

# Which Language Did Jesus Speak – Aramaic, Hebrew, or Greek?

by James J. DeFrancisco, Ph.D.

**T**his article is in response to the article of a similar title, *Which Language Did Jesus Speak – Aramaic or Hebrew?* by Brian Knowles published by ACD. While we essentially agree with the thesis of Mr. Knowles in that Jesus spoke primarily a Semitic language we do not agree with the conclusion that it was Hebrew rather than Aramaic. In this article we will provide background information that leads us to our conclusion.

The claim in the second paragraph of Mr. Knowles article in which he states that recently an expanding circle of scholars has rejected the notion of Aramaic as being the dialect spoken by Jesus and the disciples is essentially true. However, this claim is also somewhat of an exaggeration in the context of his article. He evidently forms this position based primarily on the work of several scholars: M. H. Segal, Shmuel Safrai, David Biven, and Roy Blizzard. To support his thesis he utilizes the work of two other scholars (Flusser and Lindsey) but ignores the position and importance of the Aramaic language in their writings. In addition, by not looking closely at the work of Biven and Blizzard, he overlooks at least one major misunderstanding in their quotation of the renowned Aramaic scholar, Matthew Black. The fundamental error is to overlook the fact that all of these scholars did their work in comparison with the Greek New Testament. The importance of the Aramaic language is not given justice and Aramaic versions, i.e. Old Syriac and Peshitta are not even mentioned.

Although there may be an expanding circle of scholars who have or who are rejecting the notion of Aramaic as being not only the dialect spoken by Jesus and His disciples this group is still a small percentage of scholars. In fact, the majority of scholars accept the notion that the primary language of Jesus and His disciples was Aramaic. Biven and Blizzard, while presenting useful information in their book, perhaps stretch the facts a bit to de-emphasize Aramaic in their effort to focus on Hebrew. They also seem to misunderstand and perhaps quote Matthew Black out of context in their attempt to support their thesis.

Knowles, Biven, and Blizzard have somewhat misused the work of Flusser and Lindsey in their de-emphasis of Aramaic because neither Flusser nor Lindsey do

this in their own writings. In fact, Flusser and Lindsey often speak of Hebrew and Aramaic interchangeably as they emphasize the Semitic languages over Greek. Also, the Jerusalem Perspective Online website ([www.JerusalemPerspective.com](http://www.JerusalemPerspective.com)) contains articles that emphasize the importance of Aramaic, e.g. "Matthew's Aramaic Glue" by Randall Buth indicates that "a knowledge of the Gospels' Semitic background can provide a deeper understanding of Jesus' words and influence the translation process." Buth then goes on to state that "Matthew shows a specifically Aramaic influence" and that Matthew's gospel "uses an Aramaic conjunction as the glue to hold stories together."

In The Jesus Sources (Hkeshner, 1990), Lindsey states that ". . . Mark is a Gospel of equivalents. He had what you might call a 'targumist' mentality." Targums were traditionally written in Aramaic. In A Hebrew Translation of the Gospel of Mark, Lindsey uses "Hebrew or Aramaic" in several sentences that group these two languages together (perhaps interchangeably) since they are closely related cognate languages. Unfortunately, he may be mistaken in his interpretation of the Aramaic words, "My God, my God . . ." in Mark 15:34 as being a direct quotation of the targum of Psalm 22. Several Aramaic commentators have taken another position on these words of Jesus as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> century (Ishodad of Merv). Since these words were spoken in Aramaic, the evidence of Aramaic experts should be taken into consideration. Also, it is interesting that Jesus would use Aramaic just moments before his death if it was not his primary language. If He was reciting Holy Scripture, why didn't he recite the Shema in Hebrew instead?

Regarding the expression, "son of man," Lindsey is clear that "the original is Aramaic . . . and so far as we know Jesus and the people of his day knew the text only in Aramaic." (The Jesus Sources, p. 72). The text being referred to here is Daniel 7:13 which is written in Aramaic – in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Other citations of Aramaic in The Jesus Sources include:

We have chosen to use Kepha, for it is perfectly clear that Jesus uses this Aramaic form in naming Simon." (p. 74)

Lindsey refers to "the Hebrew word 'Amen'" (p. 74). This word is identical in Aramaic. . . as are many other words.

