


**ARAMAIC BIBLE  
COMPANION**

**GLORIOUS**

**ARAMAIC**

**THE TONGUE OF  
NEBUCHADNEZZAR  
DANIEL NEHEMIAH  
BARNABAS & PAUL**

# GLORIOUS ARAMAIC

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## LANGUAGE OF 3 EMPIRES

### INTRODUCTION

#### *The beauty of POETRY*

#### *The Master's voice recovered*

It has been widely recognized that the Hebrew language is suited to conveying religious truth as can be beautifully illustrated in the use Moses and David make of this Semitic tongue. It has also been acknowledged by scholars that the Greek language because it was widely spoken in the Gentile world of the first century was a vehicle in attendance to aid the spread of the Christian Faith. Few would take issue with either view.

What then of Aramaic? The contention of this study is that like Cinderella it is the most beautiful of the three tongues-it is poetic, precise and of primary importance as the language in which Jesus and all the Apostles thought, prayed and communicated. With syllables and word endings that can be strung together with little or no tutoring and still less skill to rhyme it would have been a sheer joy to listen to the Lord Jesus speak.

Let me take you to the pure high mountain air and hear a Man speak like no other with blessing on His lips,

“Tobihon l’emasacna b’ruakh  
D’dilhon hi malkotha d’shemaim  
Tobihon l’abila  
D’khnonan nath’biahon” (Matthew 5.1-2)

Come now to the waters edge of the lake named “the harp”

Shema’u  
Ha nephaq Zerua’a l’mazara  
W’kad Zera aith d’nephal al yad aorecha  
W’atha peratha w’ocaltha” (Mark4.3-4)

Listen now in the quiet of an upper room

Lo n’thadod Lebcon  
Himanay b’elha w’bi himanay

Sigyain anon awwana bith abi  
W'ala amer haith l'kon (John 14. 1-2)  
D'azel ana d'atib l'kon athra

Wake to listen while the master prays:

Abon d'shemaim  
N'thqadesh shemek  
Thatha Melchothek  
Sabwa tsabyinek  
D'b'shemaim aph b'araha  
Khab len lekama  
D'sunekna kolyon  
W'shaboq len khathin aph anakna  
Gir shaboqan l'kol d'Khibin lan  
W'la thalay l'nashyona  
Ala paroqin min Bisha (Luke 11.2-4)

When you scan the Lord's prayer in Aramaic and see Luke's name appended you might say "Could Luke speak Aramaic?" Well, Paul studied in Aramaic and it was used in all but western coastal Asia Minor-so in Tarsus. Luke may well have had Greek as his first language but he wrote and spoke Aramaic as well.

To descant on that theme once more the historian Josephus informs us that but a handful of Jews used Greek because it was forbidden as the language of pagan idolaters. This beautiful language is that in which the 27 books of the New Testament bar none were first written in whole or part by those who first witnessed to the Christian faith.

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### ***Give me back my Greek New Testament***

You might be saying "I prefer 'Πατερ, αγιασθητω το ονομα σου  
Ελθετω βασιλεια σου Matt.5

Give me back my "Word made flesh"

Και ο λογος σαρξ εγενετο  
και εσκηνοσεν εν ημιν John 1.14

Isn't that what was first written down by Matthew Levi and John the divine? How could it be? Their schooling, their memories of the Lord's spoken words, their first scripted memoirs, their repetitive conversations

on these great themes were all in Aramaic. The Rabbis taught it were preferable to feed one's son swine flesh rather than teach him Greek. So the facts of Jesus ministry were first written in vernacular Aramaic no doubt within a very few years of apostolic witness. By AD 50 when Paul first missioned as far away as Thessalonica history was being recorded for posterity and lots of what we read in the N.T was on papyrus rolls. Luke followed others who had put pen to paper before him in Aramaic. The language spoken by three great ancient civilizations –Babylon Assyria and Greece prevailed into apostolic times as the common tongue from Mesopotamia to the coast of Asia Minor and all the Apostolic tutors who penned the story of nascent Christianity were fluent in it. Greek was used from the Greek islands westward and on the Greek speaking western coast of Asia Minor. When Ephesus became the third centre of Christianity all that is known of Christian teaching would be communicated in Greek. There Paul ministered and then John with the “angels” referred to in the book of Revelation. The 22 book Canon of the East in Aramaic as known in Aramaic documents was by then in the later Pauline period being provided in Greek and the later work of John the divine expressed initially in Aramaic would almost immediately be transcribed into Greek. When our Lord spoke to John in Patmos it would be in Aramaic. This early interplay and mutual transmission is important to remember.

