

The Aramaic Language and Its Classification

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Introductory Remarks

The Aramaic language belongs to the Semitic family of languages. This same family is subdivided into three principal sub-families which descend from a common proto-Semitic origin. The three major subfamilies are: First, the Northeastern Semitic which contains Akkadian with its two branches: Babylonian and Assyrian. Babylonian is subdivided into its Ancient, Middle and New dialects, and likewise Assyrian with its Ancient, Middle and New dialects. Ancient Assyrian, for the most part, coincides with Middle Babylonian which itself has also a Neo-Babylonian stage. Secondly, the Northwestern Semitic that contains Aramaic and Canaanite. Thirdly, the Southwestern Semitic that covers Arabic and Ethiopian.

Before concentrating on our subject, the Aramaic language, let's briefly review the structure of the Semitic languages as a family. Presently, there are two principal hypotheses that offer two divisions that serve as a basis for a later placement of the Aramaic language within the family.

The first hypothesis, which is traditional, is based principally on the geographic location and the cultural importance of different Semitic languages. The second hypothesis, first proposed by Hetzron, underlines the morphological and phonological innovations. It suffices here to mention this second hypothesis; no classification of it will be made since it is cumbersome and basically newly proposed. The traditional structure proposed by various authors¹ can be represented in the following format:

1. Traditional classification

I. Eastern Semitic

1. Akkadian

1.1. Babylonian

1.2. Assyrian

¹BROCKELMANN C., *Grundriss der vergleichenden Grammatik der semitischen Sprache*, Hildesheim 1961; MOSCATI S., *An Introduction to the Comparative Grammar of the Semitic Languages*, Wiesbaden 1969; ULLENDORF E., *Comparative Semitics. In current Trends in Linguistics*, vol. 6: *Linguistics in South West Asia and north Africa*, ed. SEBEOK T., (1970) 261-273; BERGSTRÄSSER G., *Introduction to the Semitic Languages*, Winona Lake 1983.

II. Western Semitic

1. North-western Semitic

1.1. Aramaic

1.2. Canaanite

1.2.1. Hebrew

1.2.2. Phoenician

1.2.3. Moabite

2. South-western Semitic

2.1 Arabic

2.2 Ethiopian

Naturally, these sub-divisions were proposed before the discovery of, at least, two other Semitic languages. The most obvious omissions were Ugaritic and Eblaite. The former, which was excavated at Ras Shamra, is a Semitic language, but its origin is not very clear². As for Eblaite, it was only fairly recently discovered mid 1970's³.

² After HARRIS Z. S., *Development of the Canaanite Dialects*, New Haven 1939, it could be Canaanite, in parallel to Hebrew and Phoenician. However GOETZE A., 'Is Ugaritic a Canaanite Dialect?', *Language* 17 (1941) 127-138, deduces it descends directly from North-eastern Semitic. Although years later VON SODEN W., *Sprachfamilien und Einzelsprachen im Altsemitischen: Akkadisch und Eblaitisch*, in *Studies in the Languages of Ebla*, (ed. FRONZAROLI P.) Firenze 1984, pp. 11-24, esp. 16. contradicts Goetze by saying that Ugaritic belongs to Canaanite HUEHNERGARD J., *Remarks on the Classification of the Northwest Semitic Languages*, p. 285, sustains that probably the Ugaritic does not belong to Canaanite, but it belongs to North-western Semitic.

³ Until the discovery of Eblaite it was thought that only Akkadian belonged to the eastern Semitic group. In the beginning it was thought that the Eblaite was part of South-western or Protocanaanite. (PETTINATO G., 'Testi Cuneiformi del 3. millennio in paleo-cananeo rinvenuti nella campagna 1974 a Tell Mardik=Ebla', en *Orientalia* 44 (1975) 361-374; CAPLICE R., *Eblaite and Akkadian. La lingua di Ebla*, (ed. CAGNI L.) Napoli 1981, pp. 161-164, was who said that Eblaite was neither Akkadian nor western Semitic; GELB I. J., 'Thoughts about Ibla', in *Syro-Mesopotamien studies*, 1 (1977) 3-28, esp. 25s; ID., 'Ebla and the Kish Civilization', in *La lingua di Ebla* (ed. CAGNI L.) pp. 9-73, esp. 52. argues that the closest language to Eblaite is ancient Akkadian without its being a dialect of the latter. In a deeper analysis HUEHNERGARD ('Languages of the Ancient Near East', in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 4, (1992) 155-170), shows that Eblaite belongs to the eastern Semitic as it has some common elements with the Akkadian. This author justified this phenomenon taking into consideration the *ût* terminations of the masculine plural adjectives and the datives with the suffixes *kum* and *shum*.

2. Modern Classification

As we have already stated, the second hypothesis, a much more modern and more elaborate, was initiated by Hetzron,⁴ who insisted on a morphological innovation. Yet, it took Rodgers⁵ and Huenergard⁶ to complete his intended subdivisions which, as mentioned earlier, we will not reproduce here. Instead of going into the affinities and divergences of the Semitic languages, we will concentrate on what was conserved of Aramaic in its many distinct phases.

3. The Aramaic Language

The Aramaic language is usually subdivided into five distinct phases: Ancient, Official, Middle, Late and Modern. Modern investigators do not agree unanimously on the divisions and subdivisions of the Aramaic language; that is understandable. Here, we offer the structure accepted by the majority of the language experts. The disagreements over the divisions of the last phase, Modern Aramaic, are more frequent. This fact is attributed to the scarcity of specific information about the wide variety of ethnic groups speaking a wide range of dialects which are fraught with many loanwords, especially from Arabic, Persian, Kurdish and Turkish. Among these four lender languages, the most important is Arabic, which has today become the principal medium of communication at all levels of life in the Middle East. This means that, even amongst Aramaic speaking groups, their native language is gradually losing ground in its struggle with Arabic. The modern Aramaic dialects are best preserved today in the region known these days as Kurdistan⁷, that is, in South-east of Turkey, Northern Iraq and North-east of Syria. Also in Iran, both the Jews and the Assyrians speak Aramaic. The Jews have at least had the good fortune to re-establish themselves in Israel; while the majority of the Assyrians continue to battle to maintain their

⁴ HETZRON R. dedicated various of his works to this topic. 'Ethiopian Semitic: Studies in Classification', in *Journal of Semitic Studies Monograph 2*, Manchester 1972; 'The vocalization of Prefixes in Semitic Active and Passive Verbs', in *Mélanges de l'Université Saint Joseph* 48 (1973) 35-48; *Genetic Classification and Ethiopian Semitic*, (in *Hamito-Semitic*, ed. BYNON J. y T.), The Hague 1975, pp. 103-127; 'Two Principles of Genetic Reconstruction', in *Lingua* 38 (1976) 89-104.

⁵ RODGERS J., *The Subgrouping of the South Semitic languages*, in *Semitic Studies*, in honour of Wolf Leslau, vol. 2, (ed. KAYE A.S.), Wiesbaden 1991, pp. 1323-1336.

⁶ HUENERGARD J., 'Languages of the Ancient Near East', in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, pp. 155-170.

⁷ This territory has been erroneously and unfortunately called Kurdistan but we have to admit that it makes part of the Assyrian Homeland. As I said, in my previous article (YILDIZ E., 'The Assyrians a Historical and Current Reality', in *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies* 13/1 (1999) 15-30), justice has never been done to this very appreciated ancient but still surviving and authentic ethnic group. I hope that those, who are dealing with the Assyrian question, will be honest and recognize this fact.

identity in exile, which does not always permit them to organize themselves and thus promote their own culture, history and, above all, their language. As we indicated above that Aramaic divides into five major periods. In each of these periods, distinct dialects exist according to the ethnic groups that speak them. As we indicated above that Aramaic divides into five major periods. In each of these periods, distinct dialects exist according to the ethnic groups that speak them.

