

# Aramaic Peshitta

## What is your opinion of the Aramaic Peshitta New Testament? Do you think that the Peshitta New Testament might be more original than the Greek New Testament?

It is not surprising, given some of the theological trends within our Messianic faith community, that many would be interested in the Aramaic Peshitta New Testament. Aramaic is a Semitic relative to Hebrew and was a local language of the Land of Israel during the time of Yeshua. It is historically accurate that an Aramaic version of the Apostolic Scriptures was in existence in the early centuries of Christianity. While there are many Messianics who believe that the Apostolic Scriptures were originally written in Hebrew (please be aware that this does **not** include Outreach Israel Ministries and Messianic Apologetics),<sup>1</sup> one growing trend in some sectors of the Messianic community is not proposing that the Apostolic Scriptures were originally written in Hebrew, but instead Aramaic.

Arguing for an original Aramaic version of the Apostolic Scriptures **is not the same as arguing for an original Hebrew version**. While the Aramaic language is related to Hebrew, it is nevertheless **not Hebrew**. Arguing for an original “Aramaic New Testament”—as far as we are concerned—is totally different than arguing for an original “Hebrew New Testament.” Nevertheless, similar rhetoric is advocated by Aramaic New Testament advocates as it is from Hebrew New Testament advocates. One advocate of an original Aramaic New Testament, revealing a severe lack of objectivity, states,

“I...could not understand how Elohim could reveal half of His Word in the holy tongue of Hebrew and the other half in the language of Greek paganism and the Romans, who burned Jerusalem to the ground.”<sup>2</sup>

What is ironic about this statement is the fact that while Greek is assumed to be the pagan language of those who destroyed Jerusalem and the Second Temple, Aramaic was used by the pagan Assyrians who carried away many exiles from the Northern Kingdom, *and* the pagan Babylonians who destroyed Jerusalem and the First Temple. Aramaic was “an international language of diplomacy in the latter days of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, and the dispersal of Aramaic-speaking peoples from Egypt to Lower Mesopotamia as a result of the Assyrian policies of deportation” (*ABD*).<sup>3</sup> To somehow assume that the Greek language is “totally pagan” and that Aramaic is “just as pure as Hebrew” is totally confounded. **Aramaic was used by pagans every bit as much as Greek.**

Parts of the Tanach were written in Aramaic, including sections of Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and 1&2 Chronicles. As *ABD* notes, “Late biblical Hebrew and rabbinic Hebrew were heavenly influenced by Aramaic in both grammar and vocabulary.”<sup>4</sup> Aramaic or a hybrid Hebrew-Aramaic was spoken in much of First Century Galilee. Many people in the province of Syria also spoke Aramaic or Syriac as their primary language, and were evangelized and received the gospel in great numbers. The *History of the World Christian Movement* indicates that “Syriac became the language of choice among Christians in eastern Syria, Mesopotamia, Persia, and eventually India, Mongolia, and China. Late in the first or early in the second century, a Syriac version of Old Testament texts began to appear in the form of a rough translation or paraphrase known as the Peshitta.”<sup>5</sup> Later, the complete version of the Aramaic Bible, including (most of) the Apostolic Scriptures, began being known by this name. A fair-minded approach to the Aramaic New Testament is seen in the opening preface to *The New Covenant Aramaic Peshitta Text* published by the Bible Society in Israel:

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<sup>1</sup> Consult the FAQ, “New Testament, Written in Hebrew.”

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Gabriel Roth, *Ruach Qadim: Aramaic Origins of the New Testament* (Malta: Tushiyah Press, 2005), 20.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen A. Kaufman, “Languages (Aramaic),” in *ABD*, 4:173.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, Vol. 1 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 57.

“In the Mediterranean regions of the Roman Empire, the New Covenant writings of the Gospels, Acts, Epistles and Revelation were handed down in Greek, lingua franca of the West. In the Holy Land, Syria, Mesopotamia, and other countries of the Parthian Empire, these writings were circulated in Aramaic, lingua franca of the East. The apostles and disciples obeyed the command to proclaim the tidings of the kingdom of God. This they did in the Holy Land and the diaspora communities through the empires of Rome in the West, and of Parthia in the East. For this goal they had at their disposal the two international languages of their times, Greek and Aramaic, through which they reached their people, Jews and Israelites, and the nations in those two realms (Matthew 10:6; 28:19; Acts 2.9-11).”<sup>6</sup>

This preface goes on to explain how “In the Greek text of the new Testament one finds Aramaic locutions in disguise, in addition to several words and phrases in Greek transcription, such as ‘talitha qumi [תַּלְיָתָא קֻמִי], Mark 5:41’, ‘lema shevaqtani [לֵמָּא שְׁבַקְתָּנִי], Mark 15:34’, ‘mamona [מַמּוֹנָא]’ and others, indicating that Yeshua spoke in Aramaic, and no doubt used Hebrew in conversations with scribes and other religious leaders, in addition to the synagogue use of Hebrew.”<sup>7</sup> It is fair and proper to emphasize that being able to work with some degree of Biblical Aramaic is necessary for those in Biblical Studies.