### ***Where did all the Aramaic scriptures go?***

#### ***The wonder of Christ and future HISTORIOGRAPHY***

With the famines and nascent rebellion brewing in first century Israel and on account of Jesus call to reach the nations Christians scattered and with the imminent fall of Jerusalem believers moved to Pella, to Caesarea where Luke must have researched his facts and to Damascus where a strong Aramaic speaking church at Antioch was led by Barnabas and Saul. Within a generation Christian exiles were found in Edessa where for several centuries the Old Syriac scriptures flourished under King Abgar's successors. Abgar had invited the persecuted Christ to his realm and the Lord wrote him an acknowledgment in Aramaic assuring him the offer would come good in subsequent time to shield His disciples.

## ***Harqel recovers Aramaic material in Egypt***

Before the story of the Aramaic NT is allowed to put the story of the Greek NT into the shade lets remember that the original thinking oral tradition and script would have indeed been Aramaic but the 5 books missing in the Eastern Canon and indeed other sections were retrieved by retranslation from Greek by Aramaic scholarship. One great example of this is the **Harklean Aramaic version** which benefited from an earlier work called the Philoxenian. Philoxenus devoted himself to the revision of the Syriac versions of the Bible, and with the help of his chorepiscopus Polycarp produced in **508** the so-called Philoxenian version, which was in some sense the received Bible of the Syriac Miaphysites during the 6th century.

The **Harklean version** is an Aramaic language Bible translation by Thomas of Harqel completed in **616 AD in Egypt**. The version is partly based on the earlier **Philoxenian version(507-8AD)**, *partly* a new and very literal translation from the Greek New Testament. This added books of the canon by then only found in Greek in the West though available in the monasteries of Egypt in Syriac in the 600's. The translation recovered the original expressions.

Thomas of Harqel used the Philoxenian Aramaic version (*22books*) adding the other 5 canonical books (*2Peter, 2John, 3John, Jude, Revelation*) through a literal translation of the Greek text of the era (Aramaic is characteristically literal) even if the Syriac was more cumbersome and less sonorous. ***The Harklean is considered a masterpiece in mirror translation: every particle in the original Greek is somehow represented in Syriac.*** As is the case with all the previous versions, the Harklean is not a new translation, rather a revision. The Harklean is the only version of the early period which includes the entire text of the New Testament in Aramaic and by virtue of its antiquity is a valuable template of biblical scholars.

## ***The Diatessaron debacle***

### ***The replacement Peshitta recovers gospel ACCURACY***

Tatian would have the four gospels amalgamated in a messy mix which endured but a little time before the Church's bishops in the east in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century determined "enough was enough" and whilst the genuine writings of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John in Aramaic were still available they ordained that the "simple gospel" in the four versions

be republished. This authentic and quite authoritative work lives on till this very day as a full cousin in literary provenance of the Peshitta-‘the simple(gospel)’ Along with it at that early stage 22 of the 27 books were preserved in Aramaic. Later the others were added from manuscripts that could then be accessed. Sterling work has been done by Gwilliams and Pinkerton in Pauline material (The epistles) tht confirm the Peshitta text and by Gwilliams and Pusey in making available their edition of the gospels somewhat earlier. This work relies on work from circa 425AD (the Aramaic Peshitta) which stands on the shoulders of the Old Syriac in common use in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century and stemming from largely unrecoverable Manuscripts of the first and second centuries. The Mepharreshe(Gospels in Aramaic) recovered in the Sinai Palimpsest testify to this provenance as do portions of scripture found in Nisbis and the Qumran Q5 cave horde. It is a signal providence that wise bishops of the east scrapped Tatian’s work and returned to the beauty of the simplicity and accuracy of the gospels in the Aramaic.

