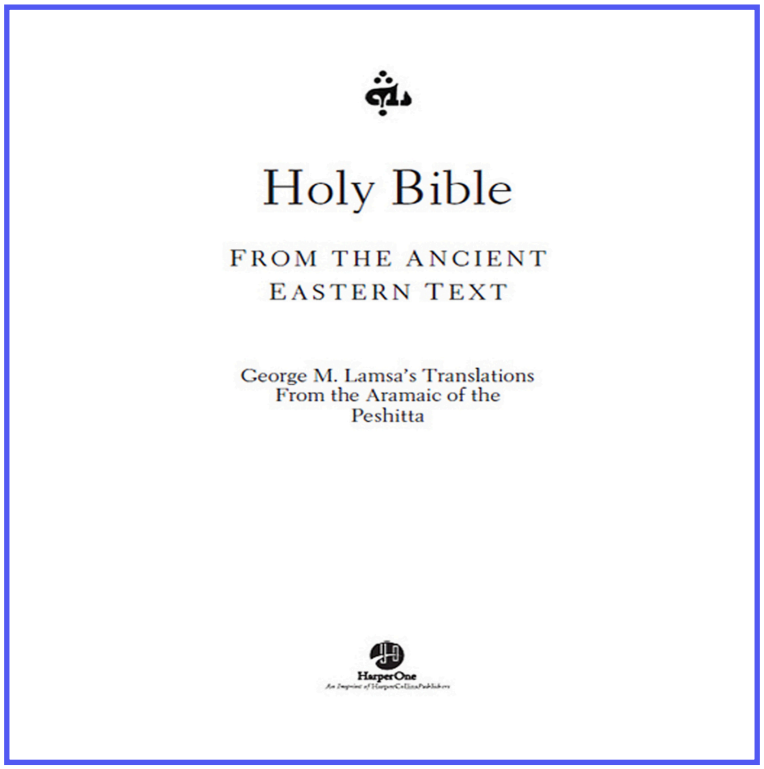


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PREFACE

The favorable reception accorded the Lamsa translation of the Gospels, later of the New Testament and of the Psalms, has prompted us to publish a complete translation of The Holy Bible from the Peshitta, the authorized Bible of the Church of the East. This translation of the Old and New Testaments into English is based on Peshitta manuscripts which have comprised the accepted Bible of all of those Christians who have used Syriac as their language of prayer and worship for many centuries. It is appropriate that as we have translations based on the Greek Septuagint of the Old Testament and on the Latin Bible of Jerome, so also should there be available to the modern reader that form of the text which was translated anciently into a branch of the Aramaic language which has been used by Christians from earliest times.

In the long history of the Aramaic language, there are three periods of special interest to us. From the sixth to the fourth century before Christ, it was a language of empire extending from the borders of Persia to those of Europe, and down the Nile through the length of Egypt. It was in those days spoken and written by the Jewish people at least equally with Hebrew; and so we have parts of Ezra and Daniel, and one verse in Jeremiah (10:11), that were composed in Aramaic and preserved in that ancient form of the language in the midst of the Hebrew Old Testament.

In the first century, Jesus and his earliest followers certainly spoke Aramaic for the most part, although they also knew Hebrew. Therefore the Gospel message was first preached in the Aramaic of the Jews of Palestine. Modern scholarship tells us that the originals of the Four Gospels and of other parts of the New Testament were written in Greek; this is disputed by the Church of the East and by some noted Western scholars. Regardless of which view one may accept, Aramaic speech is an underlying factor and it is unquestionably true that documents written in Aramaic were drawn on by writers of the New Testament, the basic inspired form of the Christian message.

