

What's the Truth about...Aramaic?

By Ari Z. Zivotofsky

Misconception: Aramaic is a dead language used only in the study of the Talmud, the Targum, and the book of Daniel.

Fact: There are hundreds of thousands of people around the world, including thousands of Jews in Israel, who speak Aramaic as their mother tongue.

Background:¹ In the “ingathering of Jews” that is taking place in Israel, Jews from all corners of the globe with their own customs and traditions have come to live together. A recent wedding I attended in Rishon L'Tzion testifies to this wonderful diversity: the bride's parents were native English speakers from the US and the groom's parents were native Aramaic speakers from Azerbaijan. The groom's uncle through marriage was also a native Aramaic speaker, having been born in Iran.

Aramaic is an ancient language² that was used by Jews (and others) as early as the Biblical period. Aramaic, in its various forms, served as the principal language of the Near East from about 700 BCE to 700 CE and at one time was the major lingua franca from Egypt to Asia Minor to Pakistan. Within the Tanach there are about 650 Aramaic words (two in Genesis

(31:47),³ a sentence in Jeremiah (10:11), and several chapters in Ezra (4:8-6:18; 7:12-26) and Daniel (2:4-7:28).^{4,5} The Elephantine Papyri written by Egyptian Jews around 500 BCE and the deeds of sale written in the 4th century BCE and found in a cave of the Wadi Daliyeh near Yericho were also in Aramaic. Aramaic of this period is known as Imperial Aramaic. The Aramaic of the next period (200 BCE-250 CE) is sometimes referred to as Middle Aramaic and includes Aramaic from some of the Dead Sea Scrolls (much of the parabiblical material such as *Genesis Apocryphon*, *Targum of Job*, books of *Enoch*, and *Testament of Levi*), *Targum Onkelos* on the Torah, *Targum Yonatan* on the Prophets, and certain early legal formulas in rabbinic literature (e.g. *Kaddish*).

Late Aramaic (250 CE to ca. 1250 CE) is divided into several main dialects.⁶ Western Aramaic includes Jewish Palestinian Aramaic, Samaritan Aramaic, and Christian Palestinian Aramaic. Jewish Palestinian Aramaic is found in the Galilean Aramaic of the Talmud Yerushalmi, in the targumic Aramaic of the Palestinian *Targums* (*Codex Neofiti*, Genizah fragments, as well as the *Fragment Targum*), and Jewish inscriptions (mostly from synagogues). For a time, Jewish Palestinian Aramaic was the dominant language amongst the Jews of Israel. Indeed, in

discussing the number of seals in the Beit HaMikdash, the Mishnah (*Shekalim* 5:3) mentions that they were in Aramaic. Commenting on this, the Bartenura explains that Aramaic was chosen since the majority of people spoke it at the time. Samaritan Aramaic includes a mixture of Hebraisms, not unlike the Aramaic of the *geonim*, but it is still classified as a dialect of Western Aramaic.

Eastern Aramaic includes Babylonian Jewish Aramaic, which is the language of the Talmud Bavli and was the spoken language of the Jews of Babylonia for centuries.⁷ It also includes Mandaic, the spoken and literary language of a non-Christian Gnostic sect. Finally, there is Central Aramaic which contains elements from both Western and Eastern Aramaic. This dialect was used in cities, such as Edessa and Nisibis, that are located between Babylon on the east and Israel on the west. This dialect is found in such works as *Targum (Pseudo-) Jonathan* on Chumash, *Targum Psalms*, the canonical *Targum of Job*, and *Tobit*.⁸ It also includes Syriac, one of the major dialects of Aramaic, usually associated with the various Syriac Christian churches (Malkite, Jacobite, Maronite, Chaldean, Assyrian, Mar Toma, etc.). Syriac was spoken for hundreds of years, has numerous grammars and has survived for

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liturgical purposes until this day. In fact, Syriac Lebanese Christians still write religious letters in Syriac and Syriac inscriptions are found on their graves.