In Jesus, Flusser uses Palestinian Hebrew and Aramaic interchangeably for the term "fox" (p. 52, n. 28). He uses Hebrew and Aramaic together in reference to the writings from the time of Jesus (p. 128). Although he doesn't specifically mention it regarding his section on the "Chamber of Hewn Stone and Caiaphus," he is actually demonstrating the use of an Aramaic word, "Caiaphus" is a Latinized form of "Kepha." This obviously shows that the common names of people and places utilized Aramaic. This is demonstrated also with "Gabbatha"

(p. 254) and “Golgotha” (p. 255) as well as “mamona” (Aramaic) in comparison with “mammon” (Hebrew) showing the close similarity of these two languages (p. 94, n. 5).

Bivin and Blizzard, unfortunately, make comparisons exclusively using Greek texts (Codex Sinaiticus, Bezae, and Alexandrinus) with a focus on Hebrew as more original than Greek. Aramaic is de-emphasized, omitted, and referred to with little understanding in their book Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus, which doesn't totally live up to its name.

In Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus, on pages 12-14, for example, in quoting Matthew Black they suggest that Black supports their position. The statement however is actually used by Black in an argument in which he opposes the Hebrew gospel position and it is further qualified by his beginning the sentence with the word “If . . .” Black also qualifies it with a footnote in reference to page 16 of his book where he states, “Jesus must have conversed in the Galilean dialect of Aramaic, and His teaching was probably almost entirely in Aramaic.” He actually judges the emphasis of using Hebrew as a gospel language as an “extreme position” and goes on to explain that it “has found little if any support among competent authorities” and is “absurd.” To the contrary, Black in fact, states that “these Scriptures were provided with a targum for the benefit of the Aramaic speaking masses who could no longer understand Hebrew. The use of the term ‘Hebrew’ to refer to Aramaic is readily explicable, since it described the peculiar dialect of Aramaic which had grown up in Palestine since the days of Nehemiah and which was distinctively Jewish . . .” The reader is referred to page 48 of An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts by Black.

Professor Safrai has provided a detailed overview of languages used in Israel. Much valuable information is available on the [www.JerusalemPerspective.com](http://www.JerusalemPerspective.com) website. A major portion of one of his articles on this subject is presented at some length below:

*“Prof. Safrai presents an overview of the three languages used in the land of Israel during the days of Jesus, and concludes that Hebrew was the primary language spoken by the Jewish residents at that time.*

The land of Israel was under the influence of Greek culture from the time of its conquest by Alexander the Great at the end of the fourth century B.C.E. Although scholars have divergent views regarding the influence of Hellenism on religious works, literature and everyday life in first-century Israel, it is generally accepted that the Greek language was used by many of the inhabitants.

#### **“The Role of Aramaic**

Aramaic was quite widespread in Jerusalem and in other parts of the land, as can be seen from the large number of Aramaic inscriptions which have been discovered dating from the Second Temple period. The use of Aramaic is also evident from the literature created in that language. The Genesis Apocryphon, the Targum of Job and portions of several other Aramaic works were found in the ancient library of the Essenes at Qumran, and Jewish sources of the period mention additional non-extant works.

“Aramaic also had a strong influence on Mishnaic Hebrew, and Aramaic words are found in the New Testament and in the writings of Josephus. Unlike in countries such as Egypt where Aramaic almost disappeared when the country came under the influence of Hellenism, Aramaic remained a vibrant language in the land of Israel and Syria even during the centuries of Græco-Roman rule until the Arab conquest at the beginning of the seventh century C.E.

“Aramaic was the language of communication between Jews and those non-Jews not connected with the government or living in Greek cities. An ordinary non-Jew mentioned in rabbinic literature is referred to as an Aramean and generally has an Aramaic rather than a Greek name (Tosefta, Pesahim 1:27). It is possible that some Roman officials who served long periods of time in the land of Israel learned Aramaic, and Jews may have been able to converse with these officials in Aramaic.