### ***Variants would turn your head***

#### ***Aramaic has the beauty of BREVITY***

The brevity and economy of wordiness in Aramaic stems from our Lord Himself and the nature of Aramaic which discards adverbs and particles. Like Hebrew it is rich in participles and uses the tenses to good effect. It is a language which can communicate thought poetically and beautifully.

The New Testament Greek manuscripts have kept scholars and lecturers bound to the ground like Gulliver by 10,000 cords that have largely resulted from words mistakenly copied from Aramaic and lack of care to count words as Aramaic writer-scribes would do. The result is 10,000 variants in the Greek N.T. which our translators employ as their preferred base. By contrast there are 10 *significant* variants in the Aramaic or Syriac MSS –variants in the Greek run at 700:1 to those in the Aramaic. There are 5 Aramaic manuscript documents as opposed to 370 Greek manuscripts, cursives etc. The theological debates about text have ample scope in the Greek but it is most interesting to notice that when it comes to ***the periscope*** or the ***sending of the seventy*** and other important passages the Syriac versions are consulted and act virtually as literary litmos paper or as umpire in respect of nuances and preferences of text. The 2010 NIV has *in its footnotes* more often cites the Syriac I

think, than any previous translation. Aramaic has won its laurels and its claim to antiquity, and significance cannot be set aside. It may be described as the gold standard of textual provenance.

## ***Outstanding scholars of the east*** ***Men who established theological verity and biblical*** ***CLARITY***

### ***(1)Aphraates***

Aphrahat or *Aphraates* (c. 280–c. 345 became known as “The Sage of the East”. He gave us the vital Syrian Codex B with distinctive red dots for punctuation. A Persian hermit, he became involved in the struggle against the Arian heresy as seriously as Eusebius in the west. Aphraates was born on the Persian border with Syria. He converted to Christianity and became a hermit in Edessa moving in time to Antioch, Turkey. He was a near contemporary to the slightly younger Ephrem the Syrian, but the latter lived within the sphere of the Roman Empire. Both men loved the resonant musicality of the Aramaic language. When ***Aphraates spoke publicly against the Arians***, a servant of Emperor Valens tried to murder him. When the servant died suddenly, Valens took the death as a sign from God and protected Aphraates, refusing an Arian request to exile the hermit. His magnum Opus *The Demonstrations* -the oldest document of the Syrian church is a prose work, but frequently, Aphrahat employs a poetic rhythm and imagery to his writing-like many other Persians he wrote and spoke Aramaic. Four *Demonstrations* are concerned with Judaism. It appears that there was a movement within the Persian church by some either to become Jews or return to Judaism, or to incorporate Jewish elements into Christianity. ***Aphrahat in this context makes his stand for the distinctives of Christianity***-chiefly for grace as distinct from works in the gospel. He is a bridge to the Old Syriac. One example is his comment on Luke 7.14 where he tells us Jesus said to the widow of Nain’s son “Youth, Youth” and he writes on the Ruler’s daughter that Jesus said “Talitha, talitha”. It is thus Jesus spoke also to Peter saying “Simon, Simon”. It is a mark of Jesus’ deity and love for the creatures of His hand that He so often spoke thus.

### ***(2) Ephrem preserves the worldview of Christ***

*Ephrem the Syrian* is of special interest as a commentator and theologian. He flourished around 373AD and has a significant sermon

on “The last times Antichrist and the end of the world”. He writes “***Why therefore do we not reject every care of earthly actions and prepare ourselves for the meeting of the Lord Christ, so that he may draw us from the confusion, which overwhelms the world... for all the saints and elect of God are gathered, prior to the Tribulation that is to come, and are taken to the Lord lest they see the confusion that is to overwhelm the world because of our sins***”. He wrote an interest packed theology in 80 rhythms. His solid Eastern way of scripture usage gradually leavened the West and is mirrored in Calvin’s method. His work was important enough to be translated into six major languages shortly after his time. Here is a mini sample of his writing which is thoroughly evangelical.