It is a well-known fact that Aramaic became the principal medium of communication, *a lingua franca*, you might say, even during the Neo-Assyrian domination. We could compare it with the present-day Arabic in the Middle East and English in the West. In spite of these long periods, this language has conserved many common elements that we will note in the following pages. Below is a Table of the Aramaic language and its dialects which will serve us as a point of reference:

I. Ancient Aramaic

II. Official Aramaic

1. Classical Aramaic
2. Biblical Aramaic

III. Middle Aramaic

1. Western Aramaic
 - a. Christian (Syriac) Aramaic
 - b. Jewish-Palestinian Aramaic
 - c. Qumran Aramaic
 - d. Nabatean Aramaic
 - e. Official Aramaic of Targumims
2. Eastern Aramaic
 - a. Syriac Aramaic
 - b. Palmyrene Aramaic
 - c. Aramaic of Hatra
 - d. Arsacid Aramaic

IV. Late Aramaic

1. Western Aramaic
 - a. Galilean Aramaic
 - b. Samaritan Aramaic
 - c. Christian Aramaic (Syriac)

- d. Palestinian Aramaic
- e. Mandaic Aramaic
- 2. Eastern Aramaic
 - a. Syriac Aramaic
 - b. Babylonian Talmudic Aramaic
 - c. Mandaic Aramaic

V. Modern Aramaic

- 1. Western Aramaic
 - a. Ma'lula
 - b. Gubb'adin
 - c. Bax'a
- 2. Central Aramaic
 - a. Toroyo (Tur'abdin) Aramaic
 - b. Mlahso (Amida=Diyarbakir) Aramaic
- 3. Eastern Aramaic
 - a. Southeastern (Turkey): Harbul, Bespen, Ishshi, Mer, Beznaye etc.
(Iraq): Zakho, Alqosh, Tekepe, Telesqof etc.
 - b. Northeastern: Urmi; Tiari; Tkhuma; Salamas, Jilu, Quchanis, Gawar; Ṭal, Baz, Diz, Waltu; Mar Bishu, Shamzdin, Tergawar etc.
 - c. Fareastern: Mandaic

4. Material found

4.1. Ancient Aramaic

The first Aramaic inscriptions⁸ are from between the 10th to 7th century B.C. During this period, Aramaic was a language divided into several distinct

⁸ For more information cf. ROSENTHAL F., *Die aramäische Forschung seit Th. Nöldekes Veröffentlichungen*, Leiden 1939, (reprinted in 1964); KAUFMAN S. A., 'Aramaic', in HETZRON R. ed., *The Semitic Languages*, London/New York 1997, pp. 115-129; HOFFTIJZER J. - JONGELING K., *Dictionary of the North-West Semitic Inscriptions*, 2 vol. Leiden 1995; YILDIZ E., 'Los Arameos: sus orígenes, su ubicación geográfica y su lengua', in *Helmantica* 51 (2000) 236-243.

dialects which began to homogenize during the Imperial Aramaic period, also called Classical or Official Aramaic. The fact that there were distinct dialects according to the Aramean states, does not imply that in their origins they lacked a series of shared isoglosses which in spite of their differences had many common elements. Due to the bad state in which the Aramaic texts have reached us, the experts do not agree on their textual analysis or interpretation. The divergences exist even in the area of the placing of texts in their nearest period. In general, there are two tendencies: one, the more restrictive, usually limits the Aramaic language to the 10th to 7th⁹ century B.C.; the other, sustained by Segert,¹⁰ extends the survival of ancient Aramaic until the last period of Official Aramaic, including Biblical Aramaic.

In the first scheme of the Semitic linguistic branches, the inscriptions of ancient Aramaic go from Paleoaramaic up to Official Aramaic. In these texts, the Aramaic language presents distinct peculiar elements which underline the dialectical phenomenon according to their geographic location. That is to say, during this phase of Ancient Aramaic, there were various dialects that later became official Aramaic.¹¹ This way, one can say that there existed a series of dialects, evidenced by the ancient Aramaic inscriptions. These dialects became unified from the end of the 8th century B.C. There was disagreement among the experts when classifying the distinct dialects attributed to ancient Aramaic. Degen excludes the dialect of Sam'al from ancient Aramaic while Segert and Dion¹² include it. The same problem occurred with respect to the two texts of Deir 'Alla.¹³ The latest advances of scientific investigation in this area show that there are obvious reasons to include these two inscriptions in the ancient

⁹ Cf. DEGEN R., *Altaramäische Grammatik der Inschriften des 10.-8. Jh v. Chr.*, Wiesbaden 1969, (reprinted in 1978); BEYER K., *The Aramaic Language. Its Distribution and Subdivisions*, Göttingen 1986, p. 11, speaks of the appeared written 11th century BC.: "Ancient Aramaic in written form appeared in the 11th cent. BC. as the official language of the first Aramaen states".

¹⁰ Cf. SEGERT S., *Altaramäische Grammatik*, Leipzig 1975; MARTINEZ B.E., *Gramática del Arameo Antiguo*, Barcelona 1996, p. 9.

¹¹ With deportation of Arameans to Assyria under the Assyrian dominations the Aramaic language quickly became the principal vehicle of communication imposing itself on the vernacular tongue. Cf. YILDIZ E., 'The Assyrians a Historical and Current Reality', p. 20; HUG, V., *Altaramäische Grammatik der Texte des 7. und 6. Jahrhunderts v. Chr.*, Heidelberg 1993, p. 20s.

¹² Cf. DION, P.E., *La langue de Ya'udi. Description et classement de l'ancien parler de Zincirli dans le cadre des langues sémitiques de nord-ouest*, Waterloo 1974, p. 323ss.

¹³ CAQUOT A. – LEMAIRE A., 'Les textes araméennes de Deir'Alla', in *Syria* 54 (1977) 189-208; WEIPERT M., 'The Balaam Texts from Deir 'Alla and the Study of the Old Testament', in HOFTIJZER J. - VAN DER KOIJ G., (eds.), *The Balaam Text from Deir 'Alla Re-evaluated*, pp. 153-158.

Aramaic group. The principal argument centers on the lack of uniformity in the first phase of the Aramaic language in the broader context of the paleography and the majority of the isoglosses of these inscriptions with the rest of the Aramaic dialects of the period.¹⁴ The inscriptions that have reached us permit these dialects to be classified into four groups:

4.1.1. The Central group¹⁵

(1) The Stele of Zakkur was discovered in Afis in 1903, 45km southeast of Aleppo, in the territory of the ancient kingdom of Hamat, and was published by Pongon in 1907.¹⁶ (2) The Stele of Sefire (=sef.) 1-3, found in a town situated 25km to the South-east of Aleppo -- a territory which formed part of the ancient Aramean kingdom of Arpad -- were published in distinct phases.¹⁷ (3) The Graffiti of Hamat were discovered by the Danish expedition and published by Ingholt.¹⁸ (4) The Stele of Bar Hadad¹⁹ discovered in 1939 in Bredch, 7km to the north of Aleppo. Its deteriorated state of conservation makes its reading

¹⁴ Cf. McCARTER P.K., 'The Dialect of the Deir 'Alla Texts', pp. 87-99 PRADEE D., 'The linguistic Classification of the Deir 'Alla Text Written on Plaster', (HOFTIJZER J. - VAN DER KOIJ G., eds.), pp. 100-105; LIPINSKI E., *Studies in Aramaic Inscriptions and Onomastics II*, (Orientalia Louvaniensia Analecta 57), Louvain 1994, pp. 168ss; MARTINEZ B.E., *La Gramática del Arameo Antiguo*, p. 9.