“However, the role of Aramaic in everyday life should not be exaggerated. Many scholars who admit the widespread use of Hebrew in the last few generations of the Second Temple period claim that Temple services were conducted in Aramaic. While there were a number of Aramaic words and phrases associated with the administration of the Temple and Temple area, the vast majority of references relating to Temple life reflect the use of Hebrew there. The Mishnah preserves many descriptions of various aspects of everyday life in the Temple, including statements of Temple officials which almost always are in Hebrew. Moreover, to date all of the inscriptions found in the Temple area are written in Hebrew, except for two Greek inscriptions, originally part of a balustrade surrounding the inner Temple, which warned Gentiles not to go beyond that point.

“Tannaic and amoraic sources state that it was customary in the synagogue to translate the readings from the Torah and the Prophets into Aramaic. Rendering the Scriptures into Aramaic offered an opportunity to introduce into the readings elements of the Oral Torah in popular form. This was done for the benefit of religiously uneducated people who may not have completely understood Biblical Hebrew. One rabbinic source explicitly states: "...and he translates [into Aramaic] so that the rest of the

people, and the women and children, will understand it" (Tractate Soferim 18:4). However, the custom of translating the readings of the Torah and Prophets into Aramaic is not mentioned in any source before approximately 140 C.E. Sources from the second Temple period and the era immediately following the destruction of the Temple do not reflect this custom. The phenomenon of sages understanding Biblical Hebrew while the rest of the population required a translation is the reality of a later period and was not the situation during the first century C.E.

### **“Mishnaic Hebrew**

Either Hebrew or Aramaic was used in the synagogue or at other communal gatherings, but there are a number of questions concerning the relationship of these two languages in the land of Israel. The Torah and Prophets were undoubtedly read in Hebrew, as were prayers, but what was the language of Torah instruction in the synagogue? In what language did people speak in the marketplace and within the family circle? In which tongue did the sages address their students? Was there a difference between Judea and Galilee?

“Most scholars since the beginning of the nineteenth century have concluded that Aramaic was the spoken language of the land of Israel during the Second Temple period. Even when scribes of that period or later attest that they wrote or transmitted traditions in Hebrew, scholars have persisted in claiming that this "Hebrew" was actually some type of Aramaic dialect then prevalent among the Jews of the land. It has even been claimed that the Hebrew in which the Mishnah was written was an artificial language of the *bet midrash*, house of study, which was a translation from Aramaic, or at the very least heavily influenced by Aramaic.

“However, some seventy years ago a number of Jewish scholars in Palestine (later the State of Israel) began to see that the Hebrew of the Mishnah had been a living and vibrant language, spoken in the house of study, synagogue, on the street and at home. Mishnaic Hebrew does not deal only with matters of religion, but mentions, for instance, the names of dozens of implements used at the time, and records thousands of events and sayings about mundane, secular aspects of life. . .

“The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the documents from the period of the Bar-Kochba revolt (132–135 C.E.) conclusively settled the question of whether Mishnaic Hebrew had been an artificial or a living language. Hymns, prayers and biblical works written in Hebrew were discovered, as well as documents composed in the Mishnaic Hebrew dialect. Among them were letters containing Hebrew slang and abbreviated Hebrew forms characteristic of everyday speech . . .

### **“Rabbinic Literature**

When the Jewish writers of the Second Temple period referred to Hebrew, they meant Hebrew and not Aramaic. They did not confuse the two languages, but distinguished quite clearly between Hebrew and Aramaic, referring to the latter either as "Aramaic," "*targum*" or "Syriac" (*sursit*). The sages also clearly differentiated between the Hebrew and Aramaic sections of the Bible. . .

