Aramaic Language

1. Linguistic Characterization. Aramaic belongs to the group of Central Semitic languages and is commonly taken as a member of its Northwest Semitic branch. This impression is fostered by the fact that the Aramaic script is an offshoot of the Phoenician script and thus includes only 22 graphemes, giving Aramaic texts the appearance of being Northwest Semitic. But the phonetic developments shown by orthographic changes and Aramaic texts written in other scripts reveal that, initially, Aramaic owned at least 29 consonantal phonemes: ‘, ‘, b, d, g, g, h, h, k, l, m, n, p, q, r, s, š, ț, t, t, w, y, z, ẓ.

Other conservative features, which are sometimes blurred by the use of the Phoenician orthography or lost in later dialects, are the preservation of n before a consonant which at least in some dialects was still realized phonetically as n or as an nasalization of the following consonant, the distinction of roots III-w and III-y even in verbal forms (yqth :: ygyt), and the use of a Gt-stem (with prefixed t) in opposite to tG (with prefixed t).

The features which distinguish Aramaic from Northwest Semitic languages and from most others Central Semitic Languages like Arabic and Ugaritic are the use of a postponed article, in older texts written with ’, and the absence of a reflexive-passive stem built with n (cf. e.g., Heb. Niphhal).

Since all these features of Aramaic can be found in Ancient South Arabic languages like Old Sabaic which probably also belong to Central Semitic (Voigt), the common presumed close connection of Aramaic with the Northwest Semitic branch should be questioned. Aramaic should be deemed instead as an independent Central Semitic language with affinities to the southern branch of this group (or South Semitic Languages based on areal influences). And since Aramaic shares the postponed article and the missing of an N-stem with the southern languages, these features do belong to a Proto Aramaic stratum and are no later inner Aramaic developments, thus excluding the dialects of Sam‘al/Ya‘udi and of the Deir ‘Alla Inscription from being considered genuine Aramaic (Kottsieper 2008)."
Aramaic Language

context, and a long form (sg. *yaqtulul, pl. *yaqtululûn) just describing an act (Kottsieper 1999).

d) Broken plurals are not common.

e) The plural forms in the status absolutus ends on n: -in (masculine), -ân (feminine).

f) *bar “son” and *tir “two” appear, as in Modern South Arabic dialects, with r as last consonant and not with n as in other Semitic languages.

2. History of Aramaic. Aramaic was the language of a semi-nomadic group which appears at the end of the 2nd millennium BCE in the vicinity of Gebel Bûri. Given that the linguistic connections to Ancient South Arabic are not by chance, this group probably came from an area south of the Syrian Desert (Kottsieper 2009).

In the 1st half of the 1st millennium BCE, Aramaic spread throughout the whole Neo-Assyrian Empire, its western neighbors, and Babylonia and gained the status of a lingua franca. Thus in Syria but also in eastern and northern territories outside of Mesopotamia, it became a common language of inscriptions (Old Aramaic; cf. Aramaic Inscriptions). Though surely different local dialects did exist, this lingua franca used as a kind of standard literary Aramaic was based on a western dialect of Aramaic which obviously was influenced by the neighboring Northwest Semitic languages. Thus, Aramaic started to reduce its high number of phonemes and also changed rapidly its verbal system to the well known later one using the suffix conjugation for the past, the participle for the present, and (finally) only one prefix conjugation for the future tense, as an extemporalis, or for modal expressions.

After the decline of the Neo-Assyrian and the Neo-Babylonian empires, the rising Persian Empire took over Aramaic as the official language used in its western territories. Probably, this so-called Imperial Aramaic was based on a late form of the older standard literary Aramaic, although we do not possess enough information about its development in the 6th century BCE. As an official language of a single empire, written Imperial Aramaic shows only slight dialectal variants, though spoken Aramaic obviously owned a lot of dialects as any does spoken language.

At the end of the Persian era, Aramaic had become the common spoken language throughout Mesopotamia, Syria, and Palestine and was also in use in neighboring areas in the north and east. Without the unifying pressure of a single empire, local dialects of spoken Aramaic could now also influence written Aramaic. But biblical Aramaic in particular (Ezra 4:9–6:18; 7:12–26; Dan 2:4b–7:28; Jer 10:11) is still very close to Imperial Aramaic as the language of the Nabatean and Arscacid inscriptions. Also the Aramaic of the Qumran scrolls written in the Hasmonean or early post-Hasmonean times is still strongly influenced by Imperial Aramaic. Even on the language of the Targumim, which came into use after Hebrew had ceased as a common spoken language even in Judah, Imperial Aramaic influence is detectable.