No one can deny that the Aramaic Peshitta New Testament has significant value among the early translations of the Apostolic Scriptures. That the Aramaic Peshitta New Testament was used to help spread the good news of Yeshua the Messiah, to many in the East, should be something looked at with great thankfulness. The issue, of course, is how some have thought that the Aramaic Peshitta New Testament is original, and the Greek New Testament is not original. The intended audiences of the Epistles of the Apostolic Scriptures, at least, were all directed Westward—notably *disallowing* for them to have been written in Aramaic.

It is quite commonplace to see proponents of an original Aramaic New Testament, claim that there are various Aramaic expressions in the Gospels, which have been mistranslated into the Greek New Testament. Perhaps the most common one is how within the three Synoptics, one sees Yeshua issue the remark, “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:24, NASU; cf. Mark 10:25; Luke 18:25). On the surface to some readers, this does not make any sense. Why would a camel pass through the eye of a needle? One explanation offered in history has been to suggest that there was a small passageway in Jerusalem, called the Eye of the Needle, and it would have been most difficult for a beast of burden like a camel to pass through. This has been largely rejected by modern scholars as a tall tale.<sup>8</sup>

The explanation for “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle,” as offered by many proponents of an Aramaic New Testament, is to suggest that the Aramaic term *gamla* (גַּמְלָא) or “camel,” can also mean “rope.” Hence, a better reading for Yeshua’s word should be “It is easier for a large rope to enter through the eye of a needle” (Mark 10:25, HRV). On the surface, this would seem to make sense, as a rope is kind of like a hopelessly large piece of thread, and perhaps the Aramaic New Testament advocates have a made a point. It would seemingly make sense that *gamla*, meaning either rope or camel, was mistranslated as *kamēlos* (κάμηλος) into the Greek.<sup>9</sup>

We should have reason to pause, though, and consider some of the observations made by R.T. France in his commentary on the Gospel of Mark, in the *NIGTC* series. He indicates something rather important that need not be overlooked:

“The grotesque idea of a camel going through the eye of a needle is a proverbial way stating the impossible: a rabbinic saying (*b. Ber.* 55b; cf. also *b. B. Meṣ.* 38b; *b. Erub.* 53a) uses an elephant going through the eye of a needle (along with a date palm made of gold) as an image of the impossible.”<sup>10</sup>

France references some places in the Talmud, where Rabbinical voices have apparently used the analogy of an elephant passing through an eye of a needle:

- “Said R. Samuel bar Nahmani said R. Jonathan, ‘What a man is shown [in a dream] is only his own fantasy [Simon: what is suggested by his own thoughts]. For it is said, “As for you, O King, your thoughts come into your mind upon your bed” (Dan. 2:29). *If you prefer, I offer proof from the following verse: “That you may know the thoughts of your heart” (Dan. 2:30).’ Said Raba,*

<sup>6</sup> *The New Covenant Aramaic Peshitta Text with Hebrew Translation* (Jerusalem: Bible Society in Israel, 1986), i.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, ii.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. James R. Edwards, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 314.

<sup>9</sup> James Scott Trimm, trans., *The Hebraic-Roots Version Scriptures* (Northridge, South Africa: Institute for Scripture Research, 2006), 1259.

<sup>10</sup> R.T. France, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 405.

*'You may know that that is so, for people are not shown in dreams [such impossibilities as] either a golden palm tree or an elephant going through the eye of a needle'" (b.Berachot 55b).<sup>11</sup>*

- *"He said to him, 'Perhaps you come from Pumbedita, where they can pass an elephant through the eye of a needle...'" (b.Bava Metzia 38a).<sup>12</sup>*

It is not difficult for one to figure out how an elephant is a much larger beast of burden—conservatively three to four times—larger than a camel. Yet, the Jewish literature cited here indicates that various Rabbis are said to speak in terms of an elephant passing through the eye of a needle!<sup>13</sup> *A large beast of burden passing through a portal of only one or two millimeters wide!* As impossible as we might think it is, to hear Yeshua speak in terms of a camel passing through the eye of a needle, how much more impossible would it be for an elephant to do this? We do not need to disregard the primacy of the Greek New Testament, on account of the Aramaic Peshitta New Testament, because of this sort of example. Statements like “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:24, NASU; cf. Mark 10:25; Luke 18:25), can be regarded as authentic to the Jewish world of Yeshua.

While many people who spoke Aramaic or Syriac as their primary language did come to faith in Yeshua, too much can be made by Aramaic New Testament advocates by thinking that the Syrian Christians were somehow “Jewish,” and especially “Torah observant.” We need to understand that “Culturally the Christians appear to have shared much with their Jewish neighbors, but theologically they sought to distinguish themselves.”<sup>14</sup> There were many ethnic similarities between the Syrian Christians and the Jews, **but that is where it ends.** The Syrian Orthodox Church is much more identical in many ways to the Greek Orthodox Church, including the veneration of icons and the Virgin Mary.

