

ARAMAIC

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Aramaic is unique among the languages relevant to biblical studies in that, like Hebrew, it is found both within and beyond the canon. Not only are several sections of the “Hebrew” Bible (most notably Daniel and Ezra) written in Aramaic, but so are several important bodies of texts outside of the Bible that are relevant to understanding it.

The name “Aramaic” comes from the Bible itself. It reports that the leaders of Judah asked an Assyrian general who was besieging the city of Jerusalem toward the end of the eighth century to speak to them in *ʾārāmîṯ* rather than Judean (i.e., Hebrew) so that the general population would not understand what was being said (2 Kgs 18:26 = Isa 36:11). The term is also found in Dan 2:4 and Ezra 4:7, where it indicates the shift from Hebrew to Aramaic that takes place in those verses, and in one of the papyri from Elephantine.¹ Early Greek sources identify the language as “Syrian,”² except at Dan 2:26, where the Old Greek uses the term “Chaldean.”³

The name is taken from that of the Aramean people, who are first mentioned by that name in the eleventh century B.C.E., when the Assyrian emperor Tiglath-pileser I reports having encountered them during a military campaign in Syria.⁴ There they created several small kingdoms that reached as far east as the Persian Gulf; several of these are mentioned in the Bible, including Beth-rehob, Damascus, Geshur, Hamath, Maacah, Tob, and Zobah.

¹ A. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1923), no. 28, lines 4 and 6.

² LXX Dan 2:4; Job 42:17; and *Aristeas* 11; this is the basis for the rabbinic pejorative pun *lašōn sūrsî* (“clipped tongue,” *b. Sof.* 49b; *b. B. Qam.* 82b–83a; and *y. Sof.* 7:2 21c; cf. *Gen. Rab.* 71:14).

³ Cf. also Jerome’s introduction to Daniel (PL 28:1357). Occasionally, one finds the term “Hebrew” where the reference appears to be to Aramaic (e.g., John 19:13, 17 and, perhaps, Eusebius’s references to the sources used by Matthew, *Ecclesiastical History* 3:39 §16, LCL 1:296–97).

⁴ Albert Kirk Grayson, *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1976) part 2, “From Tiglath-Pileser I to Ashur-nasir-apli II,” pp. 13 (§34), 27 (§97), and 23 (§83).

By the time that Israel's monarchy fell in the early part of the sixth century, Aramaic had become the lingua franca of the ancient Near East. That, after all, is why the leaders of Judah could expect the Assyrian Rabshakeh to use it to communicate with them. Further evidence of that role can be seen in an Aramaic letter that was found at the Egyptian site of Saqqara, which records the request of a Philistine city (probably Ekron) for Egyptian assistance against the army of Babylon late in the seventh century B.C.E.⁵

The Judeans who were taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar after the Jerusalem temple was destroyed in 586 B.C.E. adopted the Aramaic language along with the Aramean script. (Hebrew was previously written in Phoenician characters, which are sometimes called Paleo-Hebrew.) As a result, biblical literature written after the exile is heavily influenced by Aramaic, and substantial sections of the books of Daniel and Ezra are actually written in it. Later on, Aramaic was extensively used within the Jewish community as well as among various Christian groups, most notably the Syrian Orthodox and also the Samaritans, Mandeans, and Nabateans. It continues in use within a handful of isolated communities to this day; among these are some in Syria, Turkey, and Iraq, as well as Jews and Christians from Kurdistan, virtually all of whom have now migrated to Israel and the United States.

1. THE LANGUAGE

Aramaic is one of two major branches of Northwest Semitic. (The other branch, which is called Canaanite, includes Hebrew as its most prominent member.) Because of its long history and widespread usage, it is divided into several dialects on the basis of chronological and geographical factors.

The oldest surviving Aramaic texts, which were written between the tenth and seventh centuries B.C.E., are said to be in Old or Ancient Aramaic. Sources from the sixth through the third century B.C.E. are said to be in Official, Imperial, or Standard Literary Aramaic (the German term is *Reichs-aramäisch*) because it manifests a degree of standardization as a result of having been used for administrative purposes in the Persian Empire, which eventually reached from Egypt to India. This is the dialect found in the Bible, although Daniel is sometimes considered to reflect a later form of the language.⁶

The fall of Persia led to variation in the dialects of different regions. This may account for the reference to Peter's distinctive accent in Matt

⁵ *KAI* §266; cf. Bezalel Porten, "The Identity of King Adon," *BA* 44 (1981): 36–52.

⁶ Among the book's idiosyncrasies are its use of *bimmôn* for the third masculine plural pronoun where Ezra has *bimmô* and the second- and third-person plural pronominal suffixes *-kôn* and *-hôn* where Ezra has *-kôm* and *-hôm* as well.

26:73. Although Greek became increasingly important in Judea at this time, Aramaic continued to play a prominent role in Jewish life and culture until it was displaced by Arabic many centuries later. The language of this period, which extends from the second century B.C.E. to the second century CE, is designated Middle Aramaic. This is the form of Aramaic found in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the New Testament. Some scholars also trace the earliest layers of the targumim to the Pentateuch (*Onqelos*) and the Prophets (*Jonathas*) to this time. Other dialects from this period are those of the Nabatean Arab tribes and the cities of Palmyra (biblical Tadmor) and Edessa in Syria, as well as Hatra, which is in Mesopotamia.

