

~ARAMAIC (397)

(Ar-a-ma'ic)

.. The Language

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- An ancient **Semitic language** having a **close relationship to Hebrew** and originally spoken by the **Aramaeans**. With the passing of time, however, it came to embrace various dialects, some of them viewed as separate languages and enjoyed wide use, especially in Southwest Asia. **Aramaic** was employed particularly from the **Second Millennium B.C.E.** to about **500 C.E.** It is one of the three languages in which the Bible was originally written. The **Hebrew** word '*Ara-mith*' occurs five times and is translated in the Syrian language or in the **Aramaic** language.
- At this Eliakim the son of Hilkiyah and Shebnah and Joah said to Rabshakeh; Speak with your servants, please, in the **Syrian** language, for we can listen, and do not speak with us in the Jews language in the ears of the people that are on the wall. (**2 Kings 18:26**)
- At this Eliakim and Shebna and Joah said to Rabshakeh: Speak, please, to your servants in the **Syrian** language, for we are listening, and do not speak to us in the Jews language in the ears of the people that are on the wall. (**Isaiah 36:11**)
- At that the Chaldeans spoke to the king in the **Aramaic** language: O king, live on even for times indefinite. Say what the dream is to your servants, and we shall show the very interpretation. (**Daniel 2:4**)
- Also, in the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel and the rest of his colleagues wrote to Artaxerxes the king of Persia, and the writing of the letter was written in **Aramaic** characters and translated into the **Aramaic** language. (**Ezra 4:7**)

See Also ARAM 5

- Biblical **Aramaic**, formerly called Chaldee, is found in;
- Rehum the chief government official and Shimshai the scribe

wrote a letter against Jerusalem to Artaxerxes the king, as follows. ([Ezra 4:8](#))

- And they appointed the priests in their classes and the Levites in their divisions, for the service of God which is in Jerusalem, according to the prescription of the book of Moses. ([Ezra 6:18](#))
- Artaxerxes, the king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the copyist of the Law of the God of the heavens. Peace be perfected. And now ([Ezra 7:12](#))
- By me an order has been put through that everyone in my realm of the people of Israel and their priests and Levites that is willing to go to Jerusalem with you should go. ([Ezra 7:13](#))
- Inasmuch as from before the king and his seven counselors an order was sent to investigate concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the Law of your God that is in your hand. ([Ezra 7:14](#))
- And to bring the silver and the gold that the king and his counselors have voluntarily given to the God of Israel, whose residence is in Jerusalem. ([Ezra 7:15](#))
- With all the silver and the gold that you find in all the jurisdictional district of Babylon along with the gift of the people and the priests who are voluntarily giving to the house of their God, which is in Jerusalem. ([Ezra 7:16](#))
- Accordingly you will promptly buy with this money bulls, rams, lambs and their grain offerings and their drink offerings and you will present them upon the altar of the house of your God, which is in Jerusalem. ([Ezra 7:17](#))
- And whatever it seems good to you and to your brothers to do with the rest of the silver and gold, according to the will of your God, you men will do. ([Ezra 7:18](#))
- And the vessels that are being given to you for the service of the house of your God deliver in full before God at Jerusalem. ([Ezra 7:19](#))
- And the rest of the necessities of the house of your God that it devolves upon you to give, you will give out of the king's house of treasures. ([Ezra 7:20](#))

