

Classical Syriac



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Classical Syriac

Arman Akopian

Gorgias Press LLC, 954 River Road, Piscataway, NJ, 08854, USA

www.gorgiaspress.com

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2019



ISBN 978-1-4632-3979-4

ISSN 1935-6838

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A Cataloging-in-Publication Record is available from the Library of Congress.

Printed in the United States of America



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PREFACE

The Syriac language is one of the classical tongues of early Christian thought, and, as such, garners a lot of interest particularly from theologians, historians, and culturologists. As an Aramaic dialect, it is also of considerable interest to scholars of Semitic languages. The Syriac language produced a rich body of original literature and served as a medium through which the most valuable writings of Antiquity were passed on to the Arabs, who in turn returned them to medieval Europe. Since the 13th century AD, Syriac declined as a language of active literary activity, but it continued to serve as the liturgical language of several Middle Eastern churches called “the Churches of the Syriac tradition.” Today, it is a source of great pride and an object of admiration for the Syriac / Aramean / Assyrian / Chaldean people scattered throughout the Middle East and the diaspora.

Syriac can be found in the curricula of many leading universities and theological schools. International symposia and numerous scholarly publications deal with the language along with the rich cultural and spiritual heritage it produced and served. Since the late Middle Ages, many Syriac textbooks and grammars have been published, but their number remains relatively small compared to the impressive volume of literature devoted to, for example, Arabic and Hebrew, which are languages related to Syriac.

This manual¹ is conceived as an academic one and is primarily intended for college and theological academy students; it can also be used as a “self-teaching” grammar book. An introductory course of eight lessons presents the Syriac phonology and script, followed by the basic course of 40 lessons. The book is specifically designed to fit into one academic year.

Every effort has been made to present the grammar simply and concisely, using grammatical terms that should be familiar to students from high school language courses. The paragraphs explaining grammar and the sentences in the reading sections are numbered for the sake of convenience. The Syriac texts of the basic course contain letter-marked footnotes that refer to the sections containing relevant grammatical material. This is done for students to be able to revisit the already-studied grammatical phenomena, refresh them in memory, and better assimilate them through new examples.

It is common knowledge that foreign grammar is mastered more through examples than exposition. Therefore, the examples engaging the new words and

¹ The Armenian original of this manual was published by the Yerevan State University in 2005.

expressions of the current lesson have been extended as far as possible. It should be remembered that new words are easier to remember in word combinations and short phrases, rather than separately, as a list.

The reading material is widely borrowed from the Syriac translation of the New Testament, which left a strong impact on the general style of the Syriac language, as well as from fables, fairy tales, the “Book of Laughable Stories” by the great Syriac polymath of the 13th century Gregory bar Hebraeus, and other works of Syriac literature.

At the same time, it was not considered obligatory to borrow every possible sequence of words from an existing old text. Mastering a language as an adult is not unlike mastering a musical instrument, which starts with the playing of scales and simple etudes. That is why the introductory lessons contain texts and dialogues that were composed specifically for this manual in order to make the introduction to the language more comfortable. They are also intended to present Syriac as a living language as much as possible. For the same reason, some texts were taken from the “Lessons in Reading” by Abdel-Masih Qarabashi, who treats the language in the same manner.

Still, Syriac is usually viewed as a dead language. Although efforts to restore it as a means of daily communication never cease¹, opportunities to converse in it do not present themselves very often; classical texts and comparative linguistics remain the main incentives for the study of the language. Therefore, the manual does not contain exercises aimed at the development of communication skills. Exercises of a mechanical nature are also reduced to the necessary minimum. Instead, the main emphasis is placed on translation from English to Syriac, as it is the most effective exercise, enabling students to engage in active and creative “language building” and better utilize the accumulated grammar and vocabulary². It is recommended to “play” with the sentence in the translation process—to change the gender and/or the number of the subject, try different attributes, switch to a different tense, turn it into a question, try to transform it into a simple dialogue, etc. The act of translating itself should matter more than arriving at an im-

¹ The Syriac language intended for modern usage is referred to as *Kthobonoyo*, or “the written (language).” Its main features include numerous neologisms, resemanticized words, and a simpler syntax (for more see George A. Kiraz, *Kthobonoyo Syriac: Some Observations and Remarks*, Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies, Vol. 10.2, pp. 129–142).

² The bulk of Syriac literature that scholars of Syriac usually deal with is either religious in nature or heavily influenced by religious imagery and ways of thinking. That is why the English sentences for translation inevitably contain religious themes and expressions. This in no way should be regarded as propaganda for a particular religion or an assault on the secular principles of education.

peccable translation. It is important to note that some semantic and syntactic distortions were deliberately made in the English sentences in order to hint at the right word and correct syntax in Syriac. In certain cases, the right Syriac word or optional “hinting” English words or word combinations are included in brackets. The English-Syriac dictionary contains all the necessary words for the translations, as well as those that are not used in them but are among the most frequently used in general.

Unlike other Semitic languages, Syriac has a fairly free syntax, so the book is not overloaded with excessive descriptions of syntactic features. It is anticipated that the more students interact with the language, the easier it will be for them to fix certain syntactic phenomena in their minds, derive patterns, and come to appropriate generalizations and conclusions on their own¹.

As previously indicated, the book can be used for self-study. For this purpose, it does not presuppose familiarity with other Semitic languages or contain comparisons or parallels to them (except for several cases in the phonology section). This, however, seems quite appropriate when using the book in Oriental departments, where Syriac is often studied as a second or third Semitic language.

In order to facilitate self-study, the first twenty lessons contain transcriptions, which are relatively simplistic and do not pretend to be strictly scientific in nature.

In the final section of the book, in which the language becomes more complex, the footnotes indicate the relevant book and chapter of the Bible from which the text originates. Since the correct perception and translation of the text may present certain difficulties for those unfamiliar with the stylistic features of biblical narrative, these references provide an opportunity to check the text against translations in other languages.

After lessons 25, 30, 35, and 40, texts for additional reading are included, and it is strongly recommended not to skip them. The readings after lesson 35 contain the Lord’s Prayer and the Nicene Creed, which students are encouraged to learn by heart.

The Reader contains a selection of Syriac texts of various genres and degrees of complexity. Some texts contain vowel-signs, while others do not. The Syriac-English dictionary² contains the entire vocabulary of the Reader, as well as

¹ For a more detailed analysis of the syntax it is recommended to consult the *Compendious Syriac Grammar* by Theodor Nöldeke or the *Syrische Grammatik* by Carl Brockelmann.

² The Reader, the Syriac-English and English-Syriac dictionaries are available for free download at <https://www.gorgiaspress.com/arman-akopian-classical-syriac-download>.

the entire vocabulary of the New Testament with the exception of rare words and names¹.

At the end of the book, students will find the keys to the reading exercises of the introductory course and the first ten lessons of the basic course.

Syriac script has three varieties—Estrangela, Serto, and East Syriac (“Nestorian”). The book starts with Serto because of its more relaxed vocalization system. Later on, Estrangela and the East Syriac varieties are also introduced². It is necessary to peruse the relevant sections of the “Appendices” when these scripts first appear in the lessons. It should be remembered that a good command of the Syriac language implies equal mastery of all three varieties of its script.

Along with the differences in the script, there are also two traditional systems of reading in Syriac that have some minor differences—Western (Syriac Orthodox and Catholic Churches, Maronite Church) and Eastern (Assyrian Church of the East, Chaldean Catholic Church). This book follows the academic pronunciation, which is believed to reflect the original Aramaic dialect of Edessa upon which Classical Syriac is based³. Academic pronunciation is closer to the Eastern system of reading, but the main features of West Syriac are also properly addressed to ensure an adequate familiarity with them.

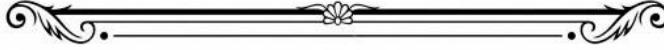
The territorial and denominational fragmentation of the Syriacs resulted in the absence of a unified standard of spelling, vocalization, and punctuation, even within the same variety of script. Those who choose this book for studying Syriac, even though it inevitably reflects this lack of uniformity, should be prepared to encounter other spelling and vocalization options for familiar words, especially those that are borrowed.

Arman Akopian

¹ The original Syriac-Armenian dictionary was converted into Syriac-English with the use of the *Sedra* lexical tools of the Beth Mardutho Syriac Institute.

² This book uses the Meltho Unicode OpenType fonts and the Estrangelo Edessa font of the Microsoft Windows operating system.

³ Combining Serto, a West Syriac script variety, with the academic pronunciation results in some artificiality in several cases, which can be safely ignored.