Aramaic was the language of the Church that spread east, almost from the beginning of Christianity, from Antioch and Jerusalem, beyond the

confines of the Roman Empire. This differed from the language of Palestine in choice of words and grammatical forms rather more extensively than does American English from British English and in written form these differences became regular and standardized. The Jews and Christians used the literary dialect of Aramaic that we call Syriac almost at the same time to propagate their translations of the sacred books brought from Palestine and the West, reaching into Syria and Mesopotamia and the nearby mountains, quite early into India, and into China in the course of time. Modern scholarship believes that as happened in other parts of the Church, the earliest copies of the sacred books in Syriac were revised again and again to bring them closer to the standard of the Hebrew and Greek texts from which they were drawn; this view, too, is not accepted by the Church of the East. Under any conditions by the fifth century A.D. the Peshitta version in its present form held the field by universal acclaim.

The fixed stand of the Church of the East with respect to some of the points mentioned above can best be understood by reference to the following letter, which we are authorized to quote, from the Patriarch and Head of that Church:

> Patriarchate of the East, Modesto, California, April 5, 1957
>
> "With reference to your letter concerning Lamsa's translation of the Aramaic Bible, and the originality of the Peshitta text, as the Patriarch and Head of the Holy Apostolic and Catholic Church of the East we wish to state, that the Church of the East received the scriptures from the hands of the blessed Apostles themselves in the Aramaic original, the language spoken by our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and that the Peshitta is the text of the Church of the East which has come down from the Biblical times without any change or revision."
>
> Mar Eshai Shimun
> by Grace, Catholicos Patriarch
> of the East

From the Mediterranean east into India the Peshitta is still the Bible of preference among Christians, though today nearly all who use it speak Arabic, or one of the tongues of South India. West of the Euphrates, spoken Aramaic as a mother-tongue survives today only in two mountain villages

northwest of Damascus, differing as much from the speech of Jesus' day as French from its parent Latin. East of the Euphrates, in the Kurdish mountains, and near Lake Urmia, perhaps a hundred thousand people (Christian, Jew and Muslim) speak another form of it, strangely mixed with borrowed words from the various languages of their polyglot neighbors, but still basically akin to the Aramaic (Syriac) of olden times.

George M. Lamsa, B.A., F.R.S.A., the translator of this work is uniquely fitted for the task to which he has devoted the major part of his life. He is an Assyrian and a native of ancient Biblical lands, where he lived until World War I. Until that time, isolated from the rest of Christendom, his people retained Biblical customs and Semitic culture which had perished everywhere else. This background, together with his knowledge of the Aramaic (Syriac) language, has enabled him to recover much of the meaning that has been lost in other translations of the Scriptures.

Manuscripts used in making this translation were the Codex Ambrosianus for the Old Testament and the so-called Mortimer-McCawley manuscript for the New Testament; the former is in the Ambrosian Library at Milan, Italy, and has been identified as fifth century A.D.; the latter was used for our previous translation of the New Testament, of which this edition is a revision, and has been variously identified as sixth or seventh century A.D. Comparisons have been had with Peshitta manuscripts in the Morgan Library, New York, N. Y., with manuscripts in the Freer Collection, Washington, D. C., with the Urumiah edition, and with a manuscript of the Peshitta Old Testament in the British Museum, the oldest *dated* Biblical manuscript in existence. Our translator states that comparisons show no differences in text between these various manuscripts, and that he has filled in the few missing portions of Chronicles from other authentic Peshitta sources, as noted in his Introduction.

We hope that this translation will be of aid to Bible readers and students in obtaining a more thorough and complete understanding of the Scriptures.

THE PUBLISHER

INTRODUCTION

North of the Garden of Eden in the basin of the river Tigris, in the mountain fastnesses of what is known today as Kurdistan, there lived an ancient people, the descendants of the Assyrians, the founders of the great Assyrian empire and culture in Bible days, the originators of the alphabet and many sciences which contributed so generously to the Semitic culture from which sprang our Bible. These people, the Assyrians, played an important part in the history of the Near East, of the Bible, and of religion in general.