On the contrary to what many advocates of an original Aramaic New Testament may try to advocate, or what new adherents in their theories may believe, the Aramaic Peshitta is well known to textual critics of the Bible. Preceding the Peshitta New Testament was the production of a work called the *Diatessaron*, produced by Tatian, a student of Justin Martyr. This work was a harmony of the four Gospels produced in Aramaic. As it is described in *History of the World Christian Movement*,

“Tatian’s most lasting contribution to the Christian movement came not through his school...but in the form of this harmony of the gospels in Syriac....Known as the *Diatessaron* (Greek for ‘From Four’), it was for at least two hundred years the preferred edition for many Syrian churches and theologians. Tatian’s project sought to present the message of Jesus in Syriac, not Greek, to its readers.”<sup>15</sup>

If the *Diatessaron* had to be produced to present Aramaic speakers with the gospel message, it indicates that there was no previous New Testament Scripture in Aramaic, discounting a written Aramaic origin for the Apostolic Writings. In fact, there is ample evidence that indicates the *Diatessaron* was originally a Greek work, later translated into Syriac. Bruce M. Metzger states in his book *The Early Versions of the New Testament*, “In support of a Greek origin is (a) its Greek title, by which it was known even in Syriac; (b) the silence of Eusebius, who, though mentioning the *Diatessaron*, says nothing of its composition in Syriac; and (c) the circumstance of the very considerable influence that it exerted on the text of the Gospels of the West.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Other commentators who have noted the connection between the camel and elephant referenced in Rabbinic literature, include **Matthew 19:24**: Donald A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 14-28*, Vol 33b (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 561; R.T. France, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), pp 737-738; John Nolland, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 795. **Mark 10:24**: C.E.B. Cranfield, *Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 332; William L. Lane, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), pp 369-370 fn#52; Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 284. **Luke 18:25**: I. Howard Marshall, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 687; Craig A. Evans, *New International Biblical Commentary: Luke* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 276; Darrell L. Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke 9:51-24:53* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 1486; Joel B. Green, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 657 fn#152.

How and why advocates of an Aramaic New Testament in today’s Messianic community, who often claim to be familiar with ancient Rabbinical literature like the Talmud—actually missed some of this—is hard to tell.

<sup>14</sup> Dale T. Irvin and Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, Vol. 1 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 64.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>16</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament: Their Origin, Transmission, and Limitations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977),

The Peshitta New Testament actually dates from the Fourth to Fifth Centuries C.E. All major textual scholars today recognize the Peshitta as a translation from the Greek Apostolic Scriptures. While the Peshitta is an important translation to be surely consulted, there are too many time-sensitive additions to the text that are not borne out in older versions of the Greek Apostolic Scriptures. Metzger indicates, “toward the close of the fourth or at the beginning of the fifth century, a version of twenty-two books of the New Testament was available in a translation which came to be called at a later date the Peshitta Syriac version.”<sup>17</sup> He goes on to record that “In its official form it includes twenty-two books of the New Testament, the four minor Catholic [meaning, universal] Epistles (2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude) and the Apocalypse being absent.”<sup>18</sup> **Any acceptance of the Peshitta New Testament as being primary to the Greek Apostolic Scriptures, discounts these texts as being inspired Scripture.**<sup>19</sup> Are we prepared to rip out 2 Peter, 2&3 John, Jude, and Revelation from our Bibles? We should be prepared to consider this, if the Peshitta New Testament is primary to the Greek Apostolic Scriptures.<sup>20</sup>

Advocates of Aramaic New Testament primacy have arguments that are widely discounted among those of the academic community, and that do not historically align like the Hebrew New Testament arguments. Many will defend their position on the basis of various Aramaisms, but like Hebraisms these must be considered on a case-by-case basis, and have strong parallel support in contemporary literature and scholastic opinion. Of course, it is very important to understand that the Peshitta is consulted by many scholars of the Bible, as it is one of the earliest New Testament translations. If anyone consults a critical commentary on the Scriptures, the Peshitta is likely to be referred to, and it is employed frequently in textual criticism. But it is not the only text employed in textual criticism, nor is it treated as being superior to the Greek Apostolic Scriptures.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *The New Covenant Aramaic Peshitta Text with Hebrew Translation* (Jerusalem: Bible Society in Israel, 1986), pp iii-iv.

<sup>20</sup> The elongated reading of Acts 15:24, “Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, ‘You must be circumcised and keep the law’—to whom we gave no such commandment” (NKJV), appears in both the Greek Textus Receptus and Aramaic Peshitta. This reading is notably lacking from the critical edition Greek New Testament used for most modern Bible versions: “Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with *their* words, unsettling your souls” (NASU).

Be sure to consult the commentary *Acts 15 for the Practical Messianic* by J.K. McKee.