A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORY OF THE SYRIAC LANGUAGE

The Syriac language belongs to the Semitic group of the language family formerly known as “Semitic-Hamitic.” The term “Semitic-Hamitic” was coined by German linguist Karl Richard Lepsius (1810–1884). The origins of these terms are found in the biblical genealogy of peoples, according to which two of Noah’s sons, Shem and Ham, were the progenitors of the Asian and African peoples, respectively. In 1950, American linguist Joseph Harold Greenberg (1915–2001) proposed the term “Afro-Asiatic,” and it was largely adopted by the scientific community.

The Semitic group is represented by a large number of extinct and living languages. There are several classifications of these languages, the most common of which is based on geographical criteria; it divides the Semitic language group into three subgroups: Northeastern, Northwestern, and Southern.

The Northeastern (or East Semitic) subgroup includes the oldest recorded Semitic language, Akkadian. It was the official and spoken language of two powerful states, Assyria (in North Mesopotamia) and Babylon (in South Mesopotamia), and is known from numerous cuneiform inscriptions. Another language of the Northeast subgroup is Eblaite, named after the ancient city of Ebla in Syria. Neither of the two Northeastern languages has living descendants today.

The Northwestern subgroup (West Semitic) includes the so-called “Canaanite”¹ languages. They included the Canaanite language proper, Phoenician, which is almost identical to Canaanite, and Hebrew, which originated from Canaanite. Closely related to them were the languages of Transjordan of the first millennium BC (the territory east of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea)—Moabite, Ammonite, and Edomite. Canaan and Phoenicia are believed to be the birthplace of the first alphabetical script in the history of mankind, which was consonantal in nature (reflecting mostly the consonants). Known as “Phoenician,” this script was spread by the Phoenician colonists all over the Mediterranean, where it was developed into the Greek and Latin scripts. Two other languages, Ugaritic and Amorite,

¹ Canaan is the ancient name of the combined territories of modern Israel and Lebanon.

share many common features with the Canaanite languages and are often combined with them in the same group.

Aramaic, with its numerous dialects, represents another branch of the Northwestern Semitic languages (see below).

Unlike East Semitic languages, which have no living descendants, the West Semitic languages are currently represented by the official language of the State of Israel, Modern Hebrew, as well as modern Aramaic dialects.

The South subgroup of the Semitic languages includes Arabic, the most widespread Semitic language today, with close to 300 million speakers. Arabic is known for its many dialects, one of which developed into an independent language, the Maltese. Arabic uses a script that descends from the Aramaic script of the ancient kingdom of Nabatea, at the south of the Dead Sea.

The South Semitic group also includes the ancient “South Arabian” languages (Sabaic, Minaic, Qatabanic, and Hadramitic), and several living languages in the south of the Arabian Peninsula with a small number of speakers (Soqotri, Mehri, Shehri). Ancient South Arabian languages used a consonantal script, with many varieties, related in nature to the Phoenician script

Closely related to the South Arabian languages are the Semitic languages of Ethiopia or Ethio-Semitic languages. The oldest is Ge‘ez, the official and spoken language of the ancient Kingdom of Aksum, and the current official language of the Ethiopian Orthodox and Catholic Churches. There are more than a dozen living Ethio-Semitic languages in Ethiopia and Eritrea. The most important is Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia, followed by Tigrinya (Tigray), Tigre, and several smaller languages. Amharic and Tigrinya use the Ge‘ez syllabary, which is believed to have descended from the South Arabian script.

* * *

The ancient history of Arameans is known from ancient written sources, which can be divided into three main groups: a) Assyrian, Babylonian, Egyptian, and others; b) biblical; and c) Aramean proper (a few inscriptions discovered during archaeological excavations).

In the last quarter of the second millennium BC, nomadic and semi-nomadic Aramean tribes occupied the northeastern edges of the Arabian Peninsula. From there, they moved to the northwest, mainly along the Euphrates. Despite the fierce resistance of the Assyrians, they gradually established themselves on the Syrian steppe, the right bank of the Middle Euphrates, and in Upper Mesopotamia,

which appears in the Old Testaments as *Aram-Naharayim*, or “the Aram of the Two Rivers (presumably Euphrates and its tributary Khabur). Several Aramean tribes settled in the south of Mesopotamia. Known as “Chaldeans,” they soon became the domineering ethnic group of this region.

In the 10th century BC, the Arameans established several states in North Mesopotamia and Syria, such as Beth Bahyani, Beth Zammani, Laqe, Beth Adini, Sam'al, Beth Gush, Hamath, and finally Aram of Damascus, the most powerful Aramean state ever to exist; its confrontation with ancient Israel is recorded in the Old Testament. In the 9th–8th centuries, Assyrians destroyed all these Aramean states and deported parts of their population to the hinterland of Assyria. As a result, the already large number of Arameans in the overall population of Mesopotamia grew even more.

To the Old Testament sources and, to a lesser extent, Assyrian sources, “Aram” is also a personal name. At least four people are mentioned by that name, including Shem’s younger son, who is also Noah’s grandson. The presence of men named “Aram” in Hebrew genealogies, particularly within the family of Abraham, is an important evidence of the kinship between the Hebrews and the Arameans. It is obvious that, due to the strengthening hand of the Arameans in the Middle Eastern geopolitics of the period, the biblical authors tried to emphasize this kinship. Not only did they keep “Arams” in their genealogies, but they also did not find it necessary to revise the story of Abraham’s descendants travelling from Canaan to their relatives in the areas inhabited by the Arameans in search of wives. Isaac married Rebecca, “the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-Aram” (Gen. 25:20), and Jacob married Leah and Rachel, daughters of “Laban the Aramean” (Gen. 31:20). Moreover, Jacob, who was the progenitor of the twelve tribes of Israel, is called the “wandering Aramean” in the Old Testament (Deut. 26:5).

Centuries after the fall of their ancient states, Arameans managed to restore their statehood at least twice, but national unity always remained beyond their reach. Throughout the 3,000 years of their history, Arameans remained a divided people, and as a result, Aramaic manifested itself in numerous dialects, some of which have become full-fledged and well-developed literary languages.

The large number of extant texts and their dialectal diversity and dispersion over time and territory, stand in the way of creating a generally accepted periodization of the history of the Aramaic language. In 1966, American biblical scholar and semitologist Joseph Fitzmyer (1920–2016) proposed a periodization that is based on a chronological approach and considers Aramaic in cultural, religious, socio-linguistic, and historical contexts. According to Fitzmyer, the history of Ar-

amaic is divided into the following “phases”: **Old Aramaic** (925–700 BC), **Imperial Aramaic** (700–200 BC), **Middle Aramaic** (200 BC–200 AD), **Late Aramaic** (200–700 AD), and **Modern Aramaic** (modern Aramaic dialects). German semitologist Klaus Beyer (1929–2014) developed another periodization, purely based on linguistic criteria, by considering the language in the context of comparative and historical linguistics. According to him, the history of the Aramaic language consists of three large periods: Old, Middle, and Modern. The dialects of each of these periods are genealogically divided into eastern and western groups, whereas in Fitzmyer’s classification such divisions are clearly fixed only for Late and Modern Aramaic.

The majority of the **Old Aramaic** inscriptions were discovered on the territories of the above-mentioned Aramean states. In the late second to early first millennium BC, Arameans, alongside Hebrews, began using the Phoenician script. It was Arameans who preserved and developed that script after the demise of Phoenicians and Canaanites. Later, they spread various modifications of this script to Central Asia and China, just as Phoenicians had spread it across the Mediterranean basin.

With the drastic increase in the number of Arameans in the population of Mesopotamia, Aramaic gradually began to oust the Akkadian language, which dominated Mesopotamia for a millennium and a half. Eventually, Aramaic received an equal status with Akkadian as an official language of the Neo-Assyrian Empire (8th–6th centuries BC). This was the result of the mass Aramaization of the population and also the simplicity of the Aramaic script with its 22 characters as opposed to the bulky Akkadian cuneiform script, which required years to master.

The same was true of the situation in the south of Mesopotamia, in Babylonia, where, in 627, a Chaldean Nabu-apla-usur, better known as “Nabopolassar,” came to power and established the Neo-Babylonian Empire under the rule of the Chaldean Dynasty. Because of the dominance of Aramaic in Mesopotamia, it also became the *lingua franca*, i.e. the main language of communication, throughout the entire Middle East and the main language of diplomatic correspondence.

The Aramiazation of Mesopotamia became irreversible after the Babylonians and Medes destroyed the Assyrian state in 612 BC, and eliminated most of the Assyrian political and intellectual elite, the last guardians of the traditions of the Assyrian national identity and statehood. In Babylonia, the same process was accelerated when Nabonidus seized power in 556. He relied largely on the Aramean tribes of Mesopotamia, and, with the assistance of the Aramean priesthood, encouraged the cult of the Aramean lunar god Sahar (Sin) at the expense of the head

of the Babylonian pantheon, Marduk. Nabonidus' policies were aimed, in essence, at eliminating the last Akkadian elements in Babylonia and its total Aramaization.