¹⁵ The following list of inscriptions is classified according to the date of their discovery or publication.

¹⁶ PONGON H., *Inscriptions sémitiques de la Syrie, de la Mésopotamie et de la région de Mossoul*, Paris 1907-1908; cf. DONNER H. – RÖLLIG W., *Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften*, I-III, (= KAI), Wiesbaden 1964-1966, num. 202; GIBSON J.C.L., *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions II*, (= TSSI) Oxford 1975, num. 5. It is a votive and commemorative stele which dates back to 800 BC..

¹⁷ RONZEVILLE S., 'Fragments d'inscriptions araméennes des environs d'Alep', (= Sef 1) in *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 15 (1930-1931) 237-260; ID., 'Une inscription araméenne inédite de Sfiré' (ed. of Sef 3) in *Bulletin du Musée de Beyrouth* 13 (1956) 23-41; the ed. of Sef 1 y Sef 2 was done by DUPONT-SOMMER A., *Les inscriptions araméennes de Sfiré (Stèles 1 et II)*, Paris 1958; cf. DONNER H. – RÖLLIG W., *KAI* nums. 222-224; GIBSON J.C.L., *TSSI* II num. 7-9 who only deals with Sef 1 A and C; Sef 2 C; Sef 3. It is highly probable they date from the mid 8th Century BC. and are steles which transmit juridical treaties between the Kingdom of Arpad and other Kingdoms which are principally Aramean.

¹⁸ INGHLT H., *Rapport préliminaire sur sept campagnes de fouilles à Hamat en Syrie (1932-1938)*, Copenague 1940, pp. 115-117, Cf. DONNER H. – RÖLLIG W., *KAI* nums. 203-213; GIBSON J.C.L., *TSSI* II num 6. They contain titles of some important persons and they date between 9th and 8th centuries BC..

¹⁹ Cf. DONNER H. – RÖLLIG W., *KAI* num. 201; GIBSON J.C.L., *TSSI* II num. 1

difficult. Albright²⁰ attributes it to Bar-Hadad, recognized in the inscription, as Ben-Hadad of Damascus. Peuch dates it to the end of the 9th century B.C.²¹ (5) The inscriptions of the Booty of Hazael²² was discovered in Arslan Tash, near Edessa, ancient Hadattu, in 1928. The difficulties in reading it²³ have been cleared up principally by another inscription of Hazael found at Samos.²⁴ Authors generally date these two inscriptions to the 9th century B.C. (6) A short inscription comes from Tel Dan,²⁵ found in 1960, and another in Ein Gev,²⁶ discovered in 1961, dating from the first half of the 9th century. (7) The Stele of Tel Dan, a place known as Tell el-Qadi, was discovered and published in 1993.²⁷ This stele seems to belong to the 9th century B.C. and speaks of a Battle between an Aramean king and Israel.

4.1.2. The Eastern Group Found in Syria

The German expedition found in Tell Halaf, in 1931, a pedestal inscribed in Aramaic,²⁸ was published in 1940.²⁹ This inscription can be considered one of the most ancient (early 9th century B.C.) amongst the texts found up to date. The

²⁰ ALBRIGHT W.F., 'A Votive Stele Erected by Ben-Hadad I of Damascus to the God Melcarth', in *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 37 (1942) 23-29.

²¹ PEUCH É., 'La stèle de Bar-Hadad à Melqart et les rois d'Arpad', in *Revue Biblique* 99 (1992) 311-334, here p. 332.

²² Cf. DONNER H. – RÖLLIG W., *KAI* num. 232; GIBSON J.C.L., *TSSI* II num. 2.

²³ Cf. PUECH É., 'L'ivoire inscrit d'Aslan Tash et les rois de Damas', in *Revue Biblique* 88 (1981) 544-562. The interpretation, which this author makes differentiates from that made by GIBSON in *TSSI* II, p. 4s

²⁴ Cf. EPH'AL I. – NAVEH J., 'Hazael's Booty Inscriptions', in *Israel Exploration Journal* 39 (1989) 192-200; BRON F. y LEMAIRE A., 'Les inscriptions araméennes de Hazaël', in *Revue d'Assyriologie et d'Archéologie Orientale* 83 (1989) 35-44.

²⁵ AVIGAD N., 'An Inscribed Bowl from Dan', in *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 100 (1968) 42-44.

²⁶ MAZAR B., 'Ein Gev. Excavations in 1961', in *Israel Exploration Journal* 14 (1964) 27-29.

²⁷ Cf. BIRAN A. – NAVEH J., 'An Aramaic Stele Fragment from Tel Dan', in *Israel Exploration Journal* 43 (1993) 81-98; also LIPINSKI E., *Studies in Aramaic Inscriptions and Onomastics* II, pp. 83-101.

²⁸ Cf. DONNER H. – RÖLLIG W., *KAI* num. 231; GIBSON J.C.L., *TSSI* II num. 10.

²⁹ FRIEDRICH J., *Die Inschriften von Tell Halaf*, in *Archiv für Orientforschung* (= *AFO*), Beiheft 6, Berlin 1940, p. 69f.

latest studies show that it is a pedestal of a statue.³⁰ With the chaos of the World War II, the pedestal disappeared from the state museum of Berlin. Thanks to some old photographs of it, the contents of the inscription have been deciphered. In the first attempts to decipher the inscription, they seemed to show that it was the base of a small altar.

Another inscription, which was found very near to Tell Halaf, is on the statue found in Tell Fekherye, in 1979; with a double inscription in Assyrian and Aramaic, it very probably dates from between the 9th to 8th century B.C.,³¹ which was published in 1982.³² The bilingual text has a double votive inscription dedicated to Hadad conceding prosperity to the governor-king Hadadyit'i and his kingdom.³³

4.1.3. The Inscriptions of Zincirli

The texts from Zincirli acquired the name of ancient Samlian Aramaic from the territory in which they were found; this territory was known as the ancient kingdom of Sam'al which was located in the south of Turkey, on the frontier with Syria. The place where these inscriptions were found is nowadays called Zincirli, and was discovered by the German expedition between 1888 and 1902.³⁴ To this group of ancient Aramaic belongs the second inscription of Kilamu³⁵ which dates from the end of the 9th century B.C. and is dedicated to Hadad³⁶ and Panammu.³⁷

³⁰ Cf. DANKWARTH G. – MÜLLER Ch., *Zur altaramäischen "Altar"-Inscription von Tell Halaf*, in *AFO* 35 (1988) 73-78; also LIPINSKI E., *Studies in Aramaic Inscriptions and Onomastics II*, pp. 15-18.

³¹ LIPINSKI E., *Studies in Aramaic Inscriptions and Onomastics II*, pp. 21-30.

³² ABOU-ASSAF A. – BORDREUIL P.- MILLARD A.R., *La statue de Tell Fekherye et son inscription bilingüe assyro-araméenne*, Paris 1982.

³³ Cf. MARTÍNEZ B.E., *Gramática del Arameo Antiguo*, p. 13.

³⁴ VON LUSCHAN F., *Ausgrabungen in Sendschirli I-V*, Berlin 1893-1943.

³⁵ Cf. DONNER H. – RÖLLIG W., *KAI num. 25*. In spite of the fact that some authors consider it Phoenician the more representative experts include it in the Samalian group. The most important contribution is that of DUPONT-SOMMER A., *Un inscription nouvelle du roi Kilamou et le dieu Rekoub-el* in *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 133 (1947/48) 19-33; DION P.E. *La Langue de Ya'udi*, p. 16; TROPPER J., *Die Inschriften von Zincirli* (Abhandlungen zur Literatur Alt-Syrien-Palästinas, Band 6), München 1993, p. 50.