Texts from the second through the ninth centuries C.E. (or sometimes later) are said to be in Late Aramaic. These include writings from the Jewish communities of both Palestine (the Palestinian Talmud, various midrashim, and several targumim) and Babylonia (the Babylonian Talmud) as well as among the Christians and Samaritans in the West and the Mandaean and Syrian communities in the East.

As mentioned above, Aramaic is still used to this day. The dialects of these communities are called Modern Aramaic.

Among the distinguishing features of Aramaic are certain characteristic words, such as *bar* rather than *bēn* for “son,” *qōdem* rather than *lipnē* for “before,” and the verbs *ʾtb* instead of *bwʾ* for “come” and *slq* rather than *ʾlb* for “ascend.” It also retains long *a*, which became long *o* in the Canaanite languages. (This is, therefore, conventionally called the Canaanite shift.) Thus the word for “good” appears as *ʾāb* in Aramaic rather than *ʾōb*, as in Hebrew.

Plural nouns are marked with the suffix *-n* in Aramaic where Hebrew uses *-m*. The masculine ending was apparently *-in* and the feminine *-ān*, although some feminine plurals end with *-āt*. In light of the Canaanite shift, this latter suffix can be recognized as equivalent to the Hebrew *-ōt*. Aramaic also uses a suffix *-āʾ* where Hebrew places the definite article *ha-* at the beginning of words. Although some scholars regard the Aramaic ending as a definite article, others think of it as creating a separate state (“determined” or “emphatic”), much like the absolute and the construct. Over time, this suffix lost its force and came to be used on almost all nouns. In a similar way, the masculine plural suffix *-ē*, which was used for the construct in earlier dialects of Aramaic (alongside the determined plural *-ayyā*), came to be the standard determined ending in some later dialects.

Like biblical Hebrew, Aramaic verbs appear in two major tenses (or aspects), one characterized by suffixes (“perfect”) and the other by prefixes (“imperfect”), albeit with suffixes to mark the plural. These prefixes and suffixes are very similar to those in Hebrew, though the vowels (at least as attested in biblical Aramaic) are not the same.

	perfect		imperfect	
	singular	plural	singular	plural
1	-ēṭ	-nāʾ	ʾe-	nī-
2m	-t(ā)	-tûn (or tûm)	t-	t-ûn
2f	-tî	-tēn	t-în	t-ān
3m	—	-û	y-	y-ûn
3f	-at	-â	t-	y-ān

The Aramaic conjugations (“stems”) are similar to those of Hebrew. There is even a *qal* (*pəʿal*) passive participle, called *pəʿil* because it is formed with the vowel *î*. However, unlike Hebrew, in biblical Aramaic there is also a perfect passive, as in *siprîn pətîḥû* (Dan 7:10), which means “the books were opened.”

Aramaic does not have a prefixed *n* stem (*nipʿal*), although there are a variety of conjugations beginning with *n* in rabbinic texts (e.g., *niṭpaʿel* and *nupʿal*). Instead, the passive is expressed by shifting the vowels to the pattern *u-a* in the derived stems. (Because of the ways in which these are realized, active and passive forms are sometimes identical.)

Like Hebrew, Aramaic uses the prefix *bit-* to express the reflexive, adding it both to the stem in which the middle root letter is lengthened (*paʿēl*), as in the Hebrew *bitpaʿel*, and to the basic (*qal*) stem (*bitpəʿel*). In Middle Aramaic, this prefix was also added to the prefixed *b* stem (*hapʿel*), creating *ʾethapʿal* forms, which became *ʾettapʿal*. Over time, all these stems came to function as passives, replacing the internal passive forms described above. The *b* prefix on various derived forms also weakened to an *ʾālep*, a process that was already underway during the biblical period, resulting in stems such as *ʾapʿel* and *ʾitpaʿēl*.⁷ On the other hand, *b* does not always elide in Aramaic as it does in imperfect and participial forms of the Hebrew *hipʿil* or when serving as a definite article on a word that has a prefixed preposition.

Aside from these generally prevailing features, each dialect has distinctive traits (isoglosses) of its own. These are useful both for classifying texts and for tracing the language’s history. For example, Old Aramaic texts share several features with Hebrew that are not found in later strata of the language. Particularly revealing is the use of *zayin*, *ṣādê*, and *šîn* to represent the consonants *ḏ*, *θ*, and *θ* respectively; this is the same way that they appear in Hebrew, though not how they are shown in most of the language’s later forms. It is likely that the pronunciation of these phonemes had not yet developed into the sounds that would eventually

⁷ Stephen Kaufman suggests that these were the original forms and that the *bit-* prefix is a Hebraism (“Languages [Aramaic],” *ABD* 4:177).

become characteristic of Aramaic. On the other hand, the original Semitic consonant ξ , which appears as $\text{\textit{\textcircled{S}}ad\textcircled{e}}$ in Hebrew, is written with $q\acute{o}p$ in this period, so that the word for “land” ($\text{\textcircled{C}}ere\text{\textcircled{S}}$ in Heb.) is spelled $\text{\textcircled{C}}rq$ in early Aramaic texts. Also, when there are two emphatic letters in a single word, the first tends to dissimilate; thus, the word for “summer” (i.e., $qayis$) occurs as kys and the verb “to kill” (qtl) as $k\text{\textcircled{t}}l$.