When the Neo-Babylonian Empire, in turn, fell under the blows of the Achaemenid King Cyrus of Persia in 539, the dominance of Aramaic in Mesopotamia left Persians no other choice but to make it the official language of their western provinces, including Egypt, and later, of all of the Achaemenid Empire. The use of Aramaic as the official language of three empires, Neo-Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian and, especially, Achaemenid, gave reason to call the language of this period "Imperial."

A year after his conquest of Babylon, Cyrus issued a decree allowing Jews who had been deported to Babylonia and spoke the Aramaic language of their captors to return to Judea. Upon their return to Palestine, Jews discovered that Hebrew had been replaced by Aramaic as a spoken language there as well. When reading the Torah (Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, or Tanakh) and other sacred texts, the priests had to simultaneously translate them into Aramaic since the common people did not understand Hebrew very well despite its similarity to Aramaic.

The main specimens of Imperial Aramaic come from Aramaic-speaking Jews. They are divided into two main groups. The first consists of the Aramaic fragments of the Old Testament Books of Ezra and Daniel, written in pure and well-developed Aramaic, which is usually called "Biblical." The second group contains the papyrus archive of the Jewish mercenaries who served in a Persian garrison on the Nile island of Elephantine in Egypt. The texts include the Aramaic translation of the renowned Behistun inscription of the Achaemenid King Darius I and the "Tale of Akhiqar the Sage," believed to be the oldest surviving specimen of Aramean folklore. It contains the story of Akhiqar, the secretary of the Assyrian kings Sennacherib and Esarhaddon, and the words of wisdom attributed to him.

In addition to Jews, there were also Aramean mercenaries in Egypt, who left behind their own archive. Other Aramaic texts from Egypt include the archive of Arsham, the Achaemenid governor of Egypt, and Aramaic fragments written in the Egyptian Demotic script. The language of all these texts is sometimes called "Egyptian Aramaic," but it is, in essence, the same as Imperial Aramaic. In addition to Judea and Egypt, samples of Imperial Aramaic also came from Mesopotamia, the Arabian Peninsula, Iran, Central Asia, and Anatolia.

The **Middle** period of the history of Aramaic began in the 3rd century BC after the fall of the Alexander the Great's empire, when two Hellenistic kingdoms emerged on its ruins in the East—the kingdom of the Seleucids in Syria and Mes-

opotamia, and the kingdom of the Ptolemies in Egypt. In these countries, Greek replaced Aramaic as the official language, but, by that time, Aramaic had almost completely replaced all the Semitic languages of the Middle East as a spoken language, with the exception of Arabic in Arabia and some parts of Mesopotamia, and Phoenician, which resisted Aramaic until approximately the 2nd century AD. Most Semitic peoples were either completely Aramaized, such as the peoples of Mesopotamia, or spoke mostly Aramaic while maintaining their national identity, like Jews and some Arab tribes of northern Arabia and Mesopotamia.

Aramaic's division into two big dialectal groups, Eastern and Western, became more pronounced during this period. The dialects of Mesopotamia belonged to the Eastern group and those of Syria, Palestine, and Transjordan to the Western. The differences between the two groups were particularly noticeable in comparison with Imperial Aramaic, with its homogeneity and high degree of standardization.

The Eastern Aramaic group included the dialect used as an official language by Parthian Arsacids of Iran ("Arsacid Aramaic"), and small kingdoms in Mesopotamia which were incorporated into the Arsacid Empire—Hatra, Adiabene (Hedhayab), and Mesene (Mayshan). Samples of Aramaic, close to the Arsacid standards, were also found in Armenia and Georgia, where, prior to the creation of local scripts, Aramaic was widely used in state chancelleries.

Aramaic began to yield its position as the official language to Parthian by the end of the 2nd century AD, that is, at the end of the Parthian era itself. The Parthian language used a script that originated from Aramaic. The Parthian-Aramaic script later developed into the scripts of other Iranian languages, namely Pahlavi (Middle Persian), which had become the sole official language of Sasanian Iran, and Sogdian in Central Asia by the middle of the 3rd century AD. The latter was borrowed by Uyghurs, a people of Turkic origin, and from them by Mongols, evolving into the Mongolian vertical script that is still in use in Chinese Inner Mongolia.

The most notable representative of the Eastern dialects is the Aramaic of Edessa (Urhai), the capital of a small Aramean state of Osrhoene in North Mesopotamia (132 BC—243 AD). More than a hundred epigraphic inscriptions and several non-epigraphic texts made in the local Aramaic cursive called *Estrangela* (from the Greek *στρογγύλη*, "roundish") survive from Osrhoene.

Bordering on the Aramaic dialects of Mesopotamia and sharing many common features with them, was Palmyra: the spoken and written language of the most famous of all Aramean states. Under Queen Zenobia (267–273), Palmyra acquired a political and economic might unprecedented for the Arameans since the

fall of Aram of Damascus, but it fell under the Roman blows, outlasting Osrhoene by thirty years. The Aramaic script used in Palmyra had two varieties—monumental, used in lapidary inscriptions, and cursive, known from the graffiti inscribed or scratched on rocks and walls by ordinary citizens. A dialect close to Palmyrene Aramaic was used in Dura-Europos, a Hellenistic city on the middle Euphrates.

The Aramaic of Palmyra and Dura-Europos is the only Middle Aramaic dialect of Syria that was reduced to writing. Virtually nothing is known of other Syrian dialects, namely those of Damascus and Aleppo. This is largely due to the fact that the position of the Greek language was very strong in central and western (coastal) Syria, and Aramaic was rarely used for official records until the 4th century AD. Arameans who lived in these regions, like many Jews in Palestine, had been Hellenized since the time of the Seleucids. Nothing is known about the dialect of one of the main centers of Hellenized Arameans, the city of Emesa, where a local Aramean-Arab dynasty ruled from the 1st century BC until the middle of the 3rd century AD.

In the central regions of Transjordan, located to the south of Syria, a dialect similar to the Aramaic dialects of Palestine has been attested. However, better known is the Aramaic dialect of the southern regions of Transjordan, part of the Nabatean Kingdom. Nabatea was primarily known for its magnificent capital, Petra, a city located in the crevices of mountains and mostly carved out of their rocky slopes. Unlike Osrhoene and Palmyra, Nabatea was not an Aramean state, as its population was mostly of Arabic origin. Aramaic, however, was used as an official language, and the local Aramaic script is believed to be the prototype of the Arabic Kufi script, from which the modern Arabic script evolved.

The Western group is presented by the Aramaic dialects of Palestine—Galilean, and Judean, which only slightly differed from each other and are collectively known as the “Palestinian Jewish Aramaic.” It was not only a spoken but also a written language, widely used in Jewish religious schools, called *yeshivas*. It was also the official language of Judea during the reign of the Hasmonean dynasty (147–34).

Of the Jewish religious texts, the translations of the books of the Tanakh, known as the *Targums* (Aramaic “translation”), go back to the oral interpretations and paraphrases in Aramaic used by the Jewish priesthood to convey Hebrew Scriptures to the postexilic Aramaic-speaking Jews. In addition to the two main Targums, those of Onkelos and Jonathan, there are several other minor translations.

There are other texts in Palestinian Jewish Aramaic that go beyond the Jewish canon—Apocrypha or Pseudepigrapha. They include the writings of the Jewish sect of the Essenes that are of great historical, religious, and linguistic value. The remnants of an Essene library, known as the “Dead Sea Scrolls,” were found in the 1940s in the caves northwest of the Dead Sea, near the ruins of the ancient settlement of Qumran. There are more than 600 parchment manuscripts sealed in jars. Most of the texts are in Hebrew and only a small part is in Aramaic. Both languages are written in the Aramaic script that resembles that of the Elephantine archive; because of the shape of its letters, this variety of Aramaic script is known as “square”.

Other specimens of Palestinian Jewish Aramaic include the documents from “Babtha’s archive”, a Jewish woman from Nabatea, inscriptions on the walls of synagogues and ossuaries (small limestone sarcophagi, in which the Jews buried their dead), graffiti on ostraca (pieces of pottery). Palestinian Jewish Aramaic was apparently the original language of the “Jewish War” by Josephus Flavius, which tells the history of Judea since the capture of Jerusalem by the Seleucids in 164 BC until the defeat of the first anti-Roman Jewish revolt of 70 BC.

