

# The importance of Aramaic

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**T**HE LATE George M. Lamsa was a notable Bible scholar who devoted himself to reviving interest in the Aramaic versions of the books of the Bible. He was an Assyrian, and therefore a native of one of the ancient Biblical lands, residing there until World War 1, when he went to America and became an American citizen. He was brought up isolated from the rest of Christendom, being reared from childhood in the Aramaic language, his people still adhering to Biblical customs and Semitic culture, which everywhere else had disappeared.

## Aramaic in Old Testament times

Lamsa, in the introduction to his translation of the Bible from the Aramaic,<sup>1</sup> writes:

“This small pastoral Hebrew tribe which God chose to reveal himself to mankind, for several generations continued to keep its paternal and racial relations with the people who lived in Padan-Aram (Mesopotamia), and preserved customs and manners which they brought with them from Padan-Aram, and the [Aramaic] language which their fathers spoke . . . Abraham instructed his servant not to let his son, Isaac, marry a Palestinian maid but to go to Padan-Aram to his own kindred from whence to bring a maid to his son. Years later, Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, went to Padan-Aram and married his uncle’s two daughters and their handmaids and lived in Haran about twenty years. Eleven of his sons were born in Padan-Aram. The first generation of the children of Jacob went to Egypt. Their sojourn in Palestine was so brief that there was no possibility of linguistic change. That is why they spoke the language which they had learned in Padan-Aram”.

The publishers’ preface to the translation says:

“From the sixth to the fourth century before Christ, [Aramaic] was a language of empire extending from the borders of Persia to those of Europe, and down the Nile through the length of Egypt. It was in those days spoken and written by the Jewish people at least equally with Hebrew; and so we have parts of Ezra and Daniel, and one verse in Jeremiah (10:11), that were composed in Aramaic and preserved in that ancient form of the lan-

guage in the midst of the Hebrew Old Testament”.

According to A. H. Sayce:

“Aramaic became the common language of trade. Not infrequently an Aramaic docket accompanies an Assyrian contract tablet, stating briefly what were its contents and the names of the chief contracting parties. These contract tablets have to do with the sale and lease of houses, slaves, and other property, as well as with the amount of interest to be paid upon loans”.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, as Lamsa says, “Aramaic was the language of Semitic culture, the language of the Hebrew patriarchs and, in the older days, the lingua franca of the Fertile Crescent . . . All branches of the great Semitic people had a common speech”. It was this that enabled the people of Nineveh to understand the preaching of Jonah; many of the Ninevites turned to God in repentance at hearing His Word proclaimed to them by Jonah, for they were able to comprehend what he was saying to them because of the closeness between the Hebrew and Aramaic tongues.

But what is the connection between the Assyrians of old and the people who still bear this name today and from which Lamsa came? Lamsa makes the suggestion that in 612 B.C., when Nineveh was destroyed, some of the people removed northward into mountain areas difficult of access, where they remained secluded and separated until the beginning of the twentieth century. The words of the Prophet Nahum are interesting here: “Thy shepherds slumber, O king of Assyria: thy nobles shall dwell in the dust: thy people is scattered upon the mountains, and no man gathereth them” (3:18).

## Aramaic and the Jews

It seems that, during the exile, and also in the post-exile period, Hebrew writers made use of the Aramaic language. The exile gave impetus to the transition from Hebrew to Aramaic, with Hebrew being no longer used by the Jewish

1. Subsequent quotations from Lamsa come from the same source.
2. *Assyria, its Princes, Priests and People*, pp. 156-7.

captives. George Lamsa explains the relationship between Hebrew and Aramaic:

“Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic were very closely related, like American English and English spoken in England. Whether the Hebrew prophets wrote in Hebrew or Aramaic would make little difference. The differences would be like those between several Arabic dialects which are spoken in Arabia. Even though the vernacular speech differs because of local color and idioms, the norm of the written language remains the same. This is true today with written Arabic when compared with spoken Arabic. And such was the case with Attic Greek when compared with other Greek dialects. The grammar, verbs, nouns and other parts of speech are practically the same in the basic ancient Biblical Hebrew language and Aramaic. The structure of a sentence, in point of grammar and syntax of Biblical Hebrew or Aramaic, is the same. But this is not the case when translating from Hebrew or Aramaic into a totally alien tongue such as Greek, Latin or English. Moreover, the alphabet is exactly the same and all letters are pronounced alike”.