“One cannot fulfill the obligation of reading from the Torah scroll unless the text is written in square script in Hebrew and in a book [some manuscripts read "on parchment"] and in ink. (Tosefta, Megillah 2:6) In other words, the Torah scroll must be written in square Hebrew script and not in the old archaic Hebrew script, nor in Aramaic. . . (NOTE: Aramaic also includes the usage of “Hebrew” square script which is called in Hebrew, “Ktav Asshurim,” i.e. “Assyrian Letters” –JJD)

“II Kings 18 tells of the Assyrian general Rabshakeh’s advance on Jerusalem and his attempt to persuade the beleaguered inhabitants of the city to surrender. The leaders of Jerusalem requested that he speak Aramaic and "not the language of Judea" so that the rest of the city’s inhabitants would not understand (v. 26). Josephus relates the story in the following manner:

“As Rabshakeh spoke these words in Hebrew, with which language he was familiar, Eliakim was afraid that the people might overhear them and be thrown into consternation, and he asked him to speak in *suristi*, [Syriac, i.e., Aramaic]. (*Antiquities* 10:8)

### **“Galilee and Judea**

There is an oft-repeated claim in scholarly literature that a high percentage of the Galilean population was religiously uneducated, and that the people consequently knew and used less Hebrew. Literary sources, however, provide no indication that this claim is correct.

“There are a number of "anti-Galilee" statements in rabbinic literature, but one can find similar barbs directed against residents of other regions of the land. What the sources do indicate is that Galilee belonged to the accepted cultural milieu of Judaism at that time, including the world of Torah study, and that culturally and spiritually Galilee may have been closer to Jerusalem than Judea.

“There is a statement in rabbinic literature that the Judeans retained the teachings of their Torah scholars because they were careful in the use of their language, while the Galileans, who were not so careful with

their speech, did not retain their learning (Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 53<sup>a-</sup>  
<sup>b</sup>; Jerusalem Talmud, Berachot 4<sup>d</sup>, *et al.*). While this saying is sometimes considered to be evidence for the dominance of Aramaic over Hebrew in the Galilee because some of the examples discussed are in Aramaic, it actually only refers to the Judeans' feeling that Galileans mispronounced the guttural letters *het* and *'ayin* and dropped the weak letters *'alef* and *hey*. This in no way reflects on the cultural status of Galilee, nor does it show that the use of Hebrew was less common there than in Judea or Jerusalem.

### **“The New Testament**

When Paul spoke to the Roman commander, he used Greek (Acts 21:37). When he addressed the people, however, he spoke to them "in the Hebrew language" (Acts 21:40).

“Hebrew-speakers commonly referred to Jews as *yisrael*, Israel, in contrast to *loudaioi*, Jews used by Greek speakers and *yehuda'in*, Jews used by Aramaic-speakers. In literary works written in Hebrew, Jews refer to themselves as *yisrael*, Israel or *bene yisrael*, sons of Israel, while non-Jews refer to Jews using the Aramaicized *yehuda'in*, Jews.

“When the author of the Book of Acts refers to Jews he normally uses the term *loudaioi*, Jews. However, when he relates the words of Jesus or of Peter and his companions, he has them refer to Jews as *yisrael*, Israel (Acts 1:6; 2:22; 2:36; 3:12; 4:10; 9:15). The author of the Book of Acts also relates that Rabban Gamaliel addressed the Sanhedrin as "Men of Israel" (5:35).

“Jesus probably spoke Hebrew within the circle of his disciples, and since the thousands of parables which have survived in rabbinic literature are all in Hebrew, no doubt he likewise told his parables in Hebrew.

The view that Aramaic was the language of conversation in first-century Israel seems to be supported by the Aramaic words found in the New Testament. Many scholars have seen Jesus' words to Jairus' twelve-year-old daughter, "*Talitha kumi*" (Mk. 5:41), as proof that he spoke Aramaic. Yet, even if Jesus spoke to her in Hebrew, he could have said "*Talitha kumi*." One must not forget that many Aramaic words in various forms found their way into Hebrew in the Second Temple period. The command to "get up" *kumi* is the same word in Hebrew and Aramaic. . .