Christianity was born in the linguistic environment of Palestinian Jewish Aramaic, a language presumably spoken by Jesus and his Apostles. The Galilean dialect was spoken in the cities of Nazareth and Capernaum, where Jesus is believed to have spent most of his life. Several Aramaic sayings of Jesus are woven into the Greek fabric of the Gospels, such as the famous *Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani* (“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”). Many New Testament scholars adhere to the “Aramaic primacy theory,” according to which the Gospels, or at least their earlier textual sources, such as the possible records of Jesus’ sayings (the so-called “Q source,” or “Q Gospel”), were originally written in Aramaic and only later translated into Greek.

In the late period, the division of Aramaic dialects into two large groups—Eastern and Western—became more pronounced. Western Aramaic dialects were spoken in Syria, Palestine, Transjordan and, partly, North Arabia and Egypt—the regions that were ruled by the Seleucids and Ptolemies, and then became part of the Roman Empire and its successor, the Byzantine Empire. The Eastern dialects were spoken in Mesopotamia, in the regions under Iranian control by the Parthian Arsacids and then the Sasanians.

The **Late West Aramaic** dialects are mostly represented in the writings of three different religious groups: Jews, Samaritans, and Christians.

A notable Jewish piece of writing from this period is the Jerusalem Talmud (“doctrine”), a major religious, philosophical, and legal treatise, with many sections written in Palestinian Jewish Aramaic. The Talmud consists of the *Mishnah*, which is the written redaction of the Jewish oral tradition, or oral law, and the *Gemarah* (Aramaic “study”), which is a set of discussions and commentaries on the treatises of the *Mishnah*. The Jerusalem Talmud is written in post-biblical Hebrew, known as “Mishnaic” (mostly the *Mishnah*), and the Galilean dialect of the Palestinian Jewish Aramaic (mostly the *Gemarah*).

In addition to the Jerusalem Talmud, several new Targums were created in the Late Aramaic period. These Targums are usually divided into three groups: a) Targums of Proverbs, Psalms, and the Book of Job; b) Targums of Ruth, Esther, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs; and c) Targums of the Chronicles.

Late Western Aramaic is also represented in the literary heritage of Samaritans, an ethno-religious group that still exists today. After the conquest of the Kingdom of Israel in 722 BC, Assyrians deported the Jews who lived in Samaria and its environs to Mesopotamia and repopulated those areas with people from Mesopotamia. Samaritans apparently emerged as a result of the intermixing of these migrants with the remaining locals. They practice a unique form of Judaism which recognizes only the Torah and rejects all of the other books of the Tanakh, as well as the “oral law” of the *Mishnah*. After the return of the Babylonian exiles, Samaritans offered to help rebuild the country and restore the temple in Jerusalem, but Jews refused to recognize Samaritans as fellow tribesmen and co-religionists and rejected their help. This marked the beginning of a long feud, the echoes of which appear in the New Testament. Today, Israel is home to nearly 800 Samaritans who live in Holon and Nablus.

In addition to the Torah in the original Hebrew, Samaritans also used its very literal Aramaic translation, known as the “Samaritan Targum;” it survives in an extremely distorted redaction that is difficult to understand. The 4th century AD was the “golden age” of Samaritan Aramaic literature, which produced prolific authors like Marqa, Amram Dara, and Nonna, who mostly distinguished themselves in the field of hymnography. Samaritans used their own script, which is different from the other varieties of the Aramaic script and constitutes a parallel branch of the development of the Phoenician alphabet.

The Late Western Aramaic dialects also include “Palestinian Christian Aramaic,” which was spoken by Orthodox Christians of Palestine and Transjordan, known as Melkites, beginning in the 3rd century AD. In terms of grammar and vo-

cabulary, this dialect is very close to the language of Palestinian Jews and Samaritans. Its literature is mostly translated from Greek and is almost exclusively religious.

The **Late East Aramaic** dialects were spoken in Mesopotamia and, like the Western dialects, were the languages of the sacred texts of several religious communities, namely Mandeans, Manicheans, Jews, and Christians.

Mandeism was a Gnostic¹ religious teaching, widespread among Arameans of Mesopotamia. Its name is derived from the Aramaic word *manda*, “knowledge,” which corresponds to the Greek *gnosis*. It is thought to have originated in the 1st century AD in the merger of Chaldo-Aramean pagan beliefs derived from the ancient Mesopotamian religions and early Judeo-Christian concepts, with strong influences from Iranian dualism. The most important figure in Mandeism is John the Baptist. Different rituals and sacraments play an important role in the religion and everyday life of Mandeans. Many of them are centered on running water, or a special reservoir connected to running water. To this day, Mandeism survives in Iraq and Iran, and is the only living Gnostic teaching.

From approximately the 3rd century AD, Mandeism produced an impressive body of literature, written in a variety of Aramaic cursive. The main holy text of the Mandeans, written in Aramaic, is the *Ginza Rabba* (“Great treasury”), also called *Sidra Rabba* (“Great Book”). Other important books are *Qolasta*, *Sidra d-Yahya*, or *Drasha d-Yahya* (“John’s Book”), the “Book of Zodiac,” and several others.

In addition to Mandeism, another dualistic doctrine, created by the Parthian Mani (216–273), emerged in the Eastern Aramaic linguistic milieu. The new religion was called “Manichaeism,” from the Greek *μανιχαϊος*, which originates from the Aramaic *mani hayya*, or “living Mani.” Since Aramaic was the dominant language of Mesopotamia and all of the Middle East at the time, it also became the language of Mani’s preaching and the original language of his doctrine. Of the seven books by Mani, six were written in Aramaic. During Mani’s lifetime, his teachings went beyond the Aramaic-speaking world and began spreading rapidly among Persians. Mani is even believed to have converted members of the ruling Sasanian dynasty, namely the brothers of King Shapur I (241–272). Upon being granted access to the king, Mani wrote his seventh and final book for him in the

¹ Gnosticism is a body of religious and philosophical doctrines of early Christianity, based on the *gnosis*—the knowledge—that reveals the secrets of life and shows the soul the path to salvation. It is a mixture of Christian religious dogma and Greek idealistic philosophy with some elements of Eastern religions.

Pahlavi (Middle Persian) language, “Shabuhrgan,” setting out the tenets of his teachings.

Another significant body of literature in a Late East Aramaic dialect was created by Babylonian Jews. This is primarily the Babylonian Talmud. In volume, the Babylonian Talmud is several times larger than the Jerusalem Talmud and it also enjoys a greater authority in the matters of religious law. The proportion of Aramaic is much greater in the Babylonian Talmud than in the Jerusalem Talmud, which is explained by its Gemarah’s lengthier commentaries. The Aramaic language of the Babylonian Talmud is practically the same as that of the Mandaean literature, but for understandable reasons, it contains a large number of Hebraisms.

In addition to servicing the Talmudic tradition, Aramaic was actively used by Babylonian Gaons¹ of the 7th–11th centuries to record their official resolutions and draw up the so-called *responsa*, the responses to written inquiries from other Jewish communities or individuals on the matters of Jewish law.

In the context of Jewish intellectual activities in the Late Aramaic period, the *Masorah* (Hebrew “tradition”) was an important system of knowledge that ensured the preservation of canonical texts. Around the 7th century, this laborious and time-consuming work was undertaken by scholars called Masoretes, who worked and taught in Palestinian and Babylonian *yeshivas*. The Masoretes created special signs to indicate vowel sounds and rules of pronunciation and recital and introduced them into the sacred texts in both Hebrew and Aramaic. The idea of vocalizing the consonantal texts was borrowed from Christian Arameans, and was later also borrowed by Arabs. “Square” Aramaic-Hebrew was the dominant script during this period; it remained so throughout the following centuries and was naturally inherited by Modern Hebrew, together with the Masoretic system of vocalization.

Since the days of the Babylonian captivity, Aramaic was the main language of the Jewish Diaspora. However, by the beginning of the second millennium, only a small part of Jews spoke Aramaic, while the rest adopted the languages of the surrounding peoples, like Arabic, Persian, and European languages. Nevertheless, even after the intellectual decline of Babylonian Jewry and the relocation of the centers of Jewish learning to Europe, most Jews preserved the centuries-long traditions of using Aramaic, and, in the late Middle Ages, religious and philosophical

¹ Gaons were the heads of prominent Jewish *yeshivas* in the Babylonian cities of Sura and Pumbeditha. They also acted as the spiritual leaders of the Jews of Babylonia. Gaons were considered the highest authority in the interpretation of the sacred texts of Judaism and the application of the principles contained therein in dealing with everyday life.

works were still being composed in it. The best-known medieval Jewish work in Aramaic is the “Book of Zohar”, which contains the fundamentals of *Kabbalah*, the Jewish mystical teachings. To some extent, Aramaic was involved in the process of modernization and the revival of the Hebrew language, as the Aramaic material, especially the vocabulary of the Babylonian Talmud, was widely used in the creation of new Hebrew words, particularly scientific and legal terms.