The Aramaic of the *Zohar* does not fall neatly into any of these categories, and is regarded by scholars as a “mixed” Aramaic, drawing freely from the Babylonian Talmud and various *midrashim*.⁹

To this day there are those who speak Aramaic as a living language. There are various modern dialects that are linear descendants of both major older dialects (Western and Eastern Aramaic) and are collectively referred to as neo-Aramaic.¹⁰ These are spoken by Moslems and Christians in Syria, Christians in Turkey, and Christians and Jews with roots near the meeting points of the borders of northern Syria, Kurdistan, Azerbaijan, Iran, Iraq, and southeastern Turkey. These Aramaic speakers include Assyrians,¹¹ Chaldeans, and Syriacs. Most of the Christian Aramaic speakers have fled to the US while the Jewish Aramaic speakers have settled in Israel. There are probably close to 300,000 Aramaic speakers, mostly Assyrians, in the US, with large communities in Chicago, Detroit, and parts of California. In Israel, there are an estimated 100,000 “Kurdim,”¹² Kurdistan Jews who fled their homeland for Israel in the early 1950s. Kurdistan Jews have written traditional literature, such as Bible translations and commentaries, midrashic literature, and a translation of the *Targum* to Song of Songs all in their neo-Aramaic dialect.¹³


Among the more famous Aramaic speakers is former Israeli Defense Minister Yitzchak Mordechai who hails from Iraq. There is even an Israeli music group called Nash Didan that performs in Aramaic. Unfortunately, most of the Jews in Israel who speak Aramaic are now elderly, having been unsuccessful in transmitting the language to the next generation. There is an annual journal published by the Organization of Kurdish Jews in Israel,

hitHadshut, but it is mostly in Hebrew. Only academicians are trying to maintain Aramaic in their publications.

There are large communities of Aramaic speakers in the Tel Aviv and Cholon areas. Their unofficial chief rabbi is 83-year-old Chaim Yeshurun. He has been in Israel since 1950 and has translated the Chumash, *haftorot*, and Tehillim into contemporary Aramaic. However, he predicts the language’s near total demise within several decades. As a case in point, at the recent wedding I attended, the groom’s parents are native Aramaic speakers but the groom speaks only Hebrew.

There are, of course, many Jews who do not speak Aramaic in everyday conversation but know it fluently and use it regularly in the study of Talmud, Midrash, etc. In Jewish tradition Aramaic has special significance. The Midrash (*Genesis Rabbah* 74 on Genesis 31:47; see also Yerushalmi *Sotah* 7:2) advises that one not treat “*sursi*,” understood to mean Aramaic, as insignificant because it was used in the Chumash, Nevi’im, and Ketuvim. Rav Yehudah Halevi (*Kuzari* 2:68) contends that Avraham’s native language was Aramaic and that he used Hebrew only for spiritual purposes. The Rama (*Responsa of Rama* 126-8) claims that Moshe received the Torah in both Hebrew and Aramaic translation.¹⁴

In modern Hebrew many Aramaic words and phrases have been adopted. Examples include: *bediavad* (post facto); *tartei mashma* (both meanings are implied); *l’mai nafka minah* (what is the practical difference?); *aderabah* (exactly the opposite); *shadar* (to send) and *shufra deshufra* (the most beautiful).

As of the 5761 academic year, Aramaic is even taught as a foreign language in the Israeli school system in some locales. Moreover, the *mamlachti dati* (religious public) school Noam in Kiryat Ata teaches it to 4th through 8th graders.¹⁵ 