- **And by me myself, Artaxerxes the king, an order has been put through to all the treasurers that are beyond the River, that everything that Ezra the priest, the copyist of the Law of the God of the heavens, requests of you men it will be done promptly. (Ezra 7:21)**
- **Even to a hundred talents of silver and a hundred cor measures of wheat and a hundred bath measures of wine and a hundred bath measures of oil, and salt without limit. (Ezra 7:22)**
- **Let all that is by the order of the God of the heavens be done with zeal for the house of the God of the heavens, that there may occur no wrath against the kings realm and his sons. (Ezra 7:23)**
- **And to you men it is being made known that, as respects any of the priests and the Levites, the musicians, the doorkeepers, the Nethinim, and the workers of this house of God, no tax, tribute or toll is allowed to be imposed upon them. (Ezra 7:24)**
- **And you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God that is in your hand appoint magistrates and judges that they may continually judge all the people that are beyond the River, even all those knowing the laws of your God, and anyone that has not known them you men will instruct. (Ezra 7:25)**
- **And as for everyone that does not become a doer of the Law of your God and the Law of the king, let judgment be promptly executed upon him, whether for death or for banishment, or for money fine or for imprisonment. (Ezra 7:26)**
- **This is what you men will say to them; The gods that did not make the very heavens and the earth are the ones who will perish from the earth and from under these heavens. (Jeremiah 10:11)**
- **At that the Chaldeans spoke to the king in the **Aramaic** language: O king, live on even for times indefinite. Say what the dream is to your servants, and we shall show the very interpretation. (Daniel 2:4)**
- **Up to this point is the end of the matter. As for me, Daniel, my own thoughts kept frightening me a great deal, so that my very complexion changed in me, but the matter itself I kept in my own**

heart. (**Daniel 7:28**)

- **Aramaic** expressions also appear in other parts of the Bible, but many of the attempts of scholars to identify **Aramaic** sources for Hebrew words are simply conjectural.
- The use of some **Aramaic** expressions is not surprising, for the Hebrews had close contact with the **Aramaeans** and with the **Aramaic** language for a long time. Among the earliest renditions of the Hebrew Scriptures into other languages were the **Aramaic** Targums, though they were not put into writing until several centuries after the production of the **Greek Septuagint** commenced, about **280 B.C.E.**

• The Language

- **Aramaic** and **Hebrew** are both classified as being in the Northwest Semitic family of languages. Though **Aramaic** differs considerably from **Hebrew**, it is a **cognate language having the same letters in its alphabet with the same names as the Hebrew**. Like **Hebrew**, **it is written from right to left**, and originally the **Aramaic** script was consonantal. However, the **Aramaic** employed in the Bible was later vowel pointed by the Masoretes, just as they vowel pointed the **Hebrew**.
- **Aramaic** has been influenced by its contact with other languages. Besides containing various Hebrew, Akkadian, and Persian proper names of localities and persons, Biblical **Aramaic** shows Hebrew influence in religious terms, Akkadian influence particularly in political and financial terms, and Persian influence in such terms as those relating to political and legal matters.
- **Aramaic**, in addition to having the same script as Hebrew, bears a similarity to it in verbal, nominal, and pronominal inflections. The verbs have two states, the imperfect, denoting uncompleted action, and the perfect, signifying completed action.
- **Aramaic** employs singular, dual, and plural nouns and has two genders, the masculine and the feminine. It differs from other Semitic languages by displaying a preference for the vowel sound **a**, and in other ways, including certain consonantal preferences, such as **d** for **z** and **t** for **sh**.

• Basic Divisions

- **Aramaic** is generally divided into Western and Eastern groups. However, from a historical standpoint the following four groups have been recognized. Old **Aramaic**, Official **Aramaic**, Levantine **Aramaic**, and Eastern **Aramaic**. It has been suggested that likely various dialects of **Aramaic** were spoken around and within the Fertile Crescent and Mesopotamia during the **Second Millennium B.C.E.** A difference between early forms of **Aramaic** and Hebrew may be noted at;
- And Laban began calling it **Jegarsahadutha**, but Jacob called it **Galeed**. (**Genesis 31:47**)
- After Jacob and Laban effected a reconciliation, a heap of stones was set up as a witness between them. Laban called it Jegarsahadutha in **Aramaic** or Syrian, while Jacob called it Galeed in **Hebrew**, both expressions meaning, **Witness Heap**.
- Old **Aramaic** is a name applied to certain inscriptions discovered in northern Syria and said to date from the **Tenth to the Eighth Centuries B.C.E.** Gradually, however, a new dialect of **Aramaic** became the lingua franca or the international auxiliary language during the time of the Assyrian Empire, supplanting Akkadian as the language used for official governmental correspondence with outlying areas of the empire.
- In view of its use, this standard form of **Aramaic** is referred to as Official **Aramaic**. It continued to be employed during the time Babylon was the World Power, **625-539 B.C.E.**, and thereafter, during the time of the Persian Empire, **538-331 B.C.E.** Especially did it then enjoy wide usage, being the official language of government and business over a wide area, as archaeological discoveries attest.
- It appears in dockets on cuneiform tablets, on ostraca, papyri, seals, coins, in inscriptions on stone, and so forth. These artifacts have been found in such lands as Mesopotamia, Persia, Egypt, Anatolia, northern Arabia, in regions as far North as the Ural Mountains, and to the East as distant as Afghanistan and Kurdistan. The use of Official **Aramaic** continued during the Hellenistic period **323-30 B.C.E.**
- It seems that it is this Official **Aramaic** that is found in the writings of Ezra, Jeremiah, and Daniel. The Scriptures also give evidence of the fact that **Aramaic** was a lingua franca of those ancient times. Thus, in the **Eighth Century B.C.E.**, appointed spokesmen for King Hezekiah of Judah appealed to Assyrian King Sennacherib's representative Rabshakeh, saying,

