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The Aramaic Language

Aramaic is one of the Semitic languages, an important group of languages known almost from the beginning of human history and including also Arabic, Hebrew, Ethiopic, and Akkadian (ancient Babylonian and Assyrian). It is particularly closely related to Hebrew, and was written in a variety of alphabetic scripts. (What is usually called "Hebrew" script is actually an Aramaic script.)

The Earliest Aramaic

The first glimpse of Aramaic comes from a small number of ancient royal inscriptions from almost three thousand years ago (900-700 B.C.E.). Dedications to the gods, international treaties, and memorial stelae reveal to us the history of the first small Aramean kingdoms, in the territories of modern Syria and Southeast Turkey, living under the shadow of the rising Assyrian empire.

Aramaic as an Imperial Language

Aramaic was used by the conquering Assyrians as a language of administration communication, and following them by the Babylonian and Persian empires, which ruled from India to Ethiopia, and employed Aramaic as the official language. For this period, then (about 700–320 B.C.E.), Aramaic held a position similar to that occupied by English today. The most important documents of this period are numerous papyri from Egypt and Palestine.

Biblical Aramaic

Aramaic displaced Hebrew for many purposes among the Jews, a fact reflected in the Bible, where portions of Ezra and Daniel are in Aramaic. Some of the best known stories in biblical literature, including that of Belshazzar's feast with the famous "handwriting on the wall" are in Aramaic.

Jewish Aramaic Literature

Aramaic remained a dominant language for Jewish worship, scholarship, and everyday life for centuries in both the land of Israel and in the diaspora, especially in Babylon.

Among the Dead Sea Scrolls, the remains of the library of a Jewish sect from around the turn of the Era, are many compositions in Aramaic. These new texts also provide the best evidence for Palestinian Aramaic of the sort used by Jesus and his disciples.

Since the Jews spoke Aramaic, and knowledge of Hebrew was no longer widespread, the practice arose in the synagogue of providing the reading of the sacred Hebrew scriptures with an Aramaic translation or paraphrase, a "Targum" In the course of time a whole array of targums for the Law and other parts of the Bible were composed. More than translations, they incorporated much of traditional Jewish scriptural interpretation.

In their academies the rabbis and their disciples transmitted, commented, and debated Jewish law; the records of their deliberations constitute the two talmuds: that of the land of Israel and the much larger Babylonian Talmud. Although the talmuds contain much material in Hebrew, the basic language of these vast compilations is Aramaic (in Western and Eastern dialects).

Christian Aramaic Literature

Although Jesus spoke Aramaic, the Gospels are in Greek, and only rarely quote actual Aramaic words. Reconstruction of the Aramaic background of the Gospels remains a fascinating, but inordinately difficult area of modern research.

Christians in Palestine eventually rendered portions of Christian Scripture into their dialect of Aramaic; these translations and related writings constitute "Christian Palestinian Aramaic".

A much larger body of Christian Aramaic is known as Syriac. Indeed, Syriac writings surpass in quantity all other Aramaic combined. Syriac is originally the literary language of the city of Edessa (now Urfa in SE Turkey). The language became the tongue of the entire eastern wing of the church, from about the third century C.E. down until well past the Muslim conquest.

Syriac writings include numerous Bible translations, the most important being the so-called Peshitta (simple) translation, and countless devotional, dogmatic, exegetical, liturgical, and historical works. Almost all of the Greek philosophical and scientific tradition was eventually translated into Syriac, and it was through this channel that most found their way into the Islamic World and thence, into post-Dark Ages Europe.

Other Aramaic

There are many other branches of Aramaic literature, including the substantial literature of the Mandaeans, a Gnostic religious group, and the Bible translation, liturgy, and doctrinal works of the Samaritans.

Aramaic survives as a spoken language in small communities in Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Iran. The Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon will not attempt to be a full dictionary for this Modern Aramaic, which is best undertaken as a separate task, but where an ancient word has a modern continuation, the Modern Aramaic use will be recorded.