³⁶ Cf. IBIDEM, *KAI num. 214*; GIBSON J.C.L., *TSSI II num.13*. This statue found in 1890, with an inscription dedicated to the god Hadad has been raised in the first half of

4.1.4. The Inscriptions of Deir 'Alla

These Aramaic texts from Transjordan, the old name for Jordan, were discovered in 1967, by Franken and Published by Hoftijer and Van der Kooij in 1976.³⁸ The works of Caquot and Lemaire³⁹ contributed a lot to the reading and interpretation of these two texts. Besides these authors, it is useful to include the work of Wiepert⁴⁰ on the first text and the interpretation of Lipinski.⁴¹ With reference to their dating, they seem to be from around 800 B.C.

4.2. Official Aramaic

We have mentioned above that due to massive deportations of the Aramaic populations, their absorption into the Neo-Assyrian Empire, and their inclusion in the larger political and administrative unit, their distinct dialects were unified into a common language. In this manner, Aramaic became increasingly important, finally establishing itself as the principal medium of communication both on an administrative and an international level. It is in this period that the Aramaic dialects melted into an amalgam, producing a new Official Aramaic. While Official Aramaic replaced Ancient Aramaic, it also introduced in it a few modifications. This lasted as the official, commercial and literary language of the Persian Empire (331 B.C.) until the 4th century AD when it was replaced, as *lingua franca* of the Middle East, by Greek.

The Greek invasion inaugurated a long process of substitution which began in Syria and Mesopotamia in the 4th century B.C. and in Egypt and in the North, in Palestine, in the 3rd century B.C. In other regions like Judea, Palmyra, Babylon and northern Arabia, Greek did not succeed in imposing itself because of the energetic resistance of national independence against the Seleucids and the Romans; fundamentally, their cultural autonomy was important as a buffer to Hellenism.

8th century BC. it was published for the first time by VON LUSCHAN F. – SACHAU E., *Ausgrabungen in Sendschirli I*, Berlin 1893.

³⁷ Cf. DONNER H. – RÖLLIG W., *KAI* num. 215; GIBSON J.C.L., *TSSI* II num. 14. This inscription dates from the second half of the 8th century BC. and although it was found in the cemetery of Tahtale Pinar, the Experts think that it comes from the province of Gercin, some 7km from Zincirli.

³⁸ HOF TIJZER J. – VAN DER KOOIJ G., *Aramaic Texts from Deir'Alla*, Leiden 1976.

³⁹ CAQUOT A. – LEMAIRE A., 'Les textes araméennes de Deir'Alla', in *Syria* 54 (1977) 189-208.

⁴⁰ WEIPERT M., *The Balaam Texts from Deir 'Alla and the Study of the Old Testament*, (ed. HOF TIJZER J. – VAN DER KOOIJ G.), Leiden 1991, pp. 153-158.

⁴¹ LIPINSKI E., *Studies in Aramaic Inscriptions and Onomastics II*, pp. 103f.

The first conserved texts written in official Aramaic come from Zincirli, which does not mean that the unified language comes from Samalian Aramaic.⁴² The ten inscriptions of Bar-Rakkab, King of Sam'al, written in official Aramaic and discovered in the German excavation at Zincirli, can be considered as the first texts in official Aramaic.⁴³ With great probability, they date back to the second half of the 8th century B.C.⁴⁴ The inscriptions of Nerab are funerary steles of some priests of the Moon god, Sahar, in Nerab, a small town 7km to the south-east of Aleppo; they were first published in 1897, by Clermont-Ganneau⁴⁵ who dated them between 600 and 550 B.C. However, later studies suggest for them other dates.⁴⁶

The Ostrakon of Ashur⁴⁷ was found during the German excavations in the years 1903-1913, in Ashur and published by Lidzbarski.⁴⁸ It contains a letter between two high ranking Assyrian bureaucrats and dates from around 650 B.C. During the Achaemenid Empire period, the texts of Official Aramaic date back to

⁴² It is very probable that central Aramaic has had more importance than any other dialect because of its geographical situation and the importance of the Kingdoms of Damascus and Arpad.

⁴³ Cf. DONNER H. – RÖLLIG W., *KAI* num. 216-221; GIBSON J.C.L., *TSSI* II num.15-17; TROPPEL J., *Die Inschriften von Zencirli*, pp. 132-152.

⁴⁴ The largest inscriptions are the first three found in 1891. The 1st and the 3rd were published by VON LUSCHAN F., *Asugrabungen in Sendschirli* IV, Berlin 1911, p. 345s. The 2nd was later published by DONNER H., 'Ein Orthostatenfragment des Königs Barrakab von Sama'al', in *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Orientforschung* III, 1955, pp 73-98. The inscriptions 4-6 are some short fragments which were published by LIDZBARSKI M., *Handbuch der nordsemitischen Epigraphik*, Weimar 1898 (reprinted in Hildesheim 1962). For the rest (7-10) cf. VON LUSCHAN F., *Ausgrabungen...* V, Berlin 1943, pp. 73f. and 119-121.

⁴⁵ CLERMONT-GANNEAU Ch., *Études d'Archéologie Orientale* 2, (1897) 182-223; cf. DONNER H. – RÖLLIG W., *KAI* num. 225-226; GIBSON J.C.L., *TSSI* II, num. 18-19.

⁴⁶ NAVEH J., *The development of the Aramaic Script*, Jerusalem 1970, p. 17f., dates from around the 7th century B.C.; GIBSON J.C.L., *TSSI* II, p. 94 suggests the beginning of the 7th century B.C.; PARPOLA S., 'Si'gabbar of Nerab Resurrected', in *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 16, (1985) 273-275; ID., *The Correspondence of Sargon II, Part I: Letters from Assyria and the West*, (*State Archives of Assyria Bulletin* 1), Helsinki 1987, p. 149, means that they are from 710 B.C.

⁴⁷ Cf. DONNER H. – RÖLLIG W., *KAI* num. 233; GIBSON J.C.L., *TSSI* II, num. 20.

⁴⁸ LIDZBARSKI M., 'Ein aramäischer Brief aus der Zeit Asurbanipals', in *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 31, (1917/18) 193-202. ID. (1921), later on also in *Wissenschaftliche Veröffentlichungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft*, pp. 5-15.

between the 5th and 3rd centuries B.C. The major part of these texts comes from Egypt, above all, from the Jewish military colony in Elephantine.⁴⁹

The texts in Biblical Aramaic also belong to the Official Aramaic period. They were probably written in the 4th century B.C. (Ezra 4,8-6,18 and 7,22-26) and the second half of the 2nd century (164?), B.C. (Daniel 2,4b-7,28); Genesis 31,47; Jeremiah 10,11.⁵⁰ These texts were adapted to the masoretic texts, thus suffering orthographic and grammatical changes; however, they too come from the Official Aramaic of the Achaemenid period.

4.3. Middle Aramaic

Middle Aramaic dates from 200 B.C. to 250 AD. In this period called Greco-Roman, Greek replaced Aramaic as the administrative language of the Middle East. It is the period in which diverse Aramaic dialects developed in the distinct Aramaic speaking languages. In spite of the strong Greek pressure, written Aramaic remained as a medium of communication among these groups. The material of the texts that has been found, could be principally classified into two groups: epigraphic and canonical texts.