To this day, Aramaic remains an important part of Jewish religious education, and its mastery is mandatory for Rabbis. It is still used by Jews as the language of marriage contracts, known as *ketubas*, and several prayers. Many Jewish communities have preserved the tradition of reading excerpts from Targums along with the readings of the Torah in Hebrew. Aramaic idioms and whole proverbs are often used by Modern Hebrew speakers. Several Modern Aramaic dialects are still spoken by the “Kurdish Jews,” the last remnants of the once-thriving Jewish community of Adiabene.

The most significant Late East Aramaic dialect was that of Osrhoene, a small Aramean kingdom that emerged in North Mesopotamia in 132 BC after the fall of the Seleucid state. Osrhoene, with Edessa (Urhai) as its capital, was the second Aramean state, after Palmyra, which was formed after the fall of the ancient Aramean kingdoms.

Its geographical proximity to Palestine and Antioch contributed to Osrhoene’s becoming one of the first countries where Christianity spread in the eastern direction. The Eastern Christian church tradition claims that King Abgar V of Osrhoene, who ruled during Jesus’ lifetime, was among the first converts to Christianity. According to legend, King Abgar, who was suffering from an illness, wrote a letter to Jesus asking him to come to Edessa and heal him. In his reply, Jesus rejected the invitation, but promised to send one of his disciples instead. After the Resurrection, Apostle Thomas sent his native Addai to Edessa, where he healed the king, converted him to Christianity, and established the Church of Edessa. Although the legend itself has no historical value, it is an established fact that, by the end of the 3rd century, Christianity had become the dominant religion in Osrhoene.

The spread of Christianity among Arameans resulted in a rather remarkable phenomenon, namely the transition to a new self-appellation. This is usually explained by the fact that the word “Aramean” gradually began to be associated with the word “pagan.” In the Aramaic translations of the New Testament, the “Hellenes,” or pagans, are called *aramaye*—“Arameans.” As a result, Christian Arameans of Osrhoene started calling themselves *suryaya*—“Syrian.” This was

not an artificial innovation since the words “Syria” and “Syrian” were widely used by Greek authors as synonyms for “Aram” and “Aramean.” This practice was entrenched in the Septuagint, as well as in translations of the Bible into other languages.

The fate of the word “Chaldean” was somewhat different; it remained in the active vocabulary of Christian authors in the Middle East and Europe, but with several different connotations. Pagan Arameans of Mesopotamia, in particular, were called “Chaldeans,” especially those who followed the ancient cults of the celestial bodies and had Harran in Osrhoene as their center. In a narrow sense, “Chaldean” was the common name for their priests, who had a thorough knowledge of astrology and other occult sciences and often earned a living by composing horoscopes and predicting the future. Therefore, various types of astrologers, oracles, soothsayers, and sorcerers were often collectively called “Chaldeans,” as is recorded in the Old Testament Book of Daniel. Because “Chaldeans” (in this case, interpreters of dreams) spoke to the Babylonian king Belshazzar in Aramaic, a practice of calling the Aramaic language “Chaldean” began in Europe and survived until the 19th century.

In the pre-Christian era, the dialect of Edessa was inferior to major Aramaic dialects in terms of its scope of use and degree of development. The city’s rise as a major regional center of Christianity, from where it spread to neighboring regions and countries, significantly affected the status of its dialect, which very quickly developed into a full-fledged literary language. Christian Arameans extended their new endoethnonym to their language, which came to be known as *leshshana suryaya*, the Syriac language¹. In a relatively short period of time, the Syriac language of Edessa became the written and canonical-liturgical language of almost all Christian Arameans, spreading across their vast homeland.

Although Christianity became the main religion of Arameans/Syriacs, it did not contribute to their ethnic consolidation, as they grew divided into several competing denominations. A part of them favored Nestorianism, a Christological doctrine developed by Theodore of Mopsuestia and later associated with Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople from 428 to 431. Nestorianism was so widespread

¹ In the English-language terminological tradition, the word “Syriac” was initially used only as an adjective to refer to the language and realities related to it but became increasingly applied to Christian Arameans as a noun, “Syriacs.” There is a tradition in scholarly literature of calling not only the literary language of the Christian period “Syriac,” but also the written language of pagan Osrhoene. To distinguish between these two historical phases, the language of the pagan period is called “Old Syriac,” while the language of the Christian period is “Classical Syriac.”

among Syriacs that it even became the main doctrine taught at the “School of Persians” of Edessa, the main Syriac institution of higher education. The Third Ecumenical Council of 431 condemned Nestorianism as heresy and its followers became subject to persecution. In 489, the “School of Persian” was closed, and Nestorian Syriacs fled to Sasanian Iran, where a large Christian Aramean community had existed since the days of King Shapur I (243–273).

In Iran, the Iranian, or Eastern Syriacs, were occasionally persecuted by the Sasanian authorities because of their Christian faith, but in the first half of the 5th century, they managed to institutionalize themselves into an independent church—the Church of the East. This Church was headed by Catholicoi, who resided in Seleucia-Ctesiphon, but it was the city of Nisibis that became the main center of Iranian Christianity largely because of the highly prestigious school established in the city by the former professors of the “School of Persians.” As Nestorianism became dominant among Iranian Christians, the Church of the East eventually declared the teachings of Theodore of Mopsuestia its official doctrine, thus securing its doctrinal and canonical independence.

Another part of Syriacs rejected both Nestorianism and the official imperial doctrine based on the decrees of the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon of 451. Together with Copts and Armenians, they formed a new Christological branch—Miaphysitism (also known as Monophysitism). Miaphysite Syriacs mostly lived in the Byzantine Empire and, therefore, were called “Western Syriacs.” In the 6th century, mostly as a result of the activities of Jacob Baradaeus, the Bishop of Edessa, Miaphysite Syriacs were united into their own independent church—the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch. The followers of this Church became known as “Jacobites.”

In contrast to “Nestorians” and “Jacobites”, a small group of Syriacs accepted the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon. Non-Chalcedonian Syriacs called them “Melkites” (from Aramaic *malka* “king”), thereby connecting them to the Byzantine Emperor’s denomination. Melkite Syriacs were mostly concentrated around Antioch and adjacent regions of northern Syria and used Syriac as their literary and liturgical language. The Melkite community also included the Aramaic-speaking Jewish converts to Christianity in Palestine and the Orthodox Christians of Transjordan. During the 5th–6th centuries, they were engaged in literary work (mainly translation) in Palestinian Christian Aramaic, a Western Aramaic dialect, using a script closely resembling the Estrangela cursive of Osrhoene. Syriac/Aramaic-speaking Melkites did not form a church of their own and, in time, were absorbed and assimilated into Greek Orthodox communities.

Under the Arab rule, the Greek Orthodox communities of the Eastern Mediterranean gradually became Arabic-speaking, and Arabic became dominant in the liturgy of their church—the Greek Orthodox Church (Patriarchate) of Antioch. An overwhelming majority of the followers of this Church eventually adopted an Arab identity; today they are considered Christian Arabs. In late Middle Ages, a part of the Greek Orthodox community adopted Catholicism and formed the Melkite Greek Catholic Church; today, the designation “Melkites” is only applied to the followers of this Church.

Another religious community that originated in the Syriac milieu was that of the Maronites. It was presumably established by a Melkite Syriac recluse named Maron, who lived in the 4th–5th centuries in the vicinity of Antioch. In the 7th century, the Maronites moved further south and eventually established themselves in the Lebanese Mountains, where they formed their own Church. For several centuries, the Maronites were loyal to the official Byzantine Orthodox Church but became inclined to Monothelitism, a Christological doctrine which states that Jesus had two natures but one will. During the Crusades, Catholicism began to spread among the Maronites, and the Maronite Syriac Church eventually entered into a full communion with the Roman Catholic Church.

The territorial and political fragmentation of Syriacs along with their constant interdenominational rivalry greatly influenced their writing and scribal practices. The “Nestorians” and “Jacobites” developed their own distinct varieties of script based on Estrangela. The “Nestorian,” or East Syriac script, is closer to Estrangela in shape. To indicate vowels, it employs a system of vocalization based on dots and short dashes. In the Jacobite script, which is called *Serto* (“line”), the vowel-signs mimic the corresponding Greek letters. *Serto* is also used by the Maronites.

