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What Is Aramaic?

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Exploring the Rich Legacy of a Biblical Language

1



Kuttamuwa Stele (eighth century BCE), a funerary stela with Aramaic inscription from Sam'al (modern Zincirli) in southern Turkey. *CC by-SA 4.0 International, via Wikimedia Commons.*

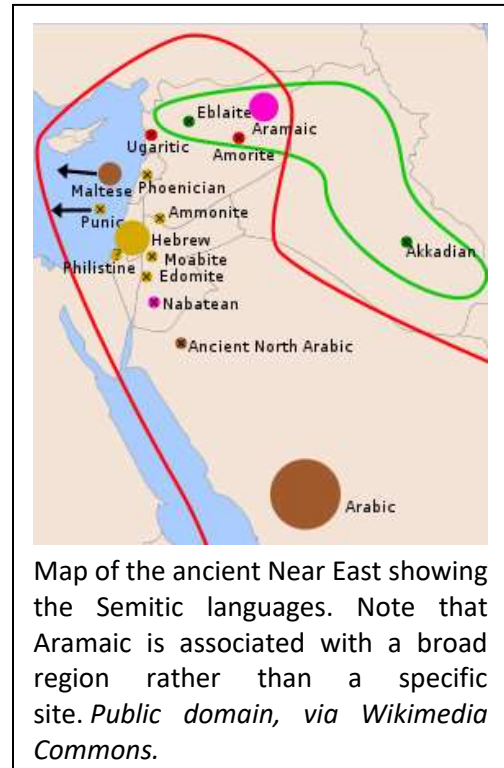
The Aramaic language constitutes the eastern branch of the Northwest Semitic language family. Its closest relatives are the Canaanite dialects in the western branch of the family, such as Hebrew, Phoenician, and Moabite. Its place of origin is the expansive region known in antiquity as Aram, which extends from southwestern Syria all the way to Upper Mesopotamia in southern Turkey and northern Iraq.

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The Origins of Aramaic

The sundry communities scattered across this vast area each used their own distinctive local variants of Aramaic; thus, for example, scholars sometimes refer to the Aramaic of the ancient city of Sam'al (modern Zincirli) in southern Turkey as "Sam'alian." In fact, the linguistic situation in the Iron Age Levant is quite complex, reflecting a Canaanite–Aramaic continuum with local dialects falling at various points along this spectrum—some bearing mainly Canaanite traits with little connection to Aramaic, and others leaning more toward the Aramaic end. This continuum is most evident with inscriptions that sit somewhere in the middle and defy easy categorization, such as the [Deir Alla Plaster Texts](#) or the Zakkur Stele.

Nevertheless, Aramaic appears to have emerged as a distinct language with a high degree of homogeneity sometime around the 11th century BCE. The oldest epigraphic evidence of Aramaic occurs in tenth-century diplomatic documents exchanged between various Aramean city-states such as Damascus and Hamath.



Old Aramaic

Over the next few centuries (tenth–eighth centuries BCE), the geographical extent of Aramaic continued to grow, due in no small part to the expansion of the Neo-Assyrian Empire from northern Mesopotamia through Aram and into the southern Levant. Indeed, the region of Aram was coterminous with a substantial portion of this large empire; the fact that it was not overtaken by Akkadian, the earlier *lingua franca*, attests to its widespread use and staying power.

In the biblical account of Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem (701 BCE) in 2 Kings 18, officials from Jerusalem ask the Assyrian king's emissary to speak with them in Aramaic, so that anyone in the city who overheard them would not be frightened or intimidated (2 Kings 18:26). This implies that the educated elites on both sides of the conflict could communicate effectively in Aramaic, even if the average person living in Jerusalem could not.

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Imperial Aramaic



Letter between Persian imperial officials in Bactria (in modern Afghanistan), written in Aramaic and dated to Year 11 or 12 of Artaxerxes III (348 or 347 BCE). *Free-use image from the Khalili Collections, via Wikimedia Commons.*

Despite the subsequent decline of the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian Empires (seventh–sixth centuries BCE), the use of Aramaic maintained a strong hold across the region. Indeed, with the emergence of the Persian Empire in the late sixth century, Aramaic became a true *lingua franca*, serving not only as the standard medium for diplomacy but also as the language of the Persian court itself, even as far east as the capital Persepolis on the Iranian plateau.