Hasmonian Aramaic was the written language employed in Jerusalem and Judea under the Hasmonian domination (142-37 B.C.). Its apparition is related to the independence of Judea and the beginning of the Hasmonian Era.⁵¹ With the fall of the Hasmonians in 37 B.C., this language was replaced by Greek. Accordingly, all the official documents were written in Greek while the private ones, until 135 AD., reached us in Hasmonian Aramaic. We could say that the texts written purely in Hasmonian Aramaic date between 142 and 37 B.C. But it

⁴⁹ For this period see COWLEY A.E., *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.*, Oxford 1923 (reprinted in 1967); AIMÉ-GIRON N., *Textes araméens d'Égypte*, Cairo 1931; also in BOWMAN R.A., in *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 58 (1941) 302-313; DRIVER G.R., *Aramaic Documents of the Fifth Century B.C.*, Oxford 1954 (reprinted in 1968); GREENFIELD J.G., *Aramaic Studies and the Bible*, *Vetus Testamentum Supplementum* 32 (1981) 110-130; LINDENBERGER J.M., *The Aramaic Proverbs of Ahiqar*, Baltimore 1983; SEGAL J.B., *Aramaic Texts from North Saqqara*, London 1983; PORTEN Y. - YARDENI A., *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt Newly copied. Edited and Translated into Hebrew and English*, 3 vols. Jerusalem 1986-1993; FOLMER M.L., *The Aramaic Language in the Achaemenid Period: A Study in linguistic Variation*, Leuven 1995; MURAOKA T.-PORTEN B., *A grammar of Egyptian Aramaic*, Leiden 1998.

⁵⁰ BAUER H. - LEANDER P., *Grammatik des Biblisch-Aramäischen*, Hildesheim/New York 1981 (reprinted in 1995); ROSENTHAL F., *A grammar of Biblical Aramaic*, Wiesbaden 1967 (reprinted in 1995), (translated into french by HERBERT P. in 1988); PALACIOS L., *Grammatica Aramaico-Biblica*, V ed., Rome 1980 ; KOCH K., *Das Buch Daniel*, Darmstadt 1984.

⁵¹ SHÜRER E., *Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes*, I, Hildesheim 1966, p. 242.

is also found in the theological texts of Qumran⁵² and in Babylonian and Galilean Targumims.

The Aramaic of the Babylonian Targum reaches us via consonantic texts -- Onkelos which covers Genesis-Deuteronomy, and Jonathan which covers Joshua-Malachi -- that were definitely established in the 5th century AD. Although they too go back to the mid-3rd century (259) AD; lately, these texts were also subjected to masoretic changes.⁵³ The Aramaic of the Galilean Targum⁵⁴ is, like Babylonian Targum, a mixture between Hasmonian Aramaic and the Galilean Aramaic which used square script. This Targum reaches us in a complete version for the following books of the Bible: Genesis-Deuteronomy, Psalms, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther and 1-2 Chronicles. In spite of their great importance linguistically, they do not seem to have acquired official status.

The Nabatean Aramaic was the written language of the Arab Kingdom of Petra (Raḡam), which traces back to 400 B.C. Although in 200 B.C. it was a kingdom; with the Roman invasion, it became a province of the Roman Empire in 106 AD. This kingdom covered the Sinai Peninsula, Eastern Jordan and the North-east of Arabia. In spite of the use of ancient northern Arabic that was already used for writing in the 6th century B.C., the Nabateans decided to use Aramaic. One of the reasons which could have caused this change could be the prosperous commerce which they conducted through their caravans with all the peoples of the region speaking Aramaic. There are almost 1,000 funerary and votive inscriptions in existence from the 2nd half of the 2nd century B.C. up to 356 AD. More than 3,000 brief commemorative inscriptions from the Sinai

⁵² One would have to exclude the two ancient manuscripts of Enoch and the Testament of Levi which come from Cairo Genizah. Cf. MURAOKA T., *Studies in Qumran Aramaic*, Louvain 1992.

⁵³ For more information see DIEZ MACHO A., in *Festschrift P. Kahle*, Berlin 1968, pp. 62-78; ABERBACH M. - GROSSFELD B., *Targum Onkelos to Genesis. A Critical Analysis together with an English Translation*, New York 1982; DARZIN I., *Targum Onkelos to Deuteronomy. An English Translation of the Text with Analysis and Commentary*, New York 1982; DIEZ MERINO L., *La Biblia Babilónica. Deuteronomium*, Barcelona 1975; FLORIT J.R., *La biblia babilónica. Profetas Posteriores*, Barcelona 1977, ID., in *Estudios bíblicos* 40, (1982) 127-158; LEVINE E., *The Aramaic Version of Jonah*, Jerusalem 1975; SPERBER A., *The Bible in Aramaic*, 3 vols., Leiden 1959-1969; VAN ZIJL J.B., *A Concordance to the Targum of Isaiah*, Missoula 1979; WEIL G.E., 'La Massorah', in *Revue des Études Juives* 131, (1972) 41-62; FRANK Y., *Dayqa' nami : diqduq la-Talmud ha-Bavli u-le-Targum 'Onqelo*, Jerusalem 1996.

⁵⁴ Cf. DÍEZ MACHO A., *Neophyti I. Targum palestinense*, 6 vols. Madrid 1968-1979; ID., ed., *Biblia Polyglotta Matritensia*, Series IV: *Targum Palaestinense in Pentateuchum*, 5 vols Madrid 1977-1985; LEVIAS C.-SOKOLOFF M., *Dikduk ha-Aramit ha-Galilit li-sefat ha-Talmud ha-Yerushalmi ve-ha-Midrashim*, New York 1986.

Peninsula that date from between 150 and 267 AD,⁵⁵ come to us from this period. One could add to these nine private contracts and a fragment found in one of the caves in the Dead Sea area which dates from the end of the 1st century AD.⁵⁶

Palmyrene Aramaic was a dialect of Eastern Aramaic, spoken in Palmyra, of which some inscriptions from the 2nd and 3rd centuries have been found in the ancient commercial center of Palmyra. There exist more than 1,000 votive, honorific and funerary inscriptions. The most important text found on this Aramaic was the tax tariffs in Greek and Aramaic for the year 137 AD.⁵⁷ The inscriptions conserve forms and various orthographic characteristics of imperial Aramaic,⁵⁸ which could be considered as an unmistakable sign of the continuity of Aramaic in Palmyra in spite of the strong Seleucid pressure.

Arsacid Aramaic was the official language of the Parthian Empire (247 B.C. to 224 AD.). The style, the orthography and the writing are very similar to Imperial Achaemenid Aramaic. From the 1st century AD. distinct local forms of Arsacid developed. This fact is due in great part to the weak structure of the Parthian Empire due to the continuous pressure from Sassanids (224-642 AD.) which, in the beginning of their reign, imposed Pahlavi, middle Persian, as the official language adopting, however, the writing of Arsacid Aramaic and using many words as logograms.⁵⁹ The Aramaic speakers of Babylon converted

⁵⁵ Cf. CANTINEAU J., *Le Nabatéen. Grammaire, choix de textes, lexique*, 2 vols, Paris 1932 (reprinted in 1978); LINDNER M., ed., *Petra und das Königreich der Nabatäer*, München 1983; NEGEV A., 'The Nabataeans and the Provincia Arabia', in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, II/8, Berlin 1977, pp. 520-686; WENNING R., *Die Nabatäer. Denkmäler und Geschichte*, Göttingen 1986.

⁵⁶ Cf. BEYER K., *Die aramäischen Texte vom Toten Meer samt den Inschriften aus Palästina, dem Testament Levis aus der Kairoer Genisa, der Fastenrolle und den alten talmudischen Zitaten: Aramaistische Einleitung, Text, Übersetzung, Deutung, Grammatik, Wörterbuch, Deutsche-aramäische Wortliste, Register*, Göttingen 1984, p. 319s.