The Syriac language never developed a unified standard of spelling, punctuation, and vocalization, even within the same variety of script. In addition, the inevitable impact of local eastern and western Aramaic dialects on literary Syriac led to the development of two systems of pronunciation: Eastern (“Nestorian”) and Western (“Jacobite”). Although the differences between them are negligible, it is believed that the Eastern pronunciation reproduces the dialect of Edessa, which is the basis of the standard Classical Syriac, more faithfully.

The constant intellectual rivalry between the Syriac denominations contributed to the development of an educational system that remained the best in the Middle East for several centuries. Syriacs had a large number of primary schools, which were predominantly parish or monastic schools. They could be found not

only in the cities but in almost every village that had a big church. There were also many secular schools where the teachers were laymen. This extensive network guaranteed a high level of literacy and knowledge of the Scriptures among the common people. After graduating from primary schools, young men could continue their education in higher schools, such as the “School of Persians” in Edessa, the renowned School of Nisibis, the School of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, or the medical school in the Iranian city of Gundishapur, operated mostly by Syrians, who held the dominant position in medicine in Sasanian Iran and later, in the Abbasid Caliphate. Many Syriac monasteries, especially the Syriac Orthodox ones, functioned as centers of learning and education.

Syriacs created a rich literature that, in volume, surpassed everything written in other Aramaic dialects put together. Translation activity, especially from Greek, was essential for the development of the original Syriac literature. The process of translation from the Greek language was continuous and intense until the end of the 9th century and, eventually, covered almost all important works of the Greek-language authors of antiquity and the Byzantine period. A large number of Greek words, mostly philosophical and religious terms, made their way into the Syriac language. Active translations from Greek also influenced the syntax of Syriac, which is the most flexible of all the Semitic languages.

Translations of the Scriptures were particularly important for the development of the Syriac literary standard. Despite the denominational fragmentation of Syrians, there exists a full canonical translation of the Bible that is recognized and used by them all. This translation is known as the “Peshitta” (“Simple”). The Peshitta, in its current form, had developed by the beginning of the 5th century, before the ecclesiastical schisms of the Syrians, which explains its recognition by all the denominations.

The Syriac tradition has not preserved any information on the history of the Peshitta, except that which is purely legend. It is believed that the Old Testament of the Peshitta was translated in the second half of the 2nd century AD and that the translation was not made from the Septuagint, like the majority of early translations, but from the Hebrew original. The earliest translations were supposedly made by Mesopotamian Jews and the latest by Christians of Jewish origin who knew Hebrew.

The first known translation of the Gospels into Aramaic (currently lost) was made in the 2nd century by Tatian of Adiabene, who combined all four Gospels into one continuous narrative called the “Diatessaron”. After the “Diatessaron,” the next translation seems to have been made in the 3rd century. There are

two manuscripts, presumably from the 5th century, that contain these translations. The first is a palimpsest¹ from Dayr al-Suryan (“Monastery of the Syrians”) in Egypt, which was published in 1858 by British Orientalist William Cureton (1808–1864); this Gospel is called the “Curetonian.” The second manuscript, a 358–page palimpsest with the Syriac translation of the four Gospels, was discovered in 1892 in the monastery of St. Catherine in the Sinai Peninsula by British sister-scholars Agnes Smith Lewis (1843–1926) and Margaret Gibson (1843–1920); it is known as the “Codex Sinaiticus.”

The original Syriac literature can be divided into two main bodies, religious and secular, but the boundary between them is not always easily detectable. Religious literature includes the fundamental writings in patristics, hagiographic works, or the description of the lives and deeds of the saints, church statutes and canons, letters and messages of Church authorities, and so on. This layer of Syriac literature is highly valuable; it is the reason that Syriac is considered the third most important language of early Christian thought, after Latin and Greek, and has a strong place not only in Oriental but also theological curricula.

Syriac secular literature includes works of philosophical, historical, medical, geographical, astrological, alchemical, and general encyclopedic nature as well as some fiction. Classical Syriac literature extends over the period between the 3rd and the 13th centuries and then almost completely fades away. This millennium of Syriac includes more than 200 authors and about 10,000 extant manuscripts.

Classical Syriac literature begins with Bardaisan (154–222). He was born pagan but converted to Christianity at the age of twenty-five. Later, without formally renouncing Christianity, he leaned more toward Alexandrian Gnosticism. He is considered the first major Syriac philosopher, and his views are contained in the “Book of the Laws of Countries.” Bardaisan was also famous for being a talented poet, who greatly influenced future generations of Syriac poets. His poetic legacy consisted of 150 religious and philosophical hymns which imitated the biblical Psalms.

The next prominent representative of early Syriac literature was Aphrahat (†350), nicknamed “the Persian sage” because his parents were Zoroastrian Persians. In his adulthood, he converted to Christianity, assimilated into the Syriac community, and led an ascetic life. His legacy consists of 23 sermons, or homilies, better known as “demonstrations” (Syriac *tahwitha*). They cover virtually all as-

¹ Palimpsests are the manuscript pages (mostly parchment) that were cleaned of the original text and reused. The original text on some of them is visible and can be read.

pects of the Christian doctrine and contain valuable factual material on early Syriac theology and Christology, the state of Christians in Iran during the reign of Shapur II (309–379), the Syriac ascetic practices, and many more.

The 4th century was a crucial period in the history of Christianity; classical philosophy and pagan gnosis were being re-examined, dogmas and tenets of Christianity were being formulated, Christological controversies were being hardened, and monasticism and asceticism were beginning to emerge. In the second half of the century, Syriac Christianity, which had previously been of the predominantly Semitic type (Tatian, Bardaisan, Aphrahat), began showing signs of convergence with the Greek-Byzantine church tradition. The person who best embodied all these tendencies and transitions was Ephrem the Syrian (†373).

Ephrem the Syrian is the recognized pinnacle of early Syriac literature and one of its most famous representatives. His work is permeated with lyricism, emotionality, vivid imagery and the symbolism inherent to Eastern Christian thought. His writings are often linked to biblical subject matter, but he also drew inspiration from his own spiritual experiences, personal impressions, and feelings. He became famous first and foremost as a religious poet, whose heritage is mainly expressed in the two most popular forms of Syriac poetry—*memra* (in plural *memre*) and *madrasha* (*madrashe*). A *memra* is a narrative poem, a speech, or a homily, consisting of couplets with a certain number of syllables per line (the Syriac poetic meters are based on the number of syllables). A *madrasha* is a strophic poem or a liturgical hymn, often with a short refrain called *onitha*, with lines of either a fixed number of syllables or various combinations thereof. Unlike *memre*, which were supposed to be recited, *madrashe* were intended to be sung accompanied by a female choir.

A *soghitha* is a type of *madrasha* with four-line stanzas, each consisting of seven or eight syllables. A *soghitha* is often a polemic dialogue between two people, which has been a poetic form typical of Mesopotamia since ancient times. Other poetic forms originating from *madrashe* are *bautha*, a prayer-poem, and *teshbokhta*, a liturgical ode based on biblical verses or sacred texts.

Ephrem's writings in prose include commentaries on the Scriptures in the spirit of the Antiochian school, a commentary on Tatian's Diatessaron, and polemical writings against Mani, Marcion, and Bardaisan. A significant part of Ephrem's work has survived only in its Armenian translations.

In addition to the works of known authors, early Syriac literature features a number of anonymous writings that echo the spread of Christianity in North Mesopotamia. The earliest is the "Odes of Solomon," which consists of 42 short po-

ems. Early Syriac literature also includes several books of the Apocrypha. Almost all of the Old and New Testaments Apocrypha are in Greek, so those composed in Aramaic are very notable. The most valuable among the Syriac Apocrypha is the “Teaching of Addai,” which deals with the spread of Christianity in Osrhoene, followed by the “Acts of Thomas,” which tells the story of the mission and martyrdom of the Apostle Thomas in India. Incorporated into the text of the “Acts of Thomas” is the “Hymn of the Pearl,” which antedates the main narrative, displays some folkloric features, and is sometimes ascribed to Bardaisan. There are also several other Syriac Apocryphal books that were not widely known outside of the Syriac milieu.

The harsh persecutions that Christians had to endure in the Roman Empire and Sasanian Iran gave rise to a very rich body of hagiographic literature. The most widely known piece of early Syriac hagiography is the “Acts of the Persian Martyrs,” which relates the lives of persecuted Christians in Iran under Shapur II. This work is usually associated with the name of Marutha, Bishop of Maypherqat (†420).