The later Middle Aramaic texts of the Jewish tradition, the Oriental churches and the Mandaeans particularly show the dialectal diversity of Aramaic, whose dialects can be assigned to two main groups. To Western Aramaic, the dialects of the Jews and Christians in Palestine belong, together with the dialect of the Samaritans. Even the inscriptions from the synagogue in Dura-Europos are influenced by such a Western dialect, although in this area an Eastern Aramaic dialect was commonly spoken, as it was throughout Syria and Mesopotamia. There, Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, Syriac, and Mandaic are the main known Eastern Aramaic dialects for which we posses written sources. One should not be misled by the traditional labeling of those dialects according to religious groups. Especially non-standard texts like magical bowls reveal that regionalism was also an important aspect for the evolution of different dialects.

Early forms of Eastern Aramaic can be found in the Palmyrene inscriptions, early Syriac inscriptions and Aramaic inscriptions from eastern Mesopotamia mainly discovered in Hatra and Asshur.

Aramaic is still spoken today. Western Aramaic is used in the dialects of Mâ`itûla, Bax`a und Gubb`adîn, three villages some 60 km northwest of Damascus. Eastern Aramaic is still found in many different dialects of non-Islamic groups from south-eastern Turkey (esp. Tûrîyo in the Tûr `Abdîn), Iraq (beside others also Modern Mandaic) and Iran. These modern dialects show a strong development in contrast to the literary Aramaic dialects still used in the religious literature of those groups. Especially the eastern dialects have undergone great changes under the influence of Arabic and/or non-semitic languages like Kurdish also used in those regions.

3. Aramaic and the Bible and Its Reception. Since Aramaic became a common literary and spoken language in Syria-Palestine, it is in several respects relevant for the Bible and its reception:

a) The later texts of the OT were written and its final redaction took place in a linguistic environment in which Aramaic was a common language and influenced Late Biblical Hebrew.

b) Since even in Judah Aramaic had become not only a common but probably even the common spoken language at the end of the Persian era and Hebrew was used mainly or even only as a kind of religious lingo at that time (Kottsieper 2007), common people needed to be educated, to be assisted by educated people, or to use translations to gain access to the Hebrew biblical texts.
Aramaics in the Bible

Aramaics in the Bible
I. Hebrew Bible/Old Testament
II. New Testament

“Aramaics” means features of the Aramaic language that are still reflected in the syntax or vocabulary of Hebrew (which is closer to Aramaic) or Greek (which belongs to a different language family). Therefore the two fields, Hebrew Bible/Old Testament and New Testament, require individual treatments as presented in the following two articles.

I. Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

Definition and Background. An Aramaism is any feature of language that appears to originate in Aramaic (for the problems of discerning Aramaics, see below). The Arameans are a people or peoples who occupied parts of northwest Mesopotamia and Syria from no later than the 11th century BCE and possibly for several centuries before that. The language spoken by them, Aramaic, is a branch of Northwest Semitic, differentiated from Canaanite (e.g., Phoenician, Hebrew), comprising a variety of dialects, attested in inscriptions from northern Syria and the nearby region of Turkey from the 9th century BCE on (see Fuehnergard). Contact between Arameans and Israelites is reported throughout biblical literature, and familiarity with Aramaic characterizes every period of Israelite history.

The patriarch Jacob, who is said to have lived in Aram-Naharaim for 20 years, is recalled as a “wandering Aramean” (Deut 26:5), and his Syrian father-in-law Laban is quoted as speaking Aramaic (“yegeh sâhadâd” “mound of testimony,” Gen 31:47; all translations mine). During the late 8th-century BCE siege of Jerusalem by the Assyrians, some Judean officials ask the Assyrian spokesman, the Rabshakeh, to speak to them in Aramaic rather than Hebrew (“Judean”; 2 Kgs 18:26 = Isa 36:11). The implication is that Aramaic was at this time understood by the elite, but not by the ordinary Israelite.

In the 6th century BCE, Aramaic spreads throughout the Neo-Babylonian and the succeeding Persian empires, becoming the lingua franca of the Middle East by the 5th century BCE. Half of two biblical books from the Persian and Hellenistic periods are written in Aramaic (Ezra 4:8–6:18; 7:12–26; Dan 2:4–7:28), as is Jer 10:11. While Hebrew scribes from the earliest Israelite times made use of Aramaic (see further below), beginning in the mid-6th century BCE the “official” or “imperial” Aramaic of the Persian Empire exerted a continuous influence on Hebrew, transforming the language irrevocably.

Some scholars would distinguish the occasional Aramaics of pre-exilic Hebrew literature from those of the post-exilic (Persian period) literature, the latter of which occur mostly through perpetual treatments as presented in the following two articles.

See also → Arameans; → Hebrew Script

Aramaic Versions of the Bible

→ Targum, Targumim; → Versions of the Bible: Aramaic Versions

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