⁵⁷ For more details see: MILIK J.T., *Dédicaces faites par des dieux (Palmyre, Hatra, Tyr) et de thiasés sémitiques à l'époque romaine*, Paris 1972; ROSENTHAL R., *Die Sprache der palmyrenischen Inschriften*, Leipzig 1936; STARK J.K., *Personal Names in Palmyrene Inscriptions*, Oxford 1971; DRIJVERS H.J.W., *The Religion of Palmyra*, Leiden 1976; TEIXIDOR J., 'Palmyre et son commerce d'Auguste à Caracalla', in *Semitica* 34, (1984) 1-127.

⁵⁸ For more information related to these characteristics cf. BEYER K., *The Aramaic Language*, p. 28.

⁵⁹ ALTHEIM F - STIEHL R., *Die aramäische Sprache unter den Achaimeniden*, pp. 278-308; KUTSCHER E.Y., 'Aramaic', in *Current Trends in Linguistics*, ed. SEBEOK T.A., vol 6, the Hague 1970, pp. 393-399.

colloquial eastern Aramaic into a written language for which reason the Mandeans conserved some Arsacid orthographic characteristics and when they emigrated to the south of Babylon, they adopted the writing of the same as they did not have one of their own. Some dedicatory inscriptions of the Aramaic of Hatra remain, which date from the period of Parthian domination. Other similar inscriptions were found very near to Ashur.

4.4. Late Aramaic.

The beginnings of Late Aramaic trace back to the year 200 B.C. lasting until the 13th century AD. Like the Middle Aramaic, Late Aramaic divides into Western and Eastern branches. The majority of Late Aramaic material constitutes of various inscriptions and a vast literature of this period.⁶⁰ During the early centuries of Late Aramaic, the Aramaic dialects were amply used. With the Islamic emergence, Arabic began to displace Aramaic as the spoken language of many peoples. So many of the surviving texts were composed by those whose mother tongue was not Aramaic. There are those who divide the Late Aramaic into Western and Eastern Aramaic⁶¹ and others divide it into Palestinian, Syriac and Babylonian Aramaic.⁶²

Palestinian Aramaic covers a series of Jewish and Christian texts. In the former we can count, with the Palestinian and Galilean Targumim, inscriptions in Synagogues and the dialect of the Talmud and of the haggadic Midrahsim, called 'Yerushalmi'.⁶³ From the latter, we get many inscriptions, Biblical versions, and liturgical texts. Almost all the inscriptions come from the region of Amman and Jerusalem and date from between the 6th and 11th centuries AD. In relation to the writing, the orthography and the language, these texts can be divided,

⁶⁰ The material in question firstly deals with the Aramaic version of the Bible, called Pshitta, the writings of the Fathers of the Oriental Church divided into three principal Assyrian groups, Nestorians, Chaldeans and Jacobites. It includes as yet unpublished material from the two famous schools of Nisibis and Edessa, found amongst the Patriarchal and Monasterial seats of the Oriental Church. Many of these Manuscripts were taken to the United States for cataloguing and publication. Both centers were burnt during the Muslim Invasion, for which reason little was saved. In Nisibis there were around 30.000 volumes relating to Exegesis, Theology, Liturgy, Biblical Theology, Philosophy, Medicine, Universal and Ecclesiastical History...

⁶¹ BEYER K., *The Aramaic Language*, pp. 43-56.

⁶² KAUFMAN S.A., 'Aramaic', HETZRON R. ed., *The Semitic Languages*, pp. 117-118.

⁶³ GOLDMAN E.A., 'A Critical Edition of Palestinian Talmud Tractate Rosh Hashana' in *Hebrew Union College Annual* 48 (1978) 205-226; NEUSNER J., *The Talmud of the land of Israel. A preliminary Translation and Explanation*, 35 vol. Chigago 1982f; STRACK H.L.- STEMBERGER G., *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch*, München 1982, especially pp. 257-273, 282-287, 289-292, it has been translated into Spanish by PÉREZ F. M., *Introducción a la Literatura Talmudica y Midrásica*, Valencia 1989.

according to Perrot, into two groups.⁶⁴ Fragments dating between the 6th and 9th centuries AD., likewise books of a liturgical character that came from the years 1030, 1104, 1118, 1187 AD.

Galilean Aramaic⁶⁵ seems to be the dialect in which Jesus spoke; the most ancient texts of Galilean Aramaic date between 200 and 700 AD. The majority of these are synagogical, funerary inscriptions and amulets. To these one must add the Palestinian Talmud (5th century AD.). Samaritan Aramaic⁶⁶ is the Aramaic spoken in Samaria with characteristics from ancient Hebrew and inscriptions that date from the 6th and 14th centuries AD. They reach us via the translation of the Pentateuch,⁶⁷ liturgical poetry and some exegetical works.

The Western and Eastern Syriac⁶⁸ is the Aramaic language of the Church, in the olden days called Oriental, which divided into three main groups, such as, Nestorian, Chaldean and Jacobite (which are all Assyrians). This is one of the

⁶⁴ PERROT C., in *Revue Biblique* 70 (1963) 506-555, cf. GOSHEN-GOTTSTEIN M.H., *The Bible in the Syropalestinian Version. Part I: Pentateuch and Prophets*, Jerusalem 1973; SCHULTHESS F., *Grammatik des christlich-Palästinischen Aramäisch*, Tübingen 1924 (reprinted in 1965); BAR-ASHER M., *Palestinian Syriac Studies*, Jerusalem 1977; MULLER-KESSLER Chr., *Grammatik des Christlich-Palastinisch-Aramaischen*, Hildesheim 1991.

⁶⁵ Cf. SVEDLUND G., *A Selection of Texts in Galilean Aramaic*, Jerusalem 1967; KUTSCHER E.Y., *Studies in Galilean Aramaic*, Ramat Gan 1976; ID., in *Encilopaedia Judaica*, III, 1971, pp. 270-275.

⁶⁶ MACUCH R., *Grammatik des samaritanischen Aramäisch*, Berlin 1982; CROWN A.D., *A Bibliography of the Samaritans*, Metuchen/New York 1984; DÍEZ MERINO L., 'El arameo samaritano. Estudios y textos', in *Estudios bíblicos* 40 (1982) 221-276; PUMMER R., 'The Present state of Samaritan Studies' in *Journal of Semitic Studies* 22 (1977) 27-47.

⁶⁷ TAL A., *The Samaritan Targum of the Pentateuch. A Critical Edition*, 3 vols. Tel Aviv 1980-1983.

⁶⁸ SEGAL J.B., *The Diacritical Point and the Accents in Syriac*, Oxford 1953; PALACIOS L., *Grammatica Syriaca*, Vicenza 1954; MURAOKA T., *Classical Syriac for Hebraists*, Wiesbaden 1987; ID., *Classical Syriac. A basic Grammar with a Chrestomathy*, Wiesbaden 1997; FERRER J. - NOGUERAS M.A., *Manual de Gramática Siríaca*, in *Estudios de Filología Semítica* 2, RIBERA-FLORES J., ed., Barcelona 1999; ID., *Breve Diccionario Siríaco*, Barcelona 1999; PAZZINI M., *Elementi di Grammatica Siríaca*, Jerusalem 1996; MINGANA A., *Clef de la Langue Araméenne ou Grammaire complète et Pratique des deux Dialectes Syriaques*, Paris 1905; NÖLDEKE Th., *Kurzgefaßte syrische Grammatik*, Darmstadt 1966 (reprinted in 1977); DUVAL R., *Traité de grammaire syriaque*, Paris 1881 (reprinted in 1969); PAYNE SMITH R., *Thesaurus Syriacus*, 2 vols., Oxford 1879 (reprinted in 1976); BROCK S.P., 'Greek Words in the Syriac Gospels', in *Muséon* 80 (1967) 389-426; STROHMANN W., ed., *Konkordanz zur syrischen Bibel*, Wiesbaden 1987.

most documented Aramaic dialects in history. The orthography is based upon the literary Aramaic. The lexicographic and grammatical structures come principally from two important learning centers: Edessa and Nisibis. The writing system of Eastern Syriac is not very well known in the west; almost always the system of vocalization of Western Aramaic (Syriac), as influenced by Greek, is mentioned.