When Nineveh was destroyed in 612 B.C., many of the princes and noblemen of this once vast empire fled northward into inaccessible mountains where they remained secluded and cut off until the dawn of the twentieth century. Nahum says: “Thy shepherds slumber, O king of Assyria: thy nobles shall dwell in the dust: thy people is scattered upon the mountains, and no man gathereth them.” Nah. 3:18.

Some descendants of the Assyrians and some of the descendants of the ten tribes who were taken captive by the Assyrian kings in 721 B.C., and settled in Assyria, Babylon, Persia and other places east of the river Euphrates, were among the first converts to Christianity.

When Jesus sent seventy of his disciples to preach the gospel, he instructed them not to go in the way of the Gentiles or into any city of the Samaritans but to go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, meaning the ten tribes who were lost from the house of Israel. Some of the descendants of these Hebrew tribes are still living in Iraq, Iran, and Turkey, and most of them still converse in Aramaic. Jesus’ command was carried out. The gospel was preached to the Jews first. “Now those who had been dispersed by the persecution which occurred on account of Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and even to the land of Cyprus and to Antioch, preaching the word to none but to the Jews only.” Acts 11:19.

The Assyrians remained dormant during the Persian, Greek, Roman and Arab conquests. Being isolated and surrounded by their enemies, they remained secluded throughout the centuries, thus preserving the Aramaic language, which was the language of the Near East, and perpetuating the ancient Biblical customs and manners which were common to all races and

peoples in this part of the ancient world. Not until the Turkish reign did these isolated Assyrian tribes recognize any government or pay any taxes. During the centuries of Arab and Turkish reigns, the Assyrians retained their cultural independence, later recognizing the sympathetic Turkish rule which permitted the continuation of their institutions and their religion. Under magnanimous Turks they were ruled by their patriarchs and chiefs, paying a nominal tax to the Turkish government.

The Assyrian church, or as it is known, the ancient Apostolic and Catholic Church of the East, was one of the strongest Christian churches in the world and was noted for its missions in the Middle East, India, and China. Its missionaries carried the Christian gospel as far as China and Mongolia, Indonesia, Japan and other parts of the world. Not until the 14th century was this church rivaled by any other church in the world. It was the most powerful branch of Christendom in the Near East, Palestine, Arabia, Lebanon, Iran, India and elsewhere.

All the literature of this church was written in literary Aramaic, the lingua franca of that time. This is corroborated by Dr. Arnold J. Toynbee in his *A Study of History* wherein he writes: "…Darius the Great's account of his own acts on the rock of Behistan, overhanging the Empire's great north-east road, was transcribed in triplicate in three different adaptations of the cuneiform script conveying the three imperial capitals: Elamite for Susa, Medo-Persian for Ecbatana, and Akkadian for Babylon. But the winning language within this universal state was none of the three thus officially honoured; it was Aramaic, with its handier alphabetic script. The sequel showed that commerce and culture may be more important than politics in making a language's fortune; for the speakers of Aramaic were politically of no account in the Achaemenian Empire…"[1]

The Persians used the Aramaic language because this tongue was the language of the two Semitic empires, the empire of Assyria and the empire of Babylon. Aramaic was so firmly established as the lingua franca that no government could dispense with its use as a vehicle of expression in a far-flung empire, especially in the western provinces. Moreover, without schools and other modern facilities, Aramaic could not be replaced by the speech of conquering nations. Conquerors were not interested in imposing their languages and cultures on subjugated peoples. What they wanted was taxes, spoils, and other levies.

The transition from Aramaic[2] into Arabic, a sister tongue, took place after the conquest of the Near East by the Moslem armies in the 7th century, A.D. Nevertheless, Aramaic lingered for many centuries and still is spoken in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and northwestern Iran, as well as among the Christian Arab tribes in northern Arabia. Its alphabet was borrowed by the Hebrews, Arabs, Iranians, and Mongols.