Syriac thought and literature reached its golden age in the 5th-7th centuries. This period includes notable personalities, both “Jacobites” and “Nestorians,” such as Sergius of Reshaina (medicine, philosophy, translation activity), Severos Sebokht (astronomy, cosmography, mathematics), Jacob of Edessa (philology), Jacob of Serugh (religious poetry), Philoxenos of Mabbogh (exegesis, philology), Stephan bar Sudaili (philosophy), Isaac the Syrian (exegesis, monastic and ascetic writings), Joseph Huzaya (philology), Catholicos Mar Aba I (philosophy, exegesis), Paul the Persian (philosophy) and many others.

In the 7th century, 2,000 years after the Arameans, another Semitic people came out in masses from the Arabian Peninsula—the Arabs. Under the banner of a new monotheistic religion, Islam, they conquered the entire Middle East and North Africa and created the vast Arab Caliphate. Sasanian Iran was unable to withstand the onslaught of the Arabs, and, in 652, it fell under their blows, losing its role as the Caliphate’s rival to the Byzantine Empire.

The initial period of the Arab domination proved to be more bearable for Syriacs than the Byzantine and Persian rule. To a large extent, this was due to their developed educational system, thanks to which they were able to provide Arabs with valuable intellectual and professional services, the need for which Arabs were still unable to satisfy on their own and had to largely rely on the conquered civilized peoples. Syriacs, who spoke a language closely related to Arabic and knew Arabs quite well, had an obvious advantage in this respect. Under the Umayyad

and Abbasid Caliphs, Syriacs maintained a very high percentage among public officials of all ranks. They also preserved their dominance in medicine, as was the case in Sasanian times, and were very close to monopolizing the position of the court physician. The seat of the Catholicoi of the Church of the East was transferred from Seleucia-Ctesiphon to Baghdad.

Under the Arabs, Syriacs distinguished themselves once again as prolific translators. They virtually translated the bulk of the Greek-language works on philosophy, medicine, and other branches of knowledge anew, this time from Syriac into Arabic. Syriacs maintained a visible presence in the “House of Wisdom” founded by al-Mamun in 830, which, apart from being an educational institution, was a major center of translations into Arabic. Thus, Syriacs played an important role in transmitting antique thought and literature on to Medieval Europe through the Arabs. The most prominent figure among the Syriac intellectuals of the Arabic period was Hunain ibn Ishaq, who, despite being a renowned physician, acquired fame as a prolific translator.

Under the Arab rule, Syriacs occasionally used their script to write in Arabic; this system of writing is called *Garshuni*. In the Ottoman period, the Syriac script was also used to write in Ottoman Turkish. There are also samples of Armenian, Persian, Greek and other languages written in it.

However, Muslim domination eventually resulted in very dire consequences for Syriacs. The religious, legal, social, and economic discrimination and the growing sense of insecurity combined with numerous benefits for new converts, made more and more Syriacs convert to Islam. Cases of forced Islamization became frequent. The confiscation of churches and their conversion into mosques became a common phenomenon. Unlike Persians, for example, who did not compromise their national identity and language when adopting Islam thanks to their large numbers, well-defined area of habitation, rich traditions of statehood, economic self-sufficiency, and other factors, the second generation of converted Syriacs became Arabic-speaking, and the third fully Arabized, losing their last traits of Syriac identity.

The Arabic language also became dominant among those Syriacs who had managed to preserve their Christian faith, such as the Syriac Melkites. As mentioned above, together with their Greek co-religionists, the Syriac Melkites completely switched to Arabic and even adopted an Arab identity. Most “Jacobites” who lived in large cities, such as Damascus, Aleppo, and Beirut, also became overwhelmingly Arabic-speaking, while rural residents in several areas continued to speak various Aramaic dialects. Of those, the most significant was the region of

Tur Abdin in Northern Mesopotamia (today in Turkey, east of Mardin), and the area around Mosul. From 1160 to 1932, the Dayr al-Zaafaran monastery in Tur Abdin housed the Patriarchate of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch.

Until approximately the end of the 17th century, the Lebanese Maronites spoke a local Western Aramaic dialect. Their isolation and defensive mentality did not protect them against full Arabization through language, although they did significantly slow down the process. Today, the Maronites are entirely Arabic-speaking, and most of their liturgy is performed in Arabic. However, Syriac is still used as a liturgical language of the Maronite Church, which officially calls itself “the Syriac Maronite Church.”

Among Syriacs, the least Arabized were the “Nestorians,” who after the catastrophic invasion of Tamerlane in the 1390s were mostly concentrated in the area between Mosul, Lake Van, and the western shores of the Lake Urmia. The town of Alkosh to the north of Mosul housed the Catholicosate of the Church of the East.

The sharp decline in the number of speakers of Aramaic dialects and the narrowing scope of their use triggered the gradual decline of the Syriac literature starting from the 8th century. Nevertheless, literary undertakings in Syriac continued until the 13th century. Moreover, in the 12th–13th centuries, the Syriac literature experienced its last revival, the “Syriac Renaissance,” producing brilliant figures like the historian Michael the Syrian (1126–1199), author of the highly valuable “Chronicle,” and polymath Grigorios bar Ebraya (Bar Hebraeus, 1226–1286). Bar Ebraya authored numerous works in various fields of knowledge, but is known mostly for his “Book of Laughable Stories,” a collection of anecdotes and aphorisms, perhaps the best-known work of the Syriac literature.

Literary activity in the Syriac language never completely ceased, even though almost nothing worth mentioning was written after the Syriac Renaissance. After Tamerlane’s invasion, the number of Aramaic-speaking Christians dwindled even more, and they could only be found in several isolated enclaves. From this period onward Classical Syriac, deprived of its feeding soil of living Aramaic dialects, was used primarily as a liturgical language of the Syriac Orthodox Church, the Church of the East, the Maronite Syriac Church, and several other churches. All of these Churches are collectively referred to as the “Churches of the Syriac tradition.”

Syriacs were known for their strong missionary zeal. From the very beginning, the propensity for missionary work was a feature inherent in Syriac Christianity, especially for the Church of the East. Missionary work took Syriacs to coun-

tries thousands of kilometers away from their homeland. Their main activities unfolded in the north (the Caucasus, southern regions of modern Russia), the south (Arabian Peninsula), the northeast (Central Asia, East Turkestan, Mongolia), and the east (India and China). Impressive material evidence, including a large number of Syriac inscriptions, confirms the Syriac presence in these territories. Of those, the most important is the Xia'an Stele in China, dated 781, which contains details of the first mission of the Church of the East to China.

Not only did the "Nestorians" and "Jacobites" evangelize in the vast territories of Asia, but they also established dioceses of their Churches there. By the end of the 13th century, the Church of the East had 30 Metropolitan Sees and 200 dioceses, which covered a vast territory from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Far East. Under Catholicos Timotheos I (780–823), the Church of the East had the largest canonical territory of all the Christian Churches of the world and held this primacy for several centuries. The Roman Catholic Church managed to extend its jurisdiction over a territory greater than that of the Church of the East only with the spread of Christianity in the Western hemisphere. The Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch also experienced a period of prosperity and the greatest territorial expansion. Like the Church of the East (although not as successfully), it was actively involved in missionary outreach in Central Asia and, by the end of the 13th century, had 20 Metropolitan Sees and 103 dioceses. Tamerlane's invasions put an end to this impressive expansion, reducing Syriacs to several isolated pockets throughout the Middle East.

In no other country was Syriac missionary activity as successful as in India. It was focused on the coastal area of the modern Indian southwestern state of Kerala, known as Malabar, where a Christian community had existed from the first centuries AD. According to local legends, the Apostle Thomas was the first to have preached in Malabar, and the Malabar Christians are known as the "St. Thomas Christians," under his name. In the 4th and 9th centuries, two large groups of Eastern Syriac migrants settled in Malabar. The influx of Syriacs to Malabar meant the strengthening of the Christians' presence in the region and contributed to the renewal and revitalization of their spiritual and religious life. The shared apostolic tradition related to St. Thomas (Thomas was the Apostle who sent Addai to Edessa, and, according to church tradition, after Thomas' death, his remains were transferred from India to Edessa) contributed to the Syriac-Malabar rapprochement. As a result, the Malabar Christians, while retaining their own apostolic tradition and the unique features of their religious practices, ended up under the jurisdiction of the Church of the East and embraced its rite and doctrine.

After the Portuguese arrived on the west coast of India in 1498, the local Christians were forcefully subjected to the Roman Catholic Church. However, in 1653, a part of the “St. Thomas Christians” decided to break away from the Vatican and restore their ties with Syriac Christianity. The Church of the East, which was in a deep decline, was unable to reclaim its former position in India or anywhere else. The Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch intercepted the initiative, and, with its assistance, a new Church, called the “Malankara Church,” was formed in Malabar, but later experienced a series of splits. The “St. Thomas Christians” who preferred to remain under the Vatican’s jurisdiction, formed two Churches, one of which follows the rite of the Syriac Orthodox Church, and the other the rite of the Church of the East. In the beginning of the 20th century, the Church of the East also eventually managed to get its share of post-Portuguese Malabar Christianity with the formation of the Chaldean Syrian Church of India in the city of Trichur. There are currently eight Churches of both Syriac rites serving the “St. Thomas Christians,” including two reformed ones.