The Babylonian Aramaic⁶⁹ of the Talmud is the language spoken by the Jews in Babylon, preserved fundamentally in the Babylonian Talmud and the Halakical Literature of the postalmudic wise (geonim) of Babylon. As Kaufman justly observed, the oral and written traditions of the Jews of Yemen had been greatly influenced by this dialect. In fact, the two oriental dialects, Babylonian and Mandaic, are distinguished from Syriac by their writing.

Mandaic Aramaic is the spoken and literary language of a Gnostic sect situated in the south of Mesopotamia. The language experts are not unanimous about their origin and the origin of their dialect. The reason for the early exodus from Palestine to the south of Babylon seems to be out of hostility towards them of the then existing Jewish community. The written material found contains poems and magical texts dating from the 4th and the 9th centuries AD. This Western Aramaic dialect continues to be spoken among the Mandaeans to the present day.

4. 5. Modern Aramaic

In the Middle East, Modern Aramaic⁷⁰ is fundamentally spoken by Christians and also by smaller populations of Jews and Mandaeans. Other than among knowledgeable scholars, Aramaic is, unfortunately, associated with dead languages although it is still the mother tongue of hundreds of thousands of speakers in different regions of Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon and Turkey. In

⁶⁹ EPSTEIN J.N., *A Grammar of Babylonian Aramaic*, Jerusalem 1960, (Hebrew); MORAG S., 'Some Notes on the Grammar of Babylonian Aramaic as Reflected in the Geniza Manuscripts', in *Tabriz* 42 (1972/73) 60-78; BOYARIN D., 'On the History of the Babylonian Jewish Aramaic Reading Tradition' in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 37 (1978) 141-160; JASTROW M., *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi and the Midrashic Literature*, 2 vols, London 1886-1903 (reprinted in 1950); OPPENHEIMER A., *Babylonian Judaica in the Talmudic Period*, Wiesbaden 1983; GOLDSCHMIDT L., *Der babylonische Talmud*, 9 vols, Berlin/Leipzig/Haag 1897-1935.

⁷⁰ KROTKOFF G., *A Neo-Aramaic Dialect of Kurdistan*, New Haven 1989; JASTROW O., 'Der neu-aramäische Dialect von hertevin', *Semitica viva* 3, Wiesbaden 1989; MACUCH R. - PANOUSI E., *Neusyrische Chrestomathie*, Wiesbaden 1974; MACUCH R., *Geschichte der spät- und neusyrischen Literatur*, Berlin 1976; SIEGEL A., *Laut- und Formenlehre des neuaramäischen Dialekts von Midin im Tur Abdin*, Wiesbaden 1968; SOLOMON, Z. S., 'Pronouns and Pronominal elements in Assyrian Aramaic', in *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies* XII/2 (1998) 46-68; KHAN G., *A Grammar of Neo-Aramaic: the dialect of the Jews of Arbel*, Leiden 1999.

diaspora, Modern Aramaic is spoken, for example, in the United States, some European countries, Australia and the countries of the former Soviet Union. During the Muslim invasion of the Middle East, Arabic imposed itself over the locally spoken languages, including both Western and Eastern Aramaic, among others.

Western Aramaic is spoken today in the Syrian villages of Ma'lula, Bax'a and Gubb'adin to the North East of Damascus. The three villages were originally inhabited by Western Christians; with time, however, the latter two were occupied by Muslims who expelled the Christian inhabitants. Only Ma'lula maintains today a Christian presence. In spite of Arabic influence, this dialect maintains the Mid/Late Aramaic structure, above all, in philological and morphological aspects.

Central and Eastern Aramaic branches cover a wide range of dialects scattered over Southeastern Turkey, Northwestern Iran, Northern Iraq and Northeastern Syria. An important fact to consider is that many of the speakers of those dialects have moved to Europe and the United States, among others, or resettled in the major cities such as Tehran, Kirmanshah, Hamadan, Abadan [in Iran] and Baghdad, Kirkuk, Basrah, Mosul (in Iraq) Thus, depending on geographic location, these dialects have experienced the invasion, to a lesser or greater extent, of the locally dominant languages. For example, the Assyrians in Iraq and Syria have suffered the influence of the Arabic language; the Jacobite Assyrians, the Syrian-Antiochians and the Assyrians of Southeastern Turkey have suffered the influences of Arabic, Turkish, and Kurdish. But it would be convenient to explore this aspect of Aramaic and produce a more accurate and authentic description of the current linguistic situation of those dialects. Foremost of the facts to be considered when preparing a more updated description of such dialects is their historical connection primarily to the Eastern Christians and to a lesser extent to some Jews. After 1948, almost all the Aramaic-speaking Jews moved to Israel where their political destiny is more predictable; however, their political security should not imply the continuous maintenance of their Aramaic language. In fact, it is under serious danger of complete erosion and loss due to the dominance of Hebrew. Much unlike the destiny of the Aramaic-speaking Jews, the Christians are experiencing both political and linguistic instability and insecurity because of their immigrant and refugee status in the countries of diaspora throughout the world.

Some writers, like Jastrow⁷¹ and Hoberman,⁷² tend to distinguish three groups of Eastern Neo-Aramaic speakers: (1) Turoyo, (2) the Northeastern group, and (3) the Mandaic people. This classification should be considered with certain reservations, as it does not offer a complete vision of the distinct groups

⁷¹ Cf. JASTROW O., *The Neo-Aramaic Languages*, ed. HETZRON R., p. 347.

⁷² Cf. HOBERMAN R. D., *The Syntax and Semantics of Verb Morphology in Modern Aramaic: A Jewish Dialect of Iraqi Kurdistan*, New Haven 1989, p. 3s.

resident in Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran. The Turoyo dialect is not only spoken in Tur'abdin, but also in other localities occupied both by Kurds and the so-called Syrians, that is, the Eastern Christians that live in Midyat and its vicinity who are still not in communion with Rome. To these can be added the Protestants of Hassana who use a dialect which is, phonologically speaking, very close to Turoyo. Not far from these places exist other populations of Neo-Aramaic speakers that escaped from the heavy pressure put on them both by the Turkish government and by the Kurds. Among such populations are those of: Harbul, Bespen, Mer, Ishshi, Geznach, Beznaye, etc., who are called Assyrians (Atoraye) or Chaldeans (Kaldaye).⁷³ Nowadays, perhaps ninety-five percent of the inhabitants of these towns are living in France, Belgium and Germany.

In Iraq, there are two groups: the Syrian-Antiochians (Monophysites) and the Assyrian-Chaldeans, the latter group being much larger.⁷⁴ These days, the Syrian-Antiochians celebrate their liturgy in Western Syriac, but only some use Aramaic for daily communication due to the dominance of Arabic. Most of the Assyrian-Chaldeans usually use Aramaic among themselves; however, because of the greater exposure of Chaldeans to Arabic through education and geographic adjacency, their Aramaic is heavily affected and infiltrated by Arabic. Among the Assyrians, especially where they had some heavy population concentrations such as the villages in the north of Iraq and the urban areas of Kirkuk, Habbaniyyah, and Baghdad, Aramaic has always been the dominant language of daily communication and the only language of religious services. Precisely, because of this dominance of Aramaic among the Assyrians of Iraq, especially between the years of 1930s and 1960s, the Assyrians were well known for their distinct accent in Arabic. However, the heavy urbanization of the Assyrians and the greater dominance of Arabic, their mastery of Aramaic suffered severe erosion during the last few decades.