Dr. Philip K. Hitti, noted historian and Professor of Semitic languages at Princeton University, in his book *The History of the Arabs,* uses the terms *Aramaic* and *Syriac* interchangeably and states that Aramaic is still a living language. He says, "In country places and on their farms these dhimmis clung to their ancient cultural patterns and preserved their native languages: Aramaic and Syriac in Syria and Al-'Iraq, Iranian in Persia and Coptic in Egypt." And again, "In Al-'Iraq and Syria the transition from one Semitic tongue, the Aramaic, to another, the Arabic, was of course easier. In the out-of-the-way places, however, such as the Lebanons with their preponderant Christian population, the native Syriac put up a desperate fight and has lingered until modern times. Indeed Syriac is still spoken in Ma'lula and two other villages in Anti-Lebanon. With its disappearance, Aramaic has left in the colloquial Arabic unmistakable traces noticeable in vocabulary, accent and grammatical structure."[3]

The late Dr. W. A. Wigram in *The Assyrians and Their Neighbours* wrote: "One thing is certain, that the Assyrians boast with justice that they alone of all Christian nations still keep as their spoken language what is acknowledged to be the language of Palestine in the first century…"[4]

Quoting Dr. Toynbee again from *A Study of History:* "…As for the Aramaic alphabet, it achieved far wider conquests. In 1599 A.D., it was adopted for the conveyance of the Manchu language on the eve of the Manchu conquest of China. The higher religions sped it on its way by taking it into their service. In its 'Square Hebrew' variant it became the vehicle of the Jewish Scriptures and liturgy; in an Arabic adaptation it became the alphabet of Islam…"[5]

As a miracle of miracles, Aramaic and most of the ancient Biblical customs which were common to Semitic people have survived in northern Iraq until today. Aramaic is still spoken in Iraq and in northwestern Iran by remnants of the Assyrian people and the Jews of the exile, and the literary Aramaic remains the same today as it was of yore. Some of the Aramaic words which are still retained in all Bible versions are still used in the

Aramaic language spoken today: for example, *Raca, Ethpatakh, Rabbuli, Lemana, Shabakthani, Talitha Koomi, Maran Etha, Manna, Khakal-Dema.*

As we have said, the survival of this small remnant of this segment of the ancient Semitic culture was due to the isolation, tenacity, and warlike character of the Assyrian people who were living isolated, now under the Parthian Empire, now under the Persian Empire, now under the Arabian Empire and now under the Turkish Empire. And because of this isolation, these ancient Christians had hardly any contact with Christians in the West. Only one of their bishops and a deacon participated in the Nicene Council in 325 A.D.

After the conversion of Emperor Constantine to Christianity in 318 A.D., Christians in the Persian Empire who hitherto had been tolerated and looked upon as the enemies of Rome, the persecutor of Christianity, now were looked upon as the friends of the Christian emperor, Constantine, and the enemies of the Persian government. Persecution of these Christians did not begin until the 4th century A.D., and lasted until the Arab conquest of Persia, 632 A.D. This is why this ancient Church was unable to establish contacts with Western Christianity.

The Scriptures in the Church of the East, from the inception of Christianity to the present day, are in Aramaic and have never been tampered with or revised, as attested by the present Patriarch of the Church of the East. The Biblical manuscripts were carefully and zealously handed down from one generation to another and kept in the massive stone walls of the ancient churches and in caves. They were written on parchment and many of them survive to the present day. When these texts were copied by expert scribes, they were carefully examined for accuracy before they were dedicated and permitted to be read in churches. Even one missing letter would render the text void. Easterners still adhere to God's commandment not to add to or omit a word from the Scriptures. The Holy Scripture condemns any addition or subtraction or modification of the Word of God.

"You shall not add to the commandment which I command you, neither shall you take from it, but you must keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you." Deut. 4:2.

"Everything that I command you, that you must be careful to do; you shall not add nor take from it." Deut. 12:32.

"Do not add to his words; lest he reprove you, and you be found a liar." Prov. 30:6.