Thus, after the captivity, Aramaic became the vernacular tongue of the Jewish people. Both the Jewish Talmuds, namely, the Babylonian and Palestinian, were written in Aramaic. Later findings, especially Jewish papyri found in Egypt in 1900, have produced many passages in Biblical Aramaic. The discovery in the caves of Qumran in Jordan of the Commentary on the Book of Habakkuk, written in Aramaic, reveals the continuing use of Aramaic.

#### Aramaic and the New Testament

It is thought that Jesus in his three-and-a-half-year ministry spoke mostly in Aramaic, as he taught those who continually thronged him about, as this was then the language of Palestine and the Near East. Thus we read: “And the common people heard him gladly” (Mk. 12:37). The common people surely heard the words of Jesus in Aramaic, the tongue that they spoke in their daily lives, a language akin to the Hebrew spoken by their forefathers. (See [Table 1](#) for examples of Aramaic words preserved in the AV.)

The apostles proclaimed the glorious message of salvation which was committed to their care by Jesus when he said: “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved . . .”

**Table 1 Some Aramaic words in the New Testament**

<i>Raca</i>	Matthew 5:22
<i>Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani</i>	Matthew 27:46
<i>Talitha cumi</i>	Mark 5:41
<i>Ephphatha</i>	Mark 7:34
<i>Rabboni</i>	John 20:16
<i>Aceldama</i>	Acts 1:19
<i>Maran-atha</i>	1 Corinthians 16:22

(16:15,16). The gospel was first preached to the Jews: “Now they which were scattered abroad upon the persecution that arose about Stephen travelled as far as Phenice, and Cyprus, and Antioch, preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only” (Acts 11:19). They would have used the Aramaic tongue, the language of the common people of the Near East.

Paul would have spoken in Greek to gatherings of people in Athens and in other Greek cities. However, verse 26 tells us that the disciples were “called Christians first in Antioch”, a city in Syria where Aramaic would have been spoken, and it seems highly likely that, when Paul made his impassioned confession in the synagogue at the Syrian city of Damascus that “Christ . . . is the Son of God” (9:20), he addressed the gathering in Aramaic.

#### The Aramaic version of the Bible

The Aramaic version of the Bible is called the Peshitta, a name which, according to Lamsa, indicates that it is the original Bible used by the churches of the east. Dr. Joshua Block, formerly head of the Department of Semitic Languages and Literature at New York University, said:

“Owing to its great antiquity, [the Peshitta] is one of the most valuable documents in ascertaining the original text of the Bible. In fact, in point of age, the Peshitta takes precedence of every other Oriental version; and such has been the high esteem in which it has been held by men of great eminence . . .”<sup>3</sup>

Lamsa explains that the Biblical manuscripts in Aramaic were carefully transmitted from generation to generation, and retained within the massive stone walls of the ancient churches, and also in caves, for safekeeping. They were neatly

3. In an article in the *American Journal of Semitic Languages*, April 1919, cited by Lamsa.

written on parchment, and many of them have survived to the present time. When these texts were copied they were painstakingly scrutinised for accuracy before they were dedicated and allowed to be read in churches. So thoroughly were they examined that even one missing word or wrong letter would disqualify a text from being used. Remarkably, all the Peshitta texts in Aramaic agree fully.

Lamsa makes the point that when Biblical versions were translated from Semitic languages into Greek and Latin they were subject to constant revisions. Scholars who copied them introduced changes as they endeavoured to clarify obscurities and ambiguities which were due to the first translators. Present-day Bible translators and revisers do the same. Translations are constantly subject to revisions, and the exact meaning of words and terms of speech in one language cannot be translated easily into another language without loss. Lamsa takes the view that the Aramaic manuscripts of the Peshitta remained faithful in preserving the meaning of the original Scriptures, and as such his translation of the Peshitta can be of help at times in arriving at a correct understanding of certain passages. Some examples of how Lamsa's translation of the Ara-

maic Peshitta version can throw new light on the meaning of Scripture are in Table 2 below.

**Table 2 A comparison of some passages in the AV with Lamsa's translation from the Aramaic**

In Genesis 30:8 the AV says: "And Rachel said, With great wrestlings have I wrestled with my sister . . ."; whereas the Aramaic says: "And Rachel said, I have besought the LORD, and pleaded with my sister . . .".

In Jeremiah 4:10 the AV says: "Ah, Lord GOD! surely Thou hast greatly deceived this people and Jerusalem . . ."; whereas in the Aramaic Jeremiah directs these words to himself, saying: "O, Lord GOD, surely I have greatly deceived this people and Jerusalem . . .".

In Matthew 6:13 the AV says: "And lead us not into temptation"; whereas the Aramaic says: "And do not let us enter into temptation". This latter seems to be a helpful translation because James 1:14 says: "every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed".