called Hebrew was developed. Moses and the subsequent authors of the Old Testament scriptures probably originally wrote these books in this Old Hebrew, which was not far removed from Aramaic.

Around 1000-800 BC, there were several major powers in the Near East: Assyria, Babylonia and Syria. They adopted the alphabet and language of the Arameans and Aramaic became the *lingua franca* throughout the Mesopotamian area. It was the language of commerce, trade and communication. It became the vernacular language of Assyria, Babylonia (Chaldee) and Syria. There was then a split in dialects between the east, consisting of Babylonia and Assyria and west, consisting of Syria. The eastern Aramaic was further divided into two dialects, Assyrian (northern) and Babylonian (southern).

The Assyrians conquered the northern ten tribes of Israel in 721 BC and transported the Israelites to Assyria. Those who came from Assyria to settle in Galilee and Samaria spoke this northern dialect of Aramaic. This dialect continued until the time of Christ.

## INTRODUCTION

The Babylonians conquered Judea in 586 BC and transported them to Babylon, where Eastern or Chaldean Aramaic was spoken. Daniel was written in Aramaic. When the people under Ezra and Nehemiah went back to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, they spoke this dialect. This dialect of Aramaic continued down through the 1st century and is sometimes called Palestinian Aramaic.

That is how there came to be two different dialects spoken during the time of Christ in Palestine. The difference was not great, perhaps similar to the difference between the northern and southern parts of the United States. Jesus Christ and his disciples (all except for Judas Iscariot) spoke the northern dialect of Aramaic because they were from Galilee. Paul was born and raised in Tarsus (western Aramaic), but he was educated in Jerusalem (eastern Aramaic), so he must have been fluent in both dialects. Paul also spoke Greek (Acts 21:37).

The Gospels were most certainly written in Aramaic and, most likely, Paul's letters were also. But as the gospel reached out in the 1st century from Jerusalem into Antioch of Syria and then on into Achaia and Macedonia, which were Greek-speaking areas, the Gospels and other letters were probably almost immediately translated into Greek. The transmission of the text then developed in parallel lines.

Constantinople was the capital of Babylon in the 3rd and 4th centuries, where Aramaic was still the *lingua franca*. Christianity was declared the official religion, so manuscripts of the scriptures in Aramaic were copied and passed on. There was a very careful preservation of the text and that is the reason for the integrity among the various Peshitta manuscripts.

Since the original split in the dialects to western and eastern Aramaic, Syria had grown in power and, after the 1st century, a center of teaching developed in Edessa near Haran. It is from here that the Peshitta version was compiled. The oldest complete manuscripts in Aramaic are this Peshitta version. The word Peshitta means "straight, simple, sincere, or true." The earliest manuscripts used a script called Estrangelo and this script reached the height of its development by the 4th century.

## INTRODUCTION

There was a great controversy in the church at Ephesus and Chalcedon in 431 and 451 AD because of the Monophysite bishops and about the issue of Mary as the mother of God. The church split into two separate entities in the east and west and has never recovered from this controversy. The Aramaic language was already divided into dialects, but now each side also developed new scripts from the Estrangelo letters to differentiate them from the other side.

Jacob was the leader in the school in Edessa and the script in the west became known as the Jacobite script. At this time, vowel markings were also established. Almost all of the grammar books we have today and many manuscripts were written in this script.

The other script developed in the east is called Nestorian. It is squarer and uses dots for the vowel markings. The differences in the scripts were in the formation of the letters or characters, not in the words. Thus, we use the dictionaries such as Payne Smith and Jennings to translate the Estrangelo manuscripts, even though they are written in Jacobite script. There are differences in the script, not the language.

Aramaic continued as the *lingua franca* until Arabic and Islam replaced it in the 9th century. There are still some people today in Turkey and Kurdistan who speak Aramaic. Aramaic was the native language of Dr. George Lamsa.