Also found in this period is the particle $\text{\textcircled{C}}iy\acute{a}t$, which marks the direct object. This is apparently the origin of the Hebrew $\text{\textcircled{C}}et$. The later form $y\acute{a}t$ can already be seen in Dan 3:12. Finally, inscriptions from this period demonstrate the use of the letters $h\acute{e}$, $w\acute{a}w$, and $y\acute{o}d$ to mark long vowels (*matres lectionis*), especially at the end of words, as they often do in biblical Hebrew, although it is not clear that Hebrew scribes borrowed this idea from the Arameans.⁸

Aramaic began to function as a lingua franca during the Neo-Assyrian and Babylonian periods. It was at this time that several phonological features that would become characteristic of Aramaic emerged. Among these is the use of a prefix m for the qal ($p\acute{a}al$) infinitive.⁹ It is also in this period that the changes in the representation of the letters mentioned above first occurs. For example, the consonant ξ was now written with an $\text{\textcircled{C}}ayin$ instead of a $q\acute{o}p$, as it had been earlier, so that the word for “land” (Heb. $\text{\textcircled{C}}ere\text{\textcircled{S}}$), which was written $\text{\textcircled{C}}rq$ in Old Aramaic, now appears as $\text{\textcircled{C}}r\acute{c}$. (Remarkably, both forms appear in Jer 10:11.) Several other consonants that had been represented in early Aramaic inscriptions the same way that they occur in Hebrew also took on a distinctive spelling at this time. These include $\text{\textcircled{D}}$, which appears as $d\acute{a}let$ in Aramaic rather than $zayin$ as in Hebrew, so that the word for “sacrifice” is $db\text{\textcircled{h}}$ in Aramaic rather than $zb\text{\textcircled{h}}$; $\text{\textcircled{H}}$ is now represented with $t\acute{e}t$ in Aramaic rather than $\text{\textcircled{S}}ad\textcircled{e}$ as in Hebrew, yielding the Aramaic word $qy\text{\textcircled{t}}$ (“summer”) in contrast to Hebrew qys ; and Aramaic represents θ with $t\acute{a}w$ instead of $\text{\textcircled{S}}in$ as in Hebrew, so that the Hebrew word $y\text{\textcircled{S}}b$ corresponds to the Aramaic $y\text{\textcircled{t}}b$.

Biblical Aramaic also tends to nasalize double consonants, presumably as a result of dissimilation. Examples include forms of the root $yd\acute{c}$, such as the second-person singular imperfect $\text{\textcircled{C}}idda\acute{c}$, which became $tinda\acute{c}$, and the noun $madda\acute{c}$, which became $manda\acute{c}$. (This last word, which means “knowledge,” is the basis for the name Mandaean, which is used for a gnostic sect that claimed special, secret knowledge.) In similar fashion, the infinitive of the root slq , in which $l\acute{a}med$ often assimilates

⁸ Cf. Ziony Zevit, *Matres Lectionis in Ancient Hebrew Epigraphs* (Cambridge, Mass.: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1980), 4.

⁹ This is anticipated in the ninth-century inscription from Tell Fekheriye, the significance of which is discussed below.

to the following *qôp* much as it does in forms of the Hebrew root *lqb*, is (*l*)*bansāqâ*, which is derived from the form **bassāqâ*. Of special interest is the way this process worked out for the second-person independent pronoun. Originally *ʾantâ*, it appears as *ʾt* in Old Aramaic as a result of the *nûn*, which did not have a vowel of its own, assimilating into the *tāw* (cf. Heb. *ʾattâ*); however, this doubled *tāw* then dissimilated in biblical Aramaic, yielding the form *ʾantâ*—exactly what the word had originally been!

Also characteristic of Official Aramaic is the reduction of short, pre-tonic vowels, which generally lengthen in Hebrew. Thus, the word for “prophet” (*nabîʾ*), which is familiar in the Hebrew form *nābîʾ*, appears as *nabîʾ* in Aramaic. This affects many perfect forms of verbs in the *qal* stem. For example, the Hebrew third-person masculine singular *kātab* developed from *katab*, which became *kātab* in Aramaic.

Biblical Aramaic also has several characteristic syntactic features. For example, direct objects are marked with the preposition *l-* rather than the Old Aramaic particle *ʾiyāt*. There are also several distinctive verbal forms, such as the use of the verb *hub* with the participle to create a kind of compound tense, much like our present perfect; examples include *hāwāt bātālāʾ* for “and [the work] ceased” (Ezra 4:24) and *hāzēb hāwēt* for “I saw” (Dan 4:10 [Eng. 4:13]). A similar effect is achieved with the existential particle *ʾitay* (cf. the Hebrew *yēš*), as in *lāʾ ʾitaynāʾ pālāḥîn* (Dan 3:18, cf. v. 14), which means “we do not worship.” Third-person personal pronouns can also be used as a copula, even when the accompanying verb is not in the third person, as in *ʾanaḥnāʾ himmō ʿabdôḥî dî ʾēlāḥ šamayyāʾ*, literally, “we are they (who are) his servants of the God of heaven,” that is, “we are servants of the God of heaven” (Ezra 5:11).