Before the advent of the Christian missionaries to Urmia and Hakkari, early in 19th century, literacy skills [reading and writing] in Aramaic were, more or less, confined to the clergy. With the missionaries and the opening of schools, literacy was no longer confined; many lay people acquired a reasonable level of literacy proficiency. After the displacement of Assyrians and their resettlement in Iraq, a few private schools were founded, including those of Qasha Yousip

⁷³ I usually opt for the Assyrian-Chaldeans because these two groups really have the same cultural Patrimony in every sense. The only difference between them is that after the doctrinal problems that emerged between the Antiochian and Alexandrian schools in the early 5th century the Assyrian-Chaldeans were called Nestorians. Thus the name of Chaldeans was given to part of this group after their union with Rome in 1552 AD. While the rest continue to call themselves Assyrians; the Westerners, however, continue to call them Nestorians.

⁷⁴ I use this term Assyrian-Chaldean only from the liturgical point of view; both groups are Assyrian.

Kalaita, Qasha Khando and Rabbi Yaqu, which were collectively able to educate hundreds of Aramaic speakers and help them acquire high levels of literacy in both the Modern Aramaic and Old Aramaic. The Chaldeans and the Syrians, especially in Mosul and its vicinities, had their own religious and educational institutions through which they promoted the use and the maintenance of Aramaic. Those hundreds of literate people served as teachers for thousands more, a fact which explains the success of the maintenance of Aramaic thus far. However, the pervasive dominance of Arabic in its oral and literacy modalities through schools and media after mid 1960's and the massive urbanization of the Aramaic speakers, in general, throughout Iraq Aramaic has been receding very rapidly in the face of Arabic. Consequently, for many Aramaic speakers, literacy skills in their native language are almost non-existent because Arabic has become their literacy language.

In Iran there are also Assyrian and Chaldean Christian localities, where a predominantly Urmi variety of Aramaic influenced by Farsi rhythm and lexicon is commonly spoken. Urmia still remains a major location of Aramaic;⁷⁵ other locations include Tehran, Hamadan, Kermanshah and Abadan. In Syria, at least, since World War I, a large number of Assyrians migrated from Northern Iraq. According to statistics, they should number by now more than 100,000 souls. They are predominantly *Ashiret* Assyrians. Today, most of these have likewise migrated primarily to the United States and to Europe with a smaller contingent to Australia. There are possibly now 35,000 Assyrians still enjoying a living in Syria.

The erosion of the Aramaic language is not only a phenomenon among its speakers in their native homelands; it is more so in the countries of diaspora. The new generations learn the vernacular language, the parents commit the error of not speaking to them in their own language at home which impedes the safe keeping of the essential parts of the language. The coming generations will only remember that their parents were from the Middle East, but they will feel to have become European or American. They will lose the very essence of their cultural patrimony if the language is not cultivated on a daily. We hope that the effort of some groups in the countries of diaspora, above all in Europe and the United States, will permit them to maintain their language and culture as long as possible.

⁷⁵ As an example we could cite the three peoples: Sardarid, Babari and Darbari, which speak an Aramaic dialect called Sărdă:rîd. For more informations cf. Younan Sardaroud H., 'Synharmonism in the Sărdă:rîd dialect' in *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies* 12/1 (1998) 77-82; TSERETELI K.G., 'Abriß der vergleichenden Phonetik der modernen assyrischen Dialekte', in *Fr. Althiem und R. Stiehl* ed., *Geschichte der Hunnen*, 3, Berlin 1961, pp. 218-266.

In summary, we could say that we are just in the beginning of a vigor investigation of the Aramaic language which in itself is an extensive branch of the Semitic family. Its five periods have common elements, in spite of different evolutions. Each one of the last four periods receives, more or less, influences from one or more other varieties of Aramaic. However, these influences do not affect the structural base of those varieties. The texts found up to now, due to the state in which many have reached us on occasions, permit a free interpretation that is not always correct. This difficulty is seen, in greater measure, in the ancient Aramaic texts and lately in Modern Aramaic that is still not well studied. The discussion about the classification and dating of different groups of Aramaic languages is still controversial and open for further scrutiny. Gradually, the volume of materials discovered and the modern techniques and technology of investigation help us in arriving at more definitive conclusions. In spite of the specific characteristics of each of the five phases of Aramaic, they all share common structural, systematic and lexical features regardless of the geographic dispersal over a large region. The affinities of the different groups are principally attributed to the historical use of Aramaic as the international, official and administrative language of the two periods: the Neo-Assyrian and Persian Empires⁷⁶ In spite of the occupation of the Middle-East by foreign forces, such as the Greeks, Persians and Romans, Aramaic continued its course as the most widely spread medium of communication until the Arab Muslim invasion that was slowly imposed. The existence of the last period, or Modern Aramaic, is a proof that the Aramaic language never stopped being spoken in the Middle East and in Exile, although in dialect form. These dialects that, more or less, are mutually understandable, should be studied much more deeply. In some of these dialects, some surprising linguistic aspects are conserved which date from a very remote period of the language, which even go back to ancient Aramaic.

Editorial Note

It has always been quite challenging, as the author admits, to classify the dialects of Modern Aramaic both geographically and linguistically because of the regional and linguistic overlap. Their traditional classification into Eastern and Western branches may not only sound too general, but also confusing when under the Eastern branch one has to

⁷⁶For details on Aramaic language erosion and maintenance, see Edward Y. Odisho, "Bilingualism and multilingualism among Assyrians: a case of language erosion and demise," in *Semitica: Serta philologica Constantino Tsereteli dicata*, ed. R. Contini, F. Pennacchietto and M. Tosco (Torino: Sivio Zamorani Editore, 1993); "Assyrian language maintenance and erosion in U.S.: a World War I immigrant family case study," in *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies*, Vol. XIII:2(Chicago, 1999).

insert yet another Eastern vs. Western sub-branches. One way of avoiding the duplication of labels, hence the confusion of branches and sub-branches, is to create a Central branch and then subdivide the Eastern branch into three sub-branches. Although the editorial board does not favor the association of those classifications with the religious groupings among the Aramaic-speakers, the association is, nevertheless, highly consistent. Generally speaking, the Western and Central branches cover the Syrians [Jacobites], the Southeastern sub-branch, the Chaldeans [Catholic] and the Northeastern, the Assyrians [Nestorians].

It is also strongly believed that any classification of Modern Aramaic dialects should be based on their pre World War I regional distribution. Any attempt at current description of the dialects and their typology would be greatly vulnerable to inaccuracy if three factors were not seriously taken into consideration. Firstly, the new linguistic contacts established between Modern Aramaic and the current majority languages should be seriously reevaluated. For instance, the Tiari dialects had no previous exposure to Arabic while in Turkey, but after their resettlement in Iraq and then partially in Syria, their dialects have been seriously influenced by Arabic. Secondly, their massive displacement and migratory movement of the Aramaic speakers resulted in the merger of very many dialects leading to a high degree of dialect leveling [reduction of interdialect differences] and the emergence of common dialects [koinization]⁷⁷. Thirdly, after their resettlement in Iraq, Iran and Syria, the Aramaic speakers were tempted to move and settle in urban areas where they were heavily exposed to the majority languages, e.g. Arabic and Farsi. This exposure brought about severe erosion of Modern Aramaic. Because this whole aspect of Modern Aramaic is very important, Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies is planning to prepare a more detailed study on the subject.

⁷⁷ Edward Y. Odisho, *The sound system of modern Assyrian (Neo-Aramaic)* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1988).