Notes

1. I thank H. Eldon Clem and Rabbi Dr. Seth Mandel for their assistance in preparing this article.

2. For a more complete survey of Aramaic, see *Encyclopedia Mikra'it*, 1:583-595; the article by Stephen A. Kaufman on “Languages (Aramaic),” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 4, pages 173-178; and the chapter on “Aramaic” by E. Y. Kutscher in *Current Trends in Linguistics*, vol. 6.
3. This is not of great significance because it is merely a quote from Lavan the Aramean. Torah Temimah to Genesis 31:47 notes that Aramaic is very closely related to Hebrew and suggests that there are other Aramaic words in the Chumash. For example, he points to Rashi on Gen 3:15 s.v. *ye’shufcha* where he implies it is an Aramaic word, Ramban to Genesis 30:20 that “*zevadani*” is Aramaic, and Ramban to Deuteronomy 33:3 on “*af choveiv anim*.” However, in this last example Ramban cites others who say “*choveiv*” is Aramaic, but rejects the assertion.
4. Chapters 8 through 12 are in Hebrew.
5. There may be several other isolated words, such as the word “*zeeir*” found in Job 36:2 [there may also be other Aramaic words in Job] and Daniel 7:8 (in Isaiah 28:10, 13 it is Hebrew; Onkelos used it many times, such as Genesis 19:11, 32:11, 42:13, 42:15, 43:33, 44:12).
6. Some people use a system by which they divide Late Aramaic specifically into three branches: Palestinian, Syrian, and Babylonian. On different styles of Aramaic see *Torah Sheleimah* to Genesis 31:47, note 108.
7. Several useful, recently published Hebrew-Aramaic dictionaries are those by Rabbi Ezra Tziyon Melammed.
8. A discussion of this dialect can be found in Edward M. Cook’s doctoral dissertation on *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* [UCLA, under Stanislav Segert] and in E.G. Clarke’s edition of *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1984).
9. For a detailed analysis, see Menahem Zewi Cadari, “The Grammar of the Aramaic of the *Zohar*” [Hebrew] (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University, 5714[1954]).
10. See *Encyclopedia Judaica* 12:948-951 for details of neo-Aramaic. The dialect spoken by the “Nash Didan” Jews in Israel is closer to Eastern Aramaic.
11. Assyria was a mighty Semitic empire that emerged 3500 years ago to rule the region known as Mesopotamia between

the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. For 1500 years the Assyrians fought off the Babylonians and Egyptians. Their capital was the famous Ninveh of Jonah the prophet. They suffered a military defeat in 610 BCE and it has been downhill ever since, including a failed revolt against the Turks in 1915 that resulted in a terrible butchering. They practice an ancient form of Christianity, called the Nestorian rite, live oppressed in Iraq among another homeless people, the Kurds, and speak Aramaic. There are currently about 3.3 million Assyrians, with the majority living in Iraq, approximately 300,000 in the US, and 93,000 in Europe.

12. According to Professor Yona Sabar, a professor of Semitics at UCLA, there were approximately 25,000 Kurdish Jews in Kurdistan in the 1950s before they immigrated to Israel, where they today number about 100,000 (personal e-mail, Jan 28, 2002). He also estimates that there are about 800,000 Christian Aramaic speakers worldwide (e-mail, Feb. 19, 2002).
13. Recent critical editions of some of these have been published by Professor Yona Sabar of UCLA.
14. The notion that *Targum Onkelos* is of Sinaitic origin appears in contemporary responsa as well (e.g. *Tzitz Eliezar* 8:8; *Yechava Da'at* 5:55). This assertion is not found in any Talmudic source and first appears in Rashi (*Kiddushin* 49a, s.v. *harei zeh mecharef*). It is discussed at length in Rafael Binyamin Posen, "Targum Onkelos from Sinai-An examination of the Sinaitic Origins of *Targum Onkelos*," *Sidra* 15(1999): 95-110, where he shows that it has no historical basis and was rejected by most authorities. On the period of composition see the multitude of sources listed in notes 2 and 3 (page 96).
15. Personal conversation with the principal, Chedva Kali, March 14, 2002. See *Shabbat b'Shabbato*, (Zomet), *Ki Tetzei* (9 Elul) 5760 and Arutz-7 Internet English News, September 4, 2000, item #7. There are, of course, Aramaic courses in most of the Israeli universities, as well as in some American and other universities.

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