The Bible’s Aramaic passages contain numerous terms that were borrowed from other languages, testifying to the rich mixture of cultures experienced by postexilic Jews. Among these are Persian words, such as *ʾosparnāʾ* (“completely”), *gizbār* (“treasurer”), *dāt* (“order”), *zan* (“sort”), *nīštawān* (“decree”), *paršegen* (“copy”), and *pitgām* (“report”). There are also Greek terms (most notably the musical instruments listed several times in Dan 3) and several Akkadian words, including *ʾiggārā* (“letter”), *bīrtāʾ* (“citadel”), *zəman* (“time”), and *kārsēʾ* (“seat”). In addition, there are several verbal forms that appear to belong to the *šapʿel* (i.e., prefixed *šîn*) conjugation (e.g., *šēzīb* in Dan 3:28; *šēšîʾ* in Ezra 6:15; and *šaklêl* in Ezra 4:12). Since there is no evidence that this conjugation was actively used to create verbs in biblical Aramaic, these, too, may have been borrowed from Akkadian, which does have a causative conjugation based on prefixed *šîn*.

There is also reason to believe that the spirantization of the six stops *b*, *g*, *d*, *k*, *p*, and *t* when they follow a vowel emerged in this period. This phenomenon came to be normative in classical Hebrew.

During the Middle Aramaic period, participles assumed an even broader role than they had in Official Aramaic, when they were joined with *ʾitay* and forms of *hwb*. In Eastern dialects, pronouns were attached to the end of active participles, enabling them to function as a full tense, as in the use of *ʾāmar-nā* for “I am saying.” At the same time, passive participles followed by the preposition *l-* came to serve as a past tense, as in the Syriac *šmī^c-lan* (lit. “it was heard to us”) for “we heard.” It was also during this period that Eastern dialects used the prefixes *l-* and *n-* as a third-person prefix. The use of *l-* actually goes back to Old Aramaic, where it functioned as the jussive (“let him. . .”); it is also found in Official Aramaic for the third-person imperfect of the root *hwb*, as in the biblical form *lehēwē*⁷.

2. SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE BIBLE

Because Aramaic’s relationship to the Bible is multifaceted—it is itself both a biblical language as well as the language of one of Israel’s neighbors and an important vehicle in postbiblical Jewish and Christian history—its significance for biblical studies is multifaceted as well.

The greatest importance of Aramaic for biblical studies is obviously the fact that sections of the Bible are in Aramaic. Several of these occur within biblical books, most notably Daniel (2:4–7:28) and Ezra (4:8–6:18; 7:12–26), in both of which the Aramaic passages are preceded and followed by sections in Hebrew. How this might have come to be is clearest in the case of Ezra 7:12–26, where the Aramaic section comprises an official Persian document that is, presumably, being cited in its original language.

The mixture of languages in the other cases is peculiar. Some have speculated that the books of Ezra and Daniel were written entirely in Hebrew and that the Aramaic sections are a translation that was substituted for the original. Others have proposed that these books were first written in Aramaic, in which case the Hebrew sections are a replacement. Alternatively, the shift may have been intentional, whether as a result of combining passages that were originally written in different languages or for some particular stylistic effect.¹⁰

The same problem applies to Jer 10:11, which is also in Aramaic, although this case is less difficult, since most scholars agree that the verse is a late insertion. There is no question about the appropriateness of the changing language in Gen 31:47, where the Aramaic phrase *yəgār šāhādūtā* (“pile of witness”) is attributed to Laban, whom Gen 31:20 identifies as an Aramean; the Israelite Jacob gives the same place the equivalent Hebrew name *galʿēd* (i.e., Gilead).

¹⁰ See the standard introductions and commentaries, such as Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 516–17, 543–44.

Interestingly, the New Testament contains a similar phenomenon, with occasional phrases and even sentences in Aramaic, though obviously written out in Greek script.¹¹ Examples include the reference to God as *abba* (“father”) in Mark 14:36; Rom 8:15; and Gal 4:6; the slogan *maramatba* (“our lord, come”) in 1 Cor 16:22; and Jesus’ instruction to the dead girl: *talitba koum* (“arise, little girl”) in Mark 5:41. There is even an entire biblical verse in Aramaic when Jesus quotes Ps 22:2 (Eng. 22:1) while hanging on the cross, according to Matt 27:46 and Mark 15:34.

It is hardly surprising to find Aramaic elements in the New Testament, given that language’s status as the lingua franca of Judea in the time of Jesus.¹² This surely accounts for the numerous proper names that are of plainly Aramaic origin, including Golgotha (Matt 27:33; Mark 15:22; John 19:17), Martha (Luke 10:38–41), Tabitha (Acts 9:36), and Kephias (John 1:42; NRSV Cephas). The recurring use of the phrase “son of man” (especially in Rev 1:13 and 14:14) may also reflect Aramaic influence, since that language typically refers to “a person” with the phrase *bar naš*.¹³

Hebrew texts that were written after the exile also show Aramaic influence. Among the numerous words of demonstrably Aramaic origin that are found in such passages are *ʾns* (Esth 1:8), *bʿl* (Qoh 12:3), *gəṇāzīm* (Esth 3:9; 4:7), and *ršm* (Dan 10:21). Aramaic grammatical features, such as the plural *-in* rather than the normal Hebrew *-im*, are also common in these books (e.g., *ḥittîn* in Ezek 4:9, *tannîn* in Lam 4:3, and *ḥayyāmîn* in Dan 12:13). Some scholars have even suspected that individual biblical books were translated from Aramaic originals, an assertion that conforms to the statement at the end of the Septuagint version of Job, which refers to that book as written in Aramaic (lit. “Syrian”).¹⁴

¹¹ These are listed in E. Kautzsch, *Grammatik des Biblisch-Aramäisch* (Leipzig: Vogel, 1884).