***Master of all,  
alone without sin,  
for me the unworthy sinner  
were given over to death,  
death on a Cross,  
that you might free  
the sinner’s soul  
from the bonds of sins.***

***(3) Rabbula who reinstated the original Aramaic scriptures***  
Rabbula was bishop of Edessa from 411 to 435 AD. Edessa was the thriving centre of eastern Christianity and orthodoxy. ***He ordered that priests and deacons should have copies of the separate gospels*** or Peshitto (Eastern NT with the tell-tale “o”) - THE EDM (mepharreshe) 411-435 and Theodoret 423-457 swept up 200 copies of the duly disdained Diatessaron and replaced them with separate copies of the original authoritative Old Syriac gospels. Edessa had been since Christ an independent state whose rulers in the line of Abgar fostered biblical Christianity using the old Syriac canon of 22 books as originally given and for many years still to come was to remain independent of the Roman thrall.

#### ***(4) Ishodad***

ISHO’DAD was a 9<sup>th</sup> century Commentator on the GOSPELS whose importance is that ***he was (among the last scholars) acquainted with the old Syrian text before it went off the scene***- lost in the early



medieval period as Greek and then Latin supplanted it in the West. Mrs Lewis of *Sisters of Sinai* fame found over 600 notices of the Old Syriac in her exhaustive examination of the Aramaic Mepharreshe **Palimpsest** of the original four gospels. Though the whole Syriac text did not survive she insisted it existed and demonstrated this by numerous Aramaic quotes reflecting this text in contradistinction to any known Greek expressions. Aramaic was the primary linguistic medium reflecting the word and thought of Jesus and the apostles and unquestionably the authoritative text in the early first century. Agnes Lewis says “Bishops don’t do all the good work-and that the **Antiochene Christians** did not wait till AD160-3 generations on-for a translation of the gospels in the vernacular Syriac.” What she is saying is that even before the official gathered texts foundational to the Peshitta much of the NT circulated in oral and documentary Aramaic between Jerusalem, Antioch and Edessa.

***The Khabouris Manuscript – Medieval copy of 2ndC Document yields for us today the beauty of ANTIQUITY***

The Chaplain to the United States Senate, Frederick Brown Harris referred to it as the ‘N.T. (New Testament) Time Bomb.’ His newspaper article as follows:

"Here are the very syllables as they fell from His lips when the matchless Teacher was here among men. It is a record to make the heart leap with excitement. Somehow, it is like hearing the One whose birth broke the ages in two, talking to our modern age without a language barrier between. Here is not a translation of the words, but the words themselves of that One...who declared: ***'My words shall not pass away. They are spirit and they are life.'*** Gazing across the years to be, He warned that those who defy His precepts, which are the laws of life, will be ground to powder. What treasures will be found as the very language of Jesus is studied can only be imagined.'

The Khabouris Codex -now in America’s **Younan Foundation** -was originally found in the library of a small church in Kurdistan. (By the way Dr.Younan is a first language Aramaic speaker and the foremost Aramaic scholar of our times). Khabouris(which came into his family possession)is a **ninth century manuscript** and a scribal copy of a **second century Aramaic New Testament** written in approximately 164 AD (*internally documented* as 100 years after the great persecution

of the Christians by Nero, in 65 AD). The Manuscript is written on animal skin, and consists of 254 leaves (folios). They measure about 10" plus x 7". The writing is in black ink, now somewhat brownish, and is in one column of 29 lines to the page. It contains the **twenty-two books** of the Aramaic Levant Canon, which until the 600's did not encompass Revelation and four short Epistles (2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude) of which by then manuscripts were discovered. It was carbon dated and found to be 1000 years old making it the oldest 22 book New Testament manuscript in existence. Possess the Peshitto and essentially you are back to 164AD as if in a bible time machine!