### **“Conclusion**

Hebrew was certainly the language of instruction in schools, as well as the language of prayer and Torah reading. The language of instruction in the house of study also most certainly was Hebrew, and this was likely the case regarding instruction in the synagogue. It would seem that Hebrew

was spoken in the marketplaces of Jerusalem (Jerusalem Talmud, Pesahim 37<sup>d</sup>), but there is not enough information to determine whether this also was the case in other cities. It is not impossible that there were religiously uneducated people who did not understand Hebrew and were conversant only in Aramaic. There is some evidence for this linguistic phenomenon beginning in the second century C.E., but it is unlikely that such was the case in the first century. Although the Jewish inhabitants of the land of Israel in the time of Jesus knew Aramaic and used it in their contacts with the ordinary, non-Jewish residents, Hebrew was their first or native language. It is especially clear that in enlightened circles such as those of Jesus and his disciples, Hebrew was the dominant spoken language.

### **-“Spoken Languages in the Time of Jesus,” Safrai, Shmuel**

However, many (most) scholars understand Aramaic to be the common spoken language of the people in Galilee during the time of Jesus and his disciples. This dialect of Aramaic used in Galilee is similar to the dialect used in the Peshitta New Testament. The Peshitta has remained intact for the past 1600-1800 years. Thus, Aramaic should not be discounted, let alone eliminated, as the true common language of Jesus and the Apostles and, possibly, the original language of the New Testament. At the very least, it is the language of those Christians (Mishakyae) in the Holy Land and the Near East who preserved Christianity in its purest Semitic form since the ancient times.

Fitzmyer, an expert in NT Aramaic, indicates that “From at least the eighth century B.C. Aramaic had become a *lingua franca* in the ancient Near East; and contrary to the impression that one gets from the ordinary Hebrew Bible, in which (according to Kittel’s edition) the Aramaic portion occupy a maximum of 22 pages and a few stray verses in Genesis (31:47) and Jeremiah (10:11) out of a total of 1434 pages, Aramaic was not the less important of the two languages. As for the use of Aramaic in Palestine, it is now attested from the middle of the ninth century B.C. onward.” A Wandering Aramean – Joseph A. Fitzmyer, p. 6). Fitzmyer states that “Hebrew . . . was apparently the more indigenous of the two in Palestine” but clarifies his statement with the qualification that it a form called “Postbiblical Hebrew” and that although evidence of such Hebrew is found in Qumram texts, “it is not abundant and comes from restricted areas.”

Fitzmyer concludes that “the most commonly used language of Palestine in the first century A.D. was Aramaic, but that many Palestinian Jews, not only those in Hellenistic towns, but farmers and craftsmen of less obviously Hellenistic areas used Greek, at least as a second language,” and that “pockets of Palestinian Jews also used Hebrew, even though its use was not widespread.” (p. 7). Fitzmyer criticizes Birkeland’s thesis that Hebrew was the language of the common people and sustains a solid position with the consensus of scholars

supporting the position of “Aramaic as the language most commonly used by Jesus and his immediate disciples in Palestine.” (pp.7-8)

Fitzmyer admits that Papias’ statement regarding the Gospel of Matthew being written in the “Hebrew” dialect most likely means “in the Aramaic language” but that this is highly debatable. (p.11). Regarding the Syriac, Fitzmyer’s position is that although “Syriac tradition is obviously secondary and derivative from the Greek. . . that, in the choice of Syriac forms of names, especially geographical names, that tradition may be closer to some of the native Palestinian names that have become Grecized in the NT text tradition.” (p. 12)

Fitzmyer explains that “Though the two languages, Hebrew and Aramaic, had co-existed for several centuries in the Near East before this, Aramaic became the more important of the two, serving as the *lingua franca* during the latter part of the Neo-Assyrian empire and during the Persian period. Hebrew is usually regarded today as the more important of the two languages, because it is the tongue of the bulk of the OT. And yet, historically it was restricted to a small area on the south-eastern coast of the Mediterranean, whereas Official or Imperial Aramaic was used across a major portion of the Near Eastern world, from Egypt to Asia Minor to Pakistan. Indeed, it gradually supplanted Hebrew in most of Palestine itself as the common tongue.” (p. 29) “His footnote in reference to this statement indicates that Neh. 8:8 may be hinting at this situation.” (p. 47) . . . “If asked what was the language commonly spoken in Palestine in the time of Jesus of Nazareth, most people with some acquaintance of that era and area would almost spontaneously answer Aramaic. To my way of thinking, this is still the correct answer for the *most commonly* used language, but the defense of this thesis must reckon with the growing mass of evidence that both Greek and Hebrew were used as well.” (p.38)

Other scholars debate whether Aramaic or Greek were used in the original NT writings but most agree that it was Greek. David Biven agrees as well:

“From time to time, one hears reports of the discovery of a portion of the New Testament written in Hebrew or Aramaic. To date, such reports have proven false. Readers of *JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE* should realize that there is not a single extant Hebrew-language manuscript from the early Christian era of any of the New Testament books.