¹² Cf. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Study of the Aramaic Background of the New Testament,” in *A Wandering Aramean: Collected Aramaic Essays* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1979), 1–27.

¹³ Cf. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The New Testament Title, ‘Son of Man’ Philologically Considered,” in *A Wandering Aramean*, 143–60; and John Bowker, “The Son of Man,” *JTS* NS 28 (1977): 19–48.

¹⁴ Cf. the comment of the twelfth-century Spanish exegete Abraham ibn Ezra at Job 2:11; more recently, N. H. Tur-Sinai, *The Book of Job, A New Commentary* (rev. ed., Jerusalem: Kiryath Sepher, 1967), xxx–xl. A more extensive argument is laid out by Frank Zimmermann, *Biblical Books Translated from the Aramaic* (New York: Ktav, 1973). Charles C. Torrey took a similar position regarding the Synoptic Gospels in “The Translations Made from the Original Aramaic Gospels,” in *Studies in the History of Religions Presented to Crauford Howell Toy by Pupils, Colleagues and Friends* (ed. D. G. Lyon and G. F. Moore; New York: Macmillan, 1912), 269–317.

Because Hebrew absorbed elements from Aramaic during and after the Babylonian exile, the presence of such features can be used as a criterion for determining when individual passages were written. Unfortunately, this technique is not without problems, since some Aramaic-like features are found in what are usually considered the oldest texts in the Bible.¹⁵ For example, the Song of Deborah (Judg 5), which is almost universally dated to the twelfth or eleventh centuries, includes the plural form *middîn* (v. 10) and the verb *tnb* (5:11), which is cognate to the Hebrew *šnb*.¹⁶ The Aramaic verb *mḥq* is also found there alongside its Hebrew equivalent *mḥs* (v. 26), although in that case the latter may be a gloss.¹⁷

Aramaic is also helpful for understanding the nature and history of Hebrew itself. To be sure, almost any other Semitic language is valuable for that purpose; however, the close linguistic and historical relationship between Hebrew and Aramaic makes it a particularly rich resource for comparisons and contrasts.

In addition to providing evidence that can be used to date individual passages, the relationship between the two languages can also serve as a valuable tool for identifying cognate relationships between words and forms¹⁸ and for understanding how Hebrew developed. For example, Aramaic retention of the H stem's (*hap^cēl*) characteristic prefixed-*b* in forms where it elides in the equivalent Hebrew *hip^cil* (thus Hebrew *yašpîl*, but Aramaic *yəbašpîl*) suggests that the former was an internal Hebrew development. The absence of an Aramaic cognate for the relative pronoun *še-* (Aramaic uses *dî*) suggests that it, too, developed within Hebrew, whereas the cognate relationship between later Hebrew's relative pronoun *ʔāšer* and the Aramaic noun *ʔātar* ("place") demonstrates the origin of that Hebrew usage. The presence of *bit-* prefixes in several Aramaic conjugations suggests the possibility that it may also have been more widespread in Hebrew than is usually thought; in fact, the Bible contains examples of it on verbs that do not belong to the *pi^cel* stem (e.g., *pqd* in

¹⁵ For qualifications about this method, see Avi Hurvitz, "The Chronological Significance of 'Aramaisms in Biblical Hebrew,'" *IEJ* 18 (1968): 238–40; for a recent study that revolves around these issues, see Gary R. Rendsburg, "Some False Leads in the Identification of Late Biblical Hebrew Texts: The Cases of Genesis 24 and 1 Samuel 2:27–36," *JBL* 121 (2002): 23–46.

¹⁶ Cf. Judg 11:40 and perhaps Ps 8:2 and Prov 31:31.

¹⁷ These features have alternatively been explained as belonging to northern Hebrew; cf. Gary A. Rendsburg, *Linguistic Evidence for the Northern Origin of Selected Psalms* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 6.

¹⁸ This has been recognized since early in the tenth century, as in *The Risāla of Judah ben Quraysh* (ed. Dan Becker; Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1984), 116–17.

Judg 20:15, 17; 21:9; cf. Num 1:47; 2:33; 26:62; and 1 Kgs 20:27; also *l̄m* in the Moabite Stone).¹⁹

Similar insight can be applied to phonological and orthographic phenomena. We have already suggested that Hebrew's two different pronunciations of *b*, *g*, *d*, *k*, *p*, *t* and the use of *matres lectionis* were adopted from Aramaic. The merging of the consonants *sāmek* and *śîn* in Aramaic may also account for later examples of that phenomenon in Hebrew.