“And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his portion from the tree of life and from the holy city and from the things which are written in this book.” Rev. 22:19.

It is also true of the Jews and Moslems that they would not dare to alter a word of the Torah or Koran. Easterners are afraid that they may incur the curse if they make a change in the Word of God.

Some of these ancient manuscripts go back to the 5th century A.D. The oldest dated Biblical manuscript in the world is that of the four Books of Moses, 464 A.D., which now lies in the British Museum. Another one is the Codex Ambrosianus. Some of it goes back to the 7th century, some of it to the 5th century, and some of it might be earlier. This Codex is not the work of one man. Apparently some portions were written before the vowel system was invented and that would put it prior to the 5th century. The Pentateuch of the British Museum must have been written before the vowel system was invented. Aramaic documents of the 5th century and later use the vowel system, some of them fully and some in part. It is interesting to know that this vowel system was adopted by the Jews and was begun about the 5th century, A.D. In some portions of the above texts, the old Aramaic original consonantal spelling without apparatus of vowel points is well preserved. This is also true of some of the New Testament texts in the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York City.

Unfortunately many ancient and valuable Aramaic texts were lost during World War I. But printed copies of them, carefully made by American missionaries under the help and guidance of competent native scholars, are available. Moreover, a number of ancient New Testament texts, some of them going back to the 5th century A.D. are in various libraries. The New Testament texts in the Pierpont Morgan Library are among the oldest in existence.

The translator of this work has access to the existing texts; he has spent many years comparing them in the course of translating the Bible.

Astonishingly enough, all the Peshitta texts in Aramaic agree. There is one thing of which the Eastern scribes can boast: they copied their holy books diligently, faithfully, and meticulously. Sir Frederick Kenyon, Curator of the British Museum, in his book *Textual Criticism of the New Testament,* speaks highly of the accuracy of copying and of the antiquity of Peshitta MSS.

The versions translated from Semitic languages into Greek and Latin were subject to constant revisions. Learned men who copied them introduced changes, trying to simplify obscurities and ambiguities which were due to the work of the first translators. Present translators and Bible revisers do the same when translating the Bible, treaties, and documents from one language to another. The American Constitution, written in English, will always remain the same when new copies are made, but translations into other languages will be subject to revision. Therefore, a copy of the United States Constitution published ten years ago is far more valuable than a translation made two hundred years ago. Translations are always subject to revisions and disputes over exact meaning because words and terms of speech in one language cannot be translated easily into another without loss. This is one reason why we have so many translations and revisions of the King James version.

As said before, Aramaic was the language of Semitic culture, the language of the Hebrew patriarchs and, in the older days, the lingua franca of the Fertile Crescent. The term “Hebrew” is derived from the Aramaic word *Abar* or *Habar* which means “to cross over.” This name was given to the Hebrew people simply because Abraham and the people who were with him crossed the river Euphrates and went to Palestine. Therefore, they were known by those who lived east of the river Euphrates as Hebrews, that is, “the people across the river.” All branches of the great Semitic people had a common speech. How could the people of Nineveh have understood Jonah, a Hebrew prophet, had the Biblical Hebrew tongue been different from Aramaic? There were some differences similar to the differences we have in English spoken in Tennessee and that spoken in New York.

This small pastoral Hebrew tribe through which God chose to reveal himself to mankind, for several generations continued to keep its paternal and racial relations with the people who lived in Padan-Aram (Mesopotamia), and preserved customs and manners which they brought with them from Padan-Aram, and the language which their fathers spoke. Jacob changed the name of Luz to Beth-el (Aramaic—the house of God). Abraham instructed his servant not to let his son, Isaac, marry a Palestinian maid but to go to Padan-Aram to his own kindred from whence to bring a maid to his son. Years later, Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, went to Padan-Aram and married his uncle’s two daughters and their handmaids and lived in Haran about twenty years. Eleven of his sons were born in