### **Facts**

1. All of the canonical gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—were written in Greek.
2. As the author of the gospel of Luke states in his prologue, many written accounts of Jesus’ life already were in circulation.
3. The early church fathers testify that Matthew wrote “the words of Jesus” in “Hebrew.”

4. There are many Semitisms in the gospels.

Those are the bare facts of the matter. Any further statement regarding the original language of the life story of Jesus is conjectural. A conjecture may enhance understanding, and it may even be correct. But until it is proven, it cannot be treated as fact.

### **Jerusalem School Perspective**

The Jerusalem School of Synoptic Research has arrived at two conclusions that serve as working hypotheses for their research:

- An account of Jesus' life was written in Hebrew, probably by one of Jesus' original disciples.
- One or more of the sources used by the writers of the synoptic gospels is derived from a Greek translation of that Hebrew account.

The scholars of the Jerusalem School do not claim that the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke were originally written in Hebrew. They contend only that the authors of the synoptic gospels used sources that were derived from an earlier Hebrew gospel. In fact, not every part of the synoptic gospels shows Semitic influence. Many parts, such as the prologue to Luke's gospel, show little or no Semitic influence.

### **Semitic Influence**

On the other hand, there are non-gospel portions of the New Testament that show Semitic influence. For example, the first half of the book of Acts, up to 15:35, is noticeably more Semitic than the second half (cf. Max Wilcox, *The Semitisms of Acts*).

... While there are various degrees and types of Semitic influence throughout the New Testament, the members of the Jerusalem School recognize that all the books of the canonical New Testament, including the synoptic gospels, were written in Greek. However, study has consistently shown the importance of recognizing the profoundly Jewish background of the gospels. Jerusalem School members firmly believe that a Hebraic perspective is the key to a better understanding of the Greek Testament. We invite you to join us in studying the gospels more closely, and examining the evidence we have found to support our hypotheses”.

**-“A Gospel In Hebrew?,” Bivin, David**

The position that I have taken is as follows: The gospel message was originally given orally. This oral tradition has both Aramaic (the primary transmission of the original message since Aramaic was the lingua franca of the time) and Hebrew (the more formal language used in religious services and study of the Torah)

dimensions. Greek was then used in the primary translations of these two Semitic languages for use by the Gentiles. The oldest manuscripts of the complete New Testament were preserved in Aramaic (Syriac) going back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century (as possibly as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century) C.E. This text is known as the Peshitta and is still in use today by Near Eastern churches. I have a copy of it in its ancient form. It is also important to understand that both Aramaic and Hebrew are cognate languages. Many words are identical. The Hebrew language actually uses Aramaic lettering known as Ktav Assurim (Assyrian letters). Papias and others that referred to early Christian writings, e.g. Matthew's Gospel, as being written in Hebrew were referring to the letters more than the language since it would have been difficult – if not impossible – for them to distinguish between Hebrew and Aramaic. My position is well documented by factual and historical evidence. It can be substantiated by universities, synagogues, and the Assyrian Church of the East. So, while I can agree with the emphasis of Knowles, Biven, and Blizzard of Semitic languages over the Greek language relative to New Testament studies, I cannot agree with their conclusion that the language of the day was primarily Hebrew. The majority of reputable scholars would not agree with their position either.