At some point in history, Syriacs themselves became the object of foreign missionary activity. It began with the Crusaders who brought Catholicism to the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Maronite Church eventually came under the Vatican’s jurisdiction but preserved its ancient rite, which shares many common features with the rite of the Syriac Orthodox Church.

In 1450, Catholicos Shemon IV, who was residing in Alkosh, made the Catholicosate of the Church of the East hereditary by a special decree, with the supremacy passing on to the deceased Catholicos’ nephew or, more rarely, his younger brother. In 1552, a part of the clergy that was dissatisfied with this practice elected the Abbot of the Rabban Hormizd monastery, Yohannan Sullqa (1510–1555), as the Catholicos. Under the advice of the Franciscan missionaries stationed in Mosul, Yohannan Sullqa traveled to Rome to formalize a union with the Roman Catholic Church. In 1553, he was consecrated as bishop in the Basilica of St. Peter and received the title of “Patriarch of the Chaldeans” from Pope Julius III. Thus, the new Uniate Church became known as “Chaldean” (not to be confused with the Chaldean Syrian Church of India) and its followers as “Chaldeans” (in medieval Europe, the term “Chaldean” was usually preferred over the term “Aramean”). The union of the Chaldean Catholic Church with the Vatican was formally finalized in 1830. The Syriacs of the Mosul area, including the Catholicosate of Alkosh itself, eventually came under the jurisdiction of the Chaldean Catholic Church, while those living further north, in the isolated mountainous enclave of Hakkari and on the western shores of the Lake Urmia, remained under

the watchful eye of the Church of the East with its new Catholicosate in the village of Kudshanis in Hakkari.

The Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch experienced its Catholic schism in 1620 in Aleppo, where, under the influence of the local Jesuit and Capuchin missionaries, a part of “Jacobites” converted to Catholicism and elected a “parallel” Patriarch, who became the first Patriarch of the breakaway Uniate Syriac Catholic Church of Antioch. The Syriac Catholic Church preserved the rite and main practices of its “mother” Syriac Orthodox Church. As previously mentioned, two Catholic Churches following traditional Syriac rites emerged in India among the “St. Thomas Christians.”

In 1834, American Presbyterians established their first mission among the “Nestorians” of the Urmia region. The mission lasted 100 years and was abolished in 1934 by the decree of Shah Reza Pahlavi. The American Protestant missionaries were also active in the Ottoman Empire, particularly in the big cities of Western Armenia, such as Kharberd (Kharput) where Syriacs lived side by side with Armenians.

The American mission in Urmia did not originally intend to spread Protestantism among the local Christians, but to help revive the former glory of the Church of the East. However, the number of Syriacs who converted to Protestantism grew every year, and, in 1855, the first Protestant community separated from the Church of the East, transforming, in time, into an independent Evangelical Church.

In 1841, the French Lazarist monks opened their own mission in Urmia. Then in 1886, the Archbishop of Canterbury established an Anglican mission there, which lasted until 1914. From 1898 to 1918, a Russian mission was active in Urmia, attracting a large number of local Christians into the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Foreign missionaries opened numerous schools in Urmia and its surrounding villages, spread literacy among the adult population, and sent the most talented young people to continue their education in America, Europe, and Russia. They also established printing presses and published religious and secular literature in Classical Syriac and the local modern Aramaic dialect using the East Syriac (“Nestorian”) script. As a result, they, most notably the American missionary Justin Perkins (1805–1869), played a key role in the formation and development of the modern literary Aramaic language.

The “Nestorians” of the Urmia region were not the only community that had preserved Aramaic as a spoken language. Aramaic dialects, which in scholarly

usage are referred to as “Modern” or “Neo-Aramaic,” were also preserved by the “Nestorians” of Hakkari and various communities of Chaldeans, “Jacobites”, Syriac Catholics, and Melkites. Aramaic has also survived in small Jewish and Mandaean communities in Iraq and Iran.

The division of Late Aramaic into Eastern and Western groups is generally true for the modern dialects as well, which means that both Late Aramaic groups are represented today by their living descendants. The modern dialects are not the continuation of any of the ancient and medieval literary forms of Aramaic but of the dialects that existed in parallel with those upon which the literary standards had been developed.

All modern dialects have preserved the basic Aramaic vocabulary, but they have been expanded with numerous loanwords from Arabic, Persian, Kurdish, and Turkish languages. In terms of grammar, they have significantly departed from the earlier dialects. In contrast to the ancient and medieval Aramaic dialects that were very close to each other and did not pose any particular difficulties for communication, the modern dialects moved further away from each other, which resulted in a lower degree of mutual comprehensibility.

The only modern Western dialect is that of the villages of Maalula, Bakh‘a and Juba‘din, located not far from Damascus. It descends from a Western Aramaic dialect that was spoken in the middle of the first millennium AD in the coastal regions of Syria and remained the spoken language of the Maronites until the late Middle Ages. The inhabitants of Maalula are Melkites, followers of the Greek-Catholic Church. The inhabitants of the villages of Bakh‘a and Juba‘din were also Christian in the past but converted to Islam under the pressure from the Ottoman authorities in the 19th century. The total number of speakers of the Maalula is estimated at 5,000–8,000. UNESCO included the Maalula dialect in the list of the world’s endangered languages, and the dialect is expected to be extinct by the mid-21st century. The Maalula dialect is officially unwritten, although a large number of its samples are published in scientific phonetic transcription.

The Eastern group of the modern Aramaic dialects far exceeds the Western both in the number of the dialects themselves and the number of speakers. It is divided into three sub-groups; the one designated as “western” or “central,” is represented by the dialect of Tur Abdin, called *Turoyo* (“mountainous”). The natives of Tur Abdin, who are mostly followers of the Syriac Orthodox Church, also call it *Suryoyo*, or *Surayt* (“Syriac”). As a continuation of the dialects that were closely related to the medieval dialect of Edessa, Turoyo is the modern Aramaic dialect that is closest to Syriac.

Before the Genocide of 1915, there were about 90 villages with a total Christian population of 40,000–50,000 in Tur Abdin. The population of a third of those villages was Turoyo-speaking, while others spoke Kurdish, along with some Turkish and Arabic. By the 1970s, the number of Turoyo speakers in Tur Abdin was estimated at 20,000. By the end of the 20th century, as a result of increased emigration of Christians from Turkey, the number of villages with an Aramaic-speaking population was less than a dozen, and the number of Turoyo speakers themselves barely exceeded one thousand. Virtually all remaining Syriacs in Tur Abdin, as well as some of those who moved to Istanbul, are the speakers of Turoyo. The language is also common in the northeast of Syria, in the area between the Khabur and Euphrates rivers, known as Jazeera (“Island”). The city of Qamishli, located at the border with Turkey in close proximity to Nusaybin (ancient Nisibis), had become home to many refugees from Tur Abdin who were forced to flee their homes because of the anti-Turkish uprising of the Kurds in 1924.

Despite the presence of large communities of Turoyo speakers in Istanbul and Syria, they are the most concentrated in Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Austria. In Europe, attempts have been made to introduce Turoyo into schools and publish in it using both the Serto and Latin scripts. It is also used in TV and radio broadcasts. Nevertheless, Turoyo has not yet reached the status of a full-fledged literary language and remains endangered.

There is another Neo-Aramaic dialect belonging to the same sub-group as Turoyo. In the mid-20th century, it was still spoken in the village of Mlahso near Diyarbakir (Turkey) and is known by the name of that village. *Mlahso* is currently considered extinct.

The second sub-group of the Eastern Modern Aramaic dialects, sometimes called “Southeastern,” is represented by the dialect of Mandeans (today known as Sabians) of Iraq and the Khuzestan province of Iran. It is mostly spoken by the Iranian Sabians of the city of Ahwaz. The Iraqi Sabians still spoke it in the mid-20th century but later almost entirely switched to Arabic, although they continue to use old Mandaean Aramaic and its script for religious purposes.

The third, largest and most well-studied sub-group of dialects within the Eastern Group are the Northeastern Neo-Aramaic dialects (NENA). They descend from the Eastern Late Aramaic dialects, which means that they are related to the language of the Babylonian Talmud and Mandaean literature. They are numerous (nearly 150) and differ significantly from each other, often making communication between their speakers quite difficult.