Beyond their linguistic value, Aramaic texts are a valuable resource for understanding the historical background of the Bible. That this should be so is clear from its ample references to Israelite interaction with Arameans. According to Deut 26:5, Israel's ancestors were related to the Arameans, a point supported by the genealogies of Genesis, which describe Aram as the grandson of Abraham's brother (22:20–21).²⁰ It is, therefore, hardly surprising to find that the patriarchs interacted with their relatives from that region on several occasions, most notably going there in order to find suitable (i.e. related) wives (Gen 24:1–10; 28:1–5). Both Bethuel and Laban, the fathers of Rebekah and of Leah and Rachel, are called Arameans (Gen 25:20; 31:20).

During the monarchy period, Israel had numerous and complex relations with the Arameans. Saul is said to have fought them along with several other neighboring peoples (1 Sam 14:47), including the Ammonites, who hired Aramean mercenaries for their conflict with David (2 Sam 10:6–19). He also defeated Hadadezer, the ruler of Zobah (2 Sam 8:3–10). King Solomon fought with Rezon, who fled from Zobah and then ruled over Damascus (1 Kgs 11:23–25). After the Israelite kingdom split near the end of the tenth century, the Israelites were at various times subordinate to (1 Kgs 15:8–20; 20:34; 2 Kgs 10:32; 12:17; 13:7, 22) or dominant over (1 Kgs 20:34; 2 Kgs 13:25) the Arameans. According to Assyrian sources, northern Israel was part of an alliance that included Damascus, Hamath, and nine other countries, who appear to have withstood the powerful ruler Shalmaneser III (853 B.C.E.); however, just a decade later (841 B.C.E.) the Assyrian emperor defeated these same nations.²¹

In the eighth century, the Arameans joined with northern Israel and the Phoenicians of Tyre in an apparent effort to create another coalition that could take on Assyria. When Judah's king Ahaz refused to participate, the alliance attempted to replace him with a ruler of their own choosing. In response, he turned to Assyria for assistance, as a result of

¹⁹ See the discussion in Simon B. Parker's chapter on "Ammonite, Edomite, and Moabite," pp. 54–55.

²⁰ Contrast Gen 10:22–23, where he is said to have been descended from Shem.

²¹ Cf. *ANET*, 278–81.

which Tiglath-pileser III conquered Damascus, bringing an end to Aramean power and autonomy.²² According to 2 Kgs 16:10–13, Ahaz was so impressed by an altar he saw in Damascus that he had an imitation built within Jerusalem itself.²³

These accounts clearly show that there was abundant political and cultural interaction between Israel and the nearby Aramean kingdoms. This has now been reinforced by an Aramaic inscription that was discovered in 1993–1994 at Tel Dan in northern Israel. It appears to have been written on behalf of a ninth-century Aramean ruler, who reports having killed a king from the house of David.²⁴ This suggests that the southern kingdom of Judah, which was ruled by David's descendants, had been involved in a battle against Aramean peoples in this region.

The only other Aramaic inscription to mention a biblical personality was discovered in 1930 at the Russian convent on Jerusalem's Mount of Olives.²⁵ Probably written toward the end of the Second Temple period, it states that the bones of Judah's king Uzziah had been brought "there," presumably from the site outside the city where they had been buried according to 2 Chr 26:23. (By contrast, 2 Kgs 15:7 states that he was buried in the city of David.)²⁶

An entire archive of documents written by Jewish mercenaries who were serving in a Persian military colony at the southern border of Egypt during the fifth pre-Christian century was found on the island of Yeb (Elephantine), which is located across from the settlement of Syene, just north of the first cataract of the Nile. These provide valuable information about Jewish history and practices at about the time that Judean exiles were returning to their homeland after the exile.²⁷

Several other Aramaic documents have been found in nearby regions. These include papyri from Wadi ed-Daliyeh, which were apparently written

²² Cf. Isa 7:1–9 and 2 Kgs 16:5–9.

²³ 2 Chr 28:23 reports that Ahaz actively worshiped the gods of Damascus.

²⁴ Published by Avraham Biran and Joseph Naveh in *IEJ* 43 (1993): 81–98 and 45 (1995): 1–18; a different understanding of the inscriptions can be found in Philip R. Davies, "'House of David' Built on Sand, The Sins of the Biblical Maximizers," *BAR* 20/4 (1994): 54–55.

²⁵ Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Daniel J. Harrington, *A Manual of Palestinian Aramaic Texts* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978), §70.

²⁶ See also *t. B. Bat.* 1:11.

²⁷ Cf. Bezalel Porten, *Archives from Elephantine: The Life of an Ancient Jewish Military Colony* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968); and idem, *The Elephantine Papyri in English: Three Millennia of Cross-Cultural Continuity and Change* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

in Samaria near the middle of the fourth century. Although their contents are primarily legal, they mention several individuals with plainly Yahwistic names as well as an official named Sanballat, the same name as that of an official who is mentioned in the book of Ezra (although these texts were written nearly a century later than the period with which Ezra is concerned). Other correspondence found in the region was written by a Persian official and families living at Luxor and Syene.

