

Introductory Lessons in Aramaic: Introduction

Introduction

The following pages are intended for any individual who is interested in learning the basics of Biblical Aramaic. It is based on lessons I created for an introductory class in Aramaic at the University of Michigan, where I teach. It should be considered a work in progress.

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Although there are many grammars that provide an introduction to Biblical Aramaic, only one of these purports to be an introduction that presumes no prior knowledge of another Semitic language. This grammar, Franz Rosenthal's *A Grammar of Biblical Aramaic*, is useful, especially for the graduate student. However, Rosenthal's grammar depends too much on a reader being familiar with technical phonological and grammatical principles to serve as a helpful introduction to the student or reader who has little familiarity with other languages, especially Semitic languages. (For example, within the first 10 pages of the grammar proper, there are several references to "spirantization," though no description of what this is.) Furthermore, Rosenthal's grammar does not include any exercises. Those grammars that do include exercises for students all presume that the student has a prior knowledge of Biblical Hebrew (see, for example, Andrew E. Steinmann's *Fundamental Biblical Aramaic*, Frederick E. Greenspahn's *An Introduction to Aramaic*, and Alger F. Johns's *A Short Grammar of Biblical Aramaic*).

I have tried to render the sometimes obscure descriptions as comprehensible as possible to readers with little experience with grammar and linguistics. For this reason, the explanations may seem redundant for those with a knowledge of linguistics and/or other languages. This is especially true for the descriptions of the pronunciation of Aramaic. It is hoped that after having gone through the following lessons, the student will, should he or she so desire, move on to more sophisticated grammars, like Rosenthal's, or linguistic summaries like Stuart Creason's in *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the World's Ancient Languages*.

One other caveat: the last several lessons rely on the student to learn vocabulary on his or her own, by reading passages and looking up words in the glossary. This mimics the situation that one will be faced with when sitting down with the Bible and an Aramaic dictionary.

Some Preliminaries:

The alphabet that is used to represent the western Aramaic language in contemporary publications is one that is identical to the alphabet used to represent Hebrew, both classical and modern. The origins of this alphabet are interesting, though to describe these origins would take too much space here. Suffice it to say that the alphabet in its origin is Aramaic, and is often described as “Aramaic Block Script.” For this reason, I will simply refer to the alphabet as the Aramaic alphabet.

This alphabet, like any writing system, can be represented with Roman letters (that is, the alphabet that we use to write English). This process of turning the Aramaic alphabet into Roman letters is called transliteration. Thus, for example, the Biblical Aramaic word for king is represented in the Aramaic alphabet as ܡܠܟܐ, and in the Roman alphabet as mele^k. (And, of course, the Roman alphabet is not special in this; the Aramaic alphabet can also represent any other writing system. So, the English word “king” can be transliterated into the Aramaic alphabet: ܡܠܟܐ.)

This act of transliteration is an advantage because it allows us to more easily represent Aramaic words in word-processing programs and in email messages. It also helps to indicate what the pronunciation of the word would be. And, especially important for a grammar, it forces the student to choose between multiple possible pronunciations, and thus to demonstrate how much of the grammar she or he has absorbed.

Transliteration does not aim to represent *explicitly* how the word should be pronounced. It operates by a series of conventions that have to be learned. Sometimes the transliteration of a word will represent marks that are graphically present in the Aramaic word, but are not pronounced. For example, in the Aramaic word that corresponds to the English phrase “he let you know,” ܗܘܢܘܢܗܘܢܗܘܢܗܘܢܗܘܢ hō^wdə‘ā^k, the superscript w in the transliteration is not pronounced but indicates the presence of what can be described as a “vowel-marker.”

Representations of pronunciation can be made in several ways. I will represent pronunciations with recognizable Roman letters within slash marks: / /. This is for the sake of making the pronunciations readily comprehensible for the beginner. A more scientific method is to use the International Phonetic Alphabet; with its many curious symbols and signs this is sometimes confusing for non-specialists.

Abbreviations

For Perfect and Imperfect Verbal Forms

3ms third person masculine singular

3fs third person feminine singular

2ms second person masculine singular

2fs second person feminine singular

1cs first person common singular

3mp third person masculine plural

3fp third person feminine plural

2mp second person masculine plural

2fp second person feminine plural

1cp first person common plural

For Imperatives and Participles

m.s. masculine singular

f.s. feminine singular

m.p. masculine plural

f.p. feminine plural

For Nouns

sing. singular

pl. plural

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