- At this Eliakim and Shebna and Joah said to Rabshakeh; Speak, please, to your servants in the **Syrian** language, for we are listening, and do not speak to us in the Jews language in the ears of the people that are on the wall. (**Isaiah 36:11**)
- At this Eliakim the son of Hilkiah and Shebna and Joah said to Rabshakeh. Speak with your servants, please, in the **Syrian** language, for we can listen, and do not speak with us in the Jews language in the ears of the people that are on the wall. (**2 Kings 18:26**)
- The officials of Judah understood **Aramaic**, or **Syrian**, but evidently it was not understood by the common people among the Hebrews at that time in Jerusalem.
- A number of years after the Jews returned from Babylonian exile Ezra the priest read the book of the Law to Jews assembled in Jerusalem, and various Levites explained it to the people, stating,
- They continued reading aloud from the book, from the Law of the true God, it being expounded, and there being a putting of meaning into it, and they continued giving understanding in the reading. (**Nehemiah 8:8**)
- This expounding or interpreting may have involved paraphrasing the Hebrew text into **Aramaic**, **Aramaic** possibly having been adopted by the Hebrews when in Babylon. The expounding also, no doubt, involved exposition so that the Jews, even if understanding the Hebrew, would comprehend the deep significance of what was being read.

•• What Language Did Jesus Speak

- On this question there is considerable difference of opinion among scholars. However, concerning languages used in Palestine when Jesus Christ was on earth, **Professor G. Ernest Wright** states: **Various languages were undoubtedly to be heard on the streets of the major cities.**
- **Greek** and **Aramaic** were evidently the common tongues, and most of the urban peoples could probably understand both even in such modern or western cities as Caesarea and Samaria where **Greek** was the more common. Roman soldiers and officials might be heard

conversing in Latin, while orthodox Jews may well have spoken a late variety of **Hebrew** with one another, a language that we know to have been neither classical **Hebrew** nor **Aramaic**, despite its similarities to both.

- Commenting further, on the language spoken by Jesus Christ, **Professor Wright** says; **The language spoken by Jesus has been much debated. We have no certain way of knowing whether he could speak Greek or Latin, but in his teaching ministry he regularly used either Aramaic or the highly Aramaized popular Hebrew.**
- When Paul addressed the mob in the Temple, it is said that he spoke Hebrew,
- After he gave permission, Paul, standing on the stairs, motioned with his hand to the people. When a great silence fell, he addressed them in the Hebrew language, saying; (**Acts of Apostles 21:40**)
- Scholars generally have taken this to mean **Aramaic**, but it is quite possible that a popular Hebrew was then the common tongue among the Jews. [**Biblical Archaeology, 1963, p. 243**]
- It is possible that Jesus and his early disciples, such as the apostle Peter, at least at times spoke Galilean **Aramaic**, Peter being told on the night Christ was taken into custody. Certainly you also are one of them, for, in fact, your **dialect** gives you away.
- After a little while those standing around came up and said to Peter; Certainly you also are one of them, for, in fact, **your dialect gives you away.** (**Matthew 26:73**)
- This may have been said because the apostle was using Galilean **Aramaic** at the time, though that is not certain, or he may have been speaking a Galilean **Hebrew** that differed dialectally from that employed in Jerusalem or elsewhere in Judea.
- Earlier, when Jesus came to Nazareth in Galilee and entered the synagogue there, he read from the prophecy of Isaiah, evidently as written in Hebrew, and then said; Today this scripture that you just heard is fulfilled. Nothing is said about Jesus translating this passage into **Aramaic**. So it is likely that persons present on that occasion could readily understand Biblical Hebrew.