### ***Agnes Lewis –the Scottish lady who brought back the GLORY of the truth of the gospels as originally given***

With her full teaset Agnes travelled to St.Catherines monastery in Sinai by Camel train. She returned several times and was granted the favour of untrammelled access to the unique literary treasures of the monastery which Tischendorf had already unscrupulously rifled for his manuscript. One of the cleverest women in the earliest 20<sup>th</sup> century Agnes and her sister were Oxbridge scholars deprived of their degree because they were women but they even outshone Professors of oriental languages. They did sterling work at St Catherine's monastery beneath Mt Sinai arranging the library there for modern scholars. They stumbled on a "palimpsest" in the course of their work. ***What in the name of all that's wonderful is a "palimpsest"?*** You might well ask! The word PALIN is the Greek for "again" and it simply means that paper already bearing written material has its surface so prepared as to cover but not erase the earlier script so that the document may be re-used.

Agnes and her sister travelled to the monastery at Mt Sinai where Dr Burkitt says the **Christians persecuted in Syria retreated in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century**(You can read the thrilling story in Janet Soskice's book *The sisters of Sinai*). She catalogued the Sinai library and found a "palimpsest" of enormous value to the faith. She used a chemical agent to fully clarify the original writing and copied the whole during a series of visits to Mt.Sinai. The monks had taken with them from Syria many precious manuscripts one of which-this copy of the four gospels-survives It was overwritten because vellum became difficult to obtain. The document is called S(Syrian Palimpsest) and is a vellum codex of

166 leaves of the 4 gospels in usual order-142 leaves comprise the Evangelion **Da Mepharreshe**(Syrian) or EDM in short.

### ***Word research suggests a much more intimate early Aramaic or Old Syriac NT text INTIMACY***

In working through the Peshitta gospel of John which incidentally has the accuracy of a diarist with its word for “this precise time” *HIDIN* used over 200 times I find the word *LOTH* meaning “near” used 18times. In John 21.17 for example Peter “threw himself like a stone aimed at the feet of Jesus”, Peter wanted to be close to the Lord.

The Aramaic word *QEREB* means to “draw near”. In research I have demonstrated it occurs 44 times in Matthew. Here are seven examples  
Matthew 4.11 “The angels offered themselves close to Him ministering to him” (No2)

Matthew 9.20 “Behold the woman came close in behind Jesus and touched his clothes(of mercy) (No.7)

Matthew 15.12 When the Pharisees were hurt by Jesus saying”What comes out of the mouth defiles a man” the disciples “came up close to him and were saying “You know the Pharisees were indignant!”(No.13)

Matthew 18.1 “In that hour the disciples came close and said “Who truly is great in the kingdom of heaven?” Jesus took a child and put him closer still in the midst and said ‘whoever receives this child!’”(No19)

Matthew 26.7 “A woman with a very expensive phial of perfume came near” (No.30)

Matthew 28.9 “They came near and held his feet”(No39)

Matthew 28 !8 “When the disciples doubted Matthew tells us “Jesus came near and spoke intimately with them”(No.40).

This presentation could be replicated fourfold in the gospels and in very many cases the term serves to draw attention to how close relationships between the Lord and disciples and also those to whom He ministered were. The Apostles present a Saviour who met need and fostered the close and genuine personal relationships. It is difficult for the word “near” to convey the significance of *QEREB* for it carries the concept of going with something important to offer and convey-it can also mean to “approach God”.

A third grammatical element in the Aramaic scriptures that set them apart as singularly intimate is the use of the personal pronoun in respect of our Lord Jesus. The Western texts to this day fight shy of the personal pronoun in respect of “**Our** Lord”. In at least 600 instances the words “my” and “our” when used with the Lord Jesus are absent from the Western Greek text. If as has been effectively shown by F.H.CHASE Bezae was produced in its Syriac and Greek format in Antioch and sent to the world from Seleucia in the days of Theophilus (170-185) and Serapion(190-203)and even before it is passing strange how these personal pronouns were dropped. It may simply be “preference” of later western scribes or it may have come in as the4 Greek passed into Latin- but it is most likely to have been through increasingly poor understanding of the Old Syriac. For so many intimate references to pass into technical references is not just the result of “arm’s length” r austere interpretation. It appears to be cultural and it introduced inaccuracy. One of the benefits is that texts with the original “my’s” and “our’s” show their antiquity and are known to scholars as Syracised text.

FINIS

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