### **The Peshitta Text**

The text used in this translation as the base text is taken from *The Syriac New Testament and Psalms*, published by the United Bible Societies. In 1905, the British and Foreign Bible Society published an edition of the Peshitta, reprinted by permission from a critical edition prepared by Rev. G. H. Gwilliam in 1901. This is a critical text of the Peshitta, meaning that it is a composite of readings from different manuscripts that were located in the British Museum. It is known as a western text of the Peshitta and varies to a small degree from other eastern versions of the Peshitta. In the footnotes, these differences from the eastern version are noted as variant readings. In this translation, the text is called the Peshitta. However, some would distinguish that the Peshitta is the name for only the eastern version and that the western text should be called Peshito. In order to simplify the reference in this translation, both versions are called the Peshitta.

## INTRODUCTION

Peshitta is an Aramaic word that means “simple” or “straight.” Although there are some alternative arguments, the best estimate is that the Peshitta was first written around 150 AD. The primary center that was responsible for its dissemination was Edessa in Syria. It is written in the Aramaic dialect of that region, which is called Syriac. This dialect differs from the Palestinian Aramaic of Judea and Galilee, but not to the extent that both parties would have not understood each other. Perhaps the best comparison would be between British and United States English. Since there are no surviving manuscripts of the New Testament in Palestinian Aramaic from the first century, it is very clear that the Peshitta is the closest text that we have readily available to study the Scriptures in Aramaic.

There is a particular reason why it is evident that the Peshitta must have been completed early in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. It does not include the books of II Peter, II John, III John, Jude and Revelation, which were added to the Peshitta manuscripts later. These books were not completely accepted as canon until after the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, and their origin was in the area of Ephesus. This translation utilizes the later versions of these books to complete the New Testament text.

### **Why a New Translation?**

There are two prominent translations that are out of print from the middle 1800's. One was by James Murdock and the other by J. W. Etheridge. Murdock based his work on the western text and Etheridge on the eastern text. Both of them are still very useful in studying the Peshitta. In the 1930's, Dr. George Lamsa, a native speaker of Aramaic, completed a translation of the eastern manuscripts of the Peshitta and began to travel extensively in the United States, teaching about the value of studying Aramaic. From that time until the present, there has been a renewed interest in fundamental Christianity to know about the language of Jesus and what it has to contribute to biblical study.

## INTRODUCTION

Today there are several works available that employ different methods of translation of the New Testament or portions of the New Testament. The Hebraic Roots Version by Dr. James Trimm emphasizes the Messianic beliefs of his branch of Nazarene Judaism. Herb Jahn published a very literal translation using cognate definitions in his Exegeses Bible from a computerized lexicon along with distinctive interpretations and grammatical constructions incorporated by Jahn. The Disciples New Testament by Victor Alexander, a native Aramaic speaker, uses an idiomatic approach to the translation and contributes much in this area. The American Christian Press has produced an interlinear version of the New Testament in 3 volumes. Dr. Rocco Errico has translated the Gospel of Matthew in a parallel edition with useful footnotes. Lamsa's translation is still available for purchase through HarperCollins Publishers. Another work of great value is by Paul Younan of peshitta.org, which is an interlinear version. Each of the above works represent the distinctive beliefs of the translator.

Light of the Word Ministry has developed this particular translation to fill in a need for a very accurate literal translation, but in modern English. The method employed in this translation is to preserve as much as possible the Semitic usage and sentence structure, but in readable English. Idioms are translated with dynamic equivalency. It adds many footnote explanations, providing a way for the biblical student to begin study from the Aramaic. There is a system of marking common expressions and idioms so that the footnotes can be clear and not repetitious. It is meant to be utilized with the complete database which is available through BibleWorks software.

It is my sincere wish that each Bible student who is able to read these pages will grow in understanding of the language of Jesus, its idioms and figures of speech and will be blessed with further understanding of the message of the New Testament.

Janet M. Magiera, April 2006.