- And he came to Nazareth, where he had been reared, and, according to his custom on the Sabbath day, he entered into the synagogue, and he stood up to read. (Luke 4:16)
- So the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed him, and he opened the scroll and found the place where it was written: (Luke 4:17)
- Yehowah's spirit is upon me, because he anointed me to declare Good News to the poor, he sent me forth to preach a release to the captives and a recovery of sight to the blind, to send the crushed one's away with a release. (Luke 4:18)
- To preach Yehowah's acceptable year. (Luke 4:19)
- With that he rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue were intently fixed upon him. (Luke 4:20)
- Then he started to say to them; Today this scripture that you just heard is fulfilled. (Luke 4:21)
- It may also be noted that;
- Now in these days, when the disciples were increasing, a murmuring arose on the part of the Greek-speaking Jews against the Hebrew-speaking Jews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution. (Acts of Apostles 6:1)
- Referring to a time shortly after Pentecost 33 C.E, mentions Greek-speaking Jews and Hebrew-speaking Jews in Jerusalem.
- Professor Harris Birkeland [The Language of Jesus, Oslo, 1954, pp. 10,11] points out that Aramaic's being the written language of Palestine when Jesus was on earth does not necessarily mean that it was spoken by the masses. Also, the fact that the Elephantine Papyri belonging to a Jewish colony in Egypt were written in Aramaic does not prove that it was the chief or common tongue in their homeland, for Aramaic was then an international literary language.
- Of course, the Christian Greek Scriptures contain a number of Aramaisms, Jesus using some Aramaic words, for instance. However, as Birkeland argues, perhaps Jesus ordinarily spoke the popular Hebrew, while occasionally using Aramaic expressions.

- While it may not be provable, as Birkeland contends, that the common people were illiterate as far as **Aramaic** was concerned, it does seem that when Luke, an educated physician, records that Paul spoke to the Jews in **Hebrew** and when the apostle said the voice from heaven spoke to him in Hebrew, a form of Hebrew was actually meant, though perhaps not the ancient **Hebrew** and not **Aramaic**. (**Acts of Apostles 22:2**)

- And when we had all fallen to the ground I heard a voice say to me in the Hebrew language; Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? To keep kicking against the goads makes it hard for you. (**Acts of Apostles 26:14**)

- Lending further support to the use of a form of **Hebrew** in Palestine when Jesus Christ was on earth are early indications that the apostle Matthew first wrote his Gospel account in **Hebrew**. For instance, Eusebius, **of the third and fourth centuries C.E.**, said that the evangelist Matthew delivered his Gospel in the **Hebrew** tongue. [*Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. XXII, col. 941]

- And Jerome, of the **Fourth and Fifth Centuries C.E.**, stated in his work [*Deuteronomy viris inlustribus (Concerning Illustrious Men)*, chapter III: Matthew, who is also Levi, and who from a publican came to be an apostle, first of all composed a Gospel of Christ in Judaea in the Hebrew language and characters for the benefit of those of the circumcision who had believed. . . . Moreover, the Hebrew itself is preserved to this day in the library at Caesarea, which the martyr Pamphilus so diligently collected. [Translation from the Latin text edited by E. C. Richardson and published in the series *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur*, Leipzig, 1896, Vol. 14, pp. 8,9]

- Hence, Jesus Christ as a man on earth could well have used a form of **Hebrew** and a dialect of **Aramaic**.

See Also HEBREW 2