Actually, according to the Aramaic Scriptures Research Society in Israel, the two international languages used in spreading the gospel were Greek (in the Mediterranean regions of the Roman Empire) and Aramaic in the Holy Land and the East: "In the Holy Land, Syria, Mesopotamia, and other countries of the Parthian Empire, these writings were circulated in Aramaic, lingua franca of the East. . . The main vernacular in the Holy Land, however, was Aramaic. The weekly synagogue lections of the Holy Scriptures, called sidra or parashah, with the haphtharah, were accompanied with an oral Aramaic translation, according to fairly fixed traditions." This quote is from The Bible Society – Jerusalem – which published THE NEW COVENANT – Commonly Called The New Testament – Peshitta Aramaic Text With a Hebrew Translation in 1986. The Editor's Note states that, "In the Greek text of the New Testament one finds Aramaic locutions in disguise, in addition to several words and phrases in Greek transcription, such as 'talitha qumi', 'lema shevatani', 'mamona' and others, indicating that Yeshua spoke in Aramaic, and no doubt used Hebrew in conversations with scribes and other religious leaders, in addition to the synagogue use of Hebrew." (p. ii). They proceed to explain that, "Rabbinical literature in Aramaic is printed in the Hebrew alphabet. Christian manuscripts in Eastern Aramaic are written in the ancient script called estrangela (round, thick-set)." (p. iii)

Hebrew and Aramaic are very closely related. Many words are identical in spelling. "Aramaic is about as close to Hebrew as Spanish is to Italian." (p.1096) Raymond E. Brown, D. W. Johnson, Kevin G. O'Connell, *"Texts and Versions" Sect. 101 "Aramaic and Syriac Versions;"* The New Jerome Biblical Commentary "Translation of the Scriptures into Syriac had its roots in the developing pre-Christian Aram targums of OT books brought by 1<sup>st</sup>/2d-cent. AD Jewish and christian preachers from Palestine into the district of Adiabene

(surrounding Irbil in modern Iraq) and to the neighborhood of Edessa (Urfa in modern Turkey).” However, this source also maintains that the language of the Syriac Bible is somewhat distinct “from the Western Aramaic of Palestine that was used by Christ and the apostles. The Syr Bible . . . NT is wholly a transl. from the Greek. Claims that the Syr Gospels are the form in which Jesus spoke his teaching – claims often made by people who have every reason to know better – are without foundation.” (Sect. 116; p. 1098) The Peshitta “was established firmly enough in the early 5<sup>th</sup> cent. To remain the Bible of all Syr-language Christians despite the Nestorian and Monophysite movements and the disruption of unity that accompanied them.” (Sect. 125, p. 1099) “For the NT in particular, textual transmission of the Peshitta has been remarkably faithful and precise, and good early mss. exist for both Testaments...” (Sect. 127, p. 1099)

Thackson explains that “Syriac is the Aramaic dialect of Edessa, now Urfa in Eastern Turkey, an important center of early Christianity in Mesopotamia. Edessene Syriac was rapidly accepted as the literary language of all non-Greek eastern Christianity and was the primary vehicle for the Christianization of large parts of central and south-central Asia. . . Today it is the classical tongue of the Nestorians and Chaldeans of Iran and Iraq and the liturgical language of the Jacobites of Eastern Anatolia and the Maronites of Greater Syria.” Introduction to Syriac – W. M. Thackson (p. vii)

Aramaic must not be neglected in New Testament studies for at least three reasons:

1. Because Aramaic was the *lingua franca* of the Near East during the time of Jesus and His disciples.
2. Because it is the language of the Peshitta – an ancient and very “faithful and precise” version of the New Testament texts.
3. Because this language has been preserved and is still used today by Christians in and from the Near East.

For these reasons the Aramaic language provides valuable insight into interpretations and nuances in New Testament studies which can be validated by contemporary scholars who have had this language passed down virtually intact for generations over at least the past 1600 years.

I do not want to de-emphasize the importance of the Hebrew language. It is a beautiful and powerful language that is unique in several respects. Some knowledge of Hebrew is vital to understanding the Holy Scripture. However, let us also maintain the importance of the Aramaic language and its importance in New Testament studies in particular. It provides insights on early Christianity and it clears up many difficult to understand passages because of the nuances that are evident only from an understanding of Aramaic – the *lingua franca* of the times and places of early Christianity.