In addition to these texts, which relate explicitly to ancient Israelites and Judeans, there are several inscriptions from the ancient Aramean kingdoms.²⁸ One of these, which was found near Aleppo, speaks of a ruler named “Bar Haddad . . . king of Aram” (*KAI* §201). Although that name was shared by several rulers of Damascus about whom we have other information, a careful examination of the stela has suggested that it refers to an entirely different individual.²⁹ Other inscriptions are from Zakkur, an eighth-century ruler of Hamath and Lu^ʿash and Panammuwa and Barrakib of Sam^ʿal.³⁰ Some scholars also consider the inscription about the Moabite prophet Balaam from Tell Deir ^ʿAllā to be in Aramaic. Whatever its language, that inscription is treated elsewhere in this book.³¹

In addition to direct linguistic and historical connections, it is possible to glean useful insights into biblical culture and theology from Aramaic texts that do not bear directly on people or events mentioned in the Bible. For example, an inscription from Tell Fekheriye (ancient Sikan), which is located near the upper Habur River, refers to the statue on which it is inscribed as both a *šlm* and a *dmwt* in a way that suggests these words were synonyms. (The accompanying Assyrian version uses the Sumerian term *NU*, which corresponds to the Akkadian *šalmu*.) This inscription is, therefore, frequently cited to help clarify the significance of the Bible’s statement that human beings are in God’s image (*šelem*) and likeness (*dāmût*).³²

²⁸ Cf. Scott C. Layton’s survey in “Old Aramaic Inscriptions,” *BA* 51 (1988): 172–89.

²⁹ Wayne T. Pitard has identified the king’s father as ‘Attar-hamek (“The Identity of the Bir-Hadad of the Melqart Stela,” *BASOR* 272 [1988]: 3–21). A Bar-Hadad who was the son of Tabrimmon is mentioned in 1 Kgs 15:18; 1 Kgs 20:1, 20 and 2 Kgs 6:24 seem to refer to a different ruler with the same name, and the Zakkur inscription (*KAI* §202) mentions yet another, who was the son of Hazel.

³⁰ Cf. *KAI* §§201, 214–18.

³¹ Cf. Jo Ann Hackett, *The Balaam Text from Deir ‘Allā* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1984), 109–24; and Simon B. Parker’s chapter on “Ammonite, Edomite, and Moabite,” p. 57.

³² Gen 1:26 and 5:3; the text was published by Ali Abou-Assaf, Pierre Bordreuil, and Alan R. Millard, *La statue de Tell Fekheriye et son inscription bilingue assyro-araméenne* (Paris: Editions Recherche sur les civilisations, 1982).

Another important document that is often used for biblical studies is an eighth-century treaty that was found in the Syrian village of Sefire. It prescribes the relationship between the king of Arpad and his Mesopotamian master, who was from KTK. This document has yielded valuable insights into the nature of ancient Semitic treaties and, thus, the Bible's concept of covenant. It is especially useful for understanding the blessings and curses that are contained in such agreements.³³

Among the Elephantine papyri was found a collection of proverbs attributed to a wise man named Ahiqar, who is said to have served as an advisor to the Assyrian king Sennacherib. The story of Ahiqar was already well known in a variety of versions, which parallel several biblical narratives. The proverbs in the middle of this text belong to the same tradition as much of the Bible's wisdom literature.³⁴

In addition to documents from the biblical period, there are also important Aramaic texts from the post-Israelite period. These include several of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were composed during the last two pre-Christian and the first Christian century. For example, the Genesis Apocryphon (1QapGen) retells several events from the book of Genesis, and the Prayer of Nabonidus (4QprNab) is based on an incident that is similar to that recounted in Dan 4, but with Nabonidus rather than Nebuchadnezzar as the Babylonian ruler. Several books from the apocryphal and pseudepigraphical writings also seem to have been composed in Aramaic, although they have typically survived in other languages. However, Aramaic copies of Tobit, Enoch, and a form of the *Testament of Levi* have now been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. From the same region also come Aramaic letters written by the second-century Jewish leader Simon Bar-Kosiba (Bar Kokhba).

Later Aramaic Jewish texts that relate to the Bible include substantial sections of both the Palestinian and the Babylonian Talmudim as well as several midrashim. *Megillat Ta'anit*, an early rabbinic text listing dates on which it is forbidden to fast, is in Aramaic, as are some isolated sentences in the Mishnah, which was put into its current form near the end of the second century C.E.; among these are two sayings attributed to the first-century sage Hillel.³⁵ To these, one should add the Targumim, which are Aramaic paraphrases and translations of the Bible that were written beginning during the Second Temple period and continuing into

³³ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Aramaic Inscriptions of Sefire* (rev. ed., Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1995).

³⁴ Cf. James M. Lindenberger, *The Wisdom Proverbs of Ahiqar* (JHNES; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983).

³⁵ At *m. 'Abot* 1:13; 2:6; 5:22–23.

the Middle Ages. Targumim to Leviticus and Job were also found at Qumran.³⁶

Finally, the Masorah—marginal notes to the biblical text, which were compiled by the same schools that developed the familiar vowels and accents in the sixth and seventh centuries C.E.—are generally written in a heavily abbreviated form of Aramaic, presumably because that was the language of those who composed them.