As a Persian vassal state, the newly rebuilt Yehud (formerly Judah) in the southern Levant likewise fully adopted Aramaic. This shift ultimately had lasting effects that reverberated in the centuries to follow. For instance, the “square” script used for Aramaic eventually supplanted the [Old Hebrew script](#), and continues to be used for the writing of Hebrew to the present day. Likewise, whereas only a handful of tiny snippets (from single words to short sentences) in the earlier texts of the Hebrew Bible were written in Aramaic, late biblical works attest substantial sections in this language: the fourth-century Book of Ezra ostensibly cites verbatim from official fifth-century documents written in Aramaic (4:8–6:16 and 7:12–26); and about half of the very late Book of Daniel (c. 164 BCE) was written in Aramaic (2:4b–7:28).

Also worth mentioning during this period is the Elephantine Papyri, a trove of Aramaic documents from the island of Elephantine in Egypt. Although the documents themselves come from c. 400 BCE, they reflect a thriving Jewish community in Egypt that appears to have originated in the seventh century BCE as a result of Judahite refugees arriving in Egypt ahead of the invading Assyrian armies. There remain numerous unanswered questions about this group and its relationship to contemporary Judah, making these

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documents particularly valuable. That this group used Aramaic as its standard language is especially illuminating.

The Aramaic of the Hellenistic and Roman Periods

Following Persia's fall to Alexander the Great (c. 332 BCE), it is remarkable that Aramaic remained widely used despite the spread of Hellenism throughout Alexander's empire. Across the Jewish diaspora in particular, the loss of Hebrew as a native spoken language meant that there was now a need for sacred texts written in Hebrew to be translated into Aramaic. These translations, known as *targumim* (singular: *targum*), often recorded contemporary theological interpretations as well, interpolating them directly into the thread of the biblical text; they are therefore a useful window into Jewish thought of the time.

The New Testament attests a variety of words and phrases in Aramaic that appear to reflect the use of this language by Jesus and his followers. In addition to single words like *abba*, "father" (Mark 14:36, etc.), and *rabbouni*, literally "my rabbi" (John 20:16), there are longer phrases like *talitha cum*, "Little girl, get up!" (Mark 5:41). Notably, when Jesus quotes Psalm 22:1 (22:2 in Hebrew) while on the cross, he speaks Aramaic, not Hebrew: "Eloi, eloi, lema sabachthani?" ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"; Mark 15:34; cf. Matthew 27:46).

From the Early Common Era to Modernity

As the centuries went by, Jewish diaspora communities became important repositories of Aramaic language and tradition. Regional variants developed, most notably Jewish Palestinian Aramaic (JPA) and Jewish Babylonian Aramaic (JBA), named for the areas—the Galilee and Babylon, respectively—where they arose. These particular dialects are most famously preserved in the two *Talmudim* of the fourth and fifth centuries CE: the Talmud Yerushalmi, written mainly in JPA, and the Talmud Bavli, written mainly in JBA. Aramaic remained an important language in Judaism, as attested by medieval documents such as the Zohar, a voluminous 13th-century mystical work written in Aramaic.



Page from a 17th-century Syriac liturgical text, written in the classical Estrangela script with Madhnhkaya vowel pointing. *Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.*

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Alongside these developments, the advent of Christianity created a new avenue for the preservation, use, and growth of Aramaic, namely, the Syrian Christian church. Between the second and fifth centuries CE, the Old and New Testaments were translated into Syriac, an Aramaic dialect with its own script (actually, three distinct scripts), resulting in the Peshitta, the Syriac Bible. Indeed, Syriac has been used in Christian enclaves across the Middle East ever since, and still survives as a native language in small pockets in Syria and Iraq.

A primary challenge to the study of Aramaic is that it has so many historical phases and regional variations. Additionally, many resources are designed for learners who already know some Hebrew. That said, readers familiar with the Hebrew alphabet will find useful Alger F. Johns's [A Short Grammar of Biblical Aramaic](#) (revised edition, 1972), freely accessible online. Also available for the study of Syriac is Theodor Nöldeke's classic [Compendious Syriac Grammar](#) (1904). Advanced students may wish to consult the [Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon](#) and the learning tools available there.

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