There are also several corpora of Aramaic texts that are important for the history of Christianity and include material relevant to understanding the Bible and how it has been interpreted. Most conspicuous among these are the writings of the Syrian (Orthodox) Christian community, which are in a dialect called Syriac. Besides its rich interpretive tradition, this is the language of the Peshitta, an ancient translation of the Bible that is important in its own right as well as for the light it can shed onto the original text of the Bible.³⁷ And, of course, many later Jewish texts, most notably having to do with mystical and legal matters, are in Aramaic.

3. ANCIENT SOURCES, MODERN RESOURCES

The same text-editions, lexica, and concordances that are used for the Bible's Hebrew sections are appropriate for studying its Aramaic passages. In addition, Ernestus Vogt's *Lexicon linguae aramaicae veteris testamenti documentis antiquis illustratum* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1971) is devoted solely to biblical Aramaic.

The best English grammar of biblical Aramaic is Franz Rosenthal, *A Grammar of Biblical Aramaic* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 1963); more technical material can be found in Hans Bauer and Pontus Leander, *Grammatik des Biblisch-Aramäische* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1927). Introductory textbooks to the language include Frederick E. Greenspahn, *An Introduction to Aramaic* (SBLRBS 38; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999); and Alger F. Johns, *A Short Grammar of Biblical Aramaic* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1972). Isaac Jerusalemi's *The Aramaic Sections of Ezra and Daniel* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, 1972) is also a helpful tool.

A good overview of the history of the Aramaeans and their relationship to ancient Israel is in Wayne T. Pitard, "Arameans" in *People of the Old Testament World* (ed. Alfred J. Hoerth, Gerald L. Mattingly, and Edwin M.

³⁶ They are published in volumes 6 and 23 of the series Discoveries in the Judaean Desert (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977 and 1998); see also Michael Sokoloff, *The Targum to Job from Qumran Cave XI* (Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1974).

³⁷ Cf. Michael P. Weitzman, *The Syriac Version of the Old Testament: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Yamauchi; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1994), 207–30. There are several general surveys of the Aramaic language; these include Eduard Yechezkel Kutscher, “Aramaic,” *EncJud* 3:259–87; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Phases of the Aramaic Language,” in *A Wandering Aramaean: Collected Aramaic Essays* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1979), 57–84; Klaus Beyer, *The Aramaic Language* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986); and Stephen A. Kaufman, “Languages (Aramaic),” *ABD* 4:173–78. Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Stephen A. Kaufman have also published the first part of *An Aramaic Bibliography* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993–) as part of a project to produce a comprehensive Aramaic lexicon.

Additional information can be found in the standard overviews of comparative Semitics. Among these are I. M. Diakonof, *Semito-Hamitic Languages: An Essay in Classification* (Moscow: Nauka, 1965); Sabbatino Moscati et al., *An Introduction to the Comparative Grammar of the Semitic Languages* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1969); Gotthelf Bergsträsser, *Introduction to the Semitic Languages* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1983); and W. Randall Garr, *Dialect Geography of Syria-Palestine, 1000–586 B.C.E.* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).

The most recently discovered inscriptions are likely to be available only in professional journals. Collections of West-Semitic inscriptions, such as those of Herbert Donner and Wolfgang Röllig (*Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften* [3 vols.; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1971–1976]) and John C. L. Gibson (*Aramaic Inscriptions* [vol. 2 of *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*; Oxford: Clarendon, 1975]), include sections devoted to Aramaic. Many of these texts are translated in James Pritchard’s now dated volume, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (3d ed.; Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969). More specialized collections can be found in Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Daniel J. Harrington, *A Manual of Palestinian Aramaic Texts* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978); Arthur E. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1923); Emil G. Kraeling, *The Brooklyn Museum Aramaic Papyri* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1953); G. R. Driver, *Aramaic Documents of the Fifth Century B.C.* (rev. ed.; Oxford: Clarendon, 1965); Bezalel Porten and Ada Yardeni, *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt* (4 vols.; Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 1986–1999); and Bezalel Porten, *The Elephantine Papyri in English: Three Millennia of Cross-Cultural Continuity and Change* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

Postbiblical inscriptions are published in widely scattered sources. The Aramaic texts found among the Dead Sea Scrolls can be found in B. Jongeling, C. J. Labuschagne, and A. S. van der Woude, *Aramaic Texts from Qumran* (Leiden: Brill, 1976–); Klaus Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte vom Toten Meer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987); and Florentino

García Martínez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition* (2 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1997–1998).

Alexander Sperber's *The Bible in Aramaic* (5 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1959–1973) includes several of the most important Targumim. Others have been published by E. G. Clarke (*Targum Pseudo-Jonathan of the Pentateuch* [Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav, 1984]); Alejandro Diez Macho (*Neophyti I* [Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1968]); and Michael L. Klein (*The Fragment-Targums of the Pentateuch according to the Extant Sources* [Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1980]). Many of these are translated in The Aramaic Bible series, which was initiated by Michael Glazier and is now published by Liturgical Press.

Important resources for studying nonbiblical texts include Jacob Hoftizer and Karel Jongeling, *Dictionary of the North-West Semitic Inscriptions* (2 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1995); Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Jerusalemi, and the Midrashic Literature* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1903; reprinted often); and Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1990). The Peshitta Institute is publishing a critical edition of the Peshitta under the title, *The Old Testament in Syriac according to the Peshitta Version* (Leiden: Brill, 1977–).