

Chapter 2--Aramaic: Its Origin, History and Distribution¹

The Name of the Language

As was mentioned in the introduction, the Northwest Semitic language of Aramaic is found in several places within the pages of the Old Testament. William LaSor, writing for the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, makes the following statement regarding its distribution within the pages of the Old Testament. According to LaSor, Aramaic is:

A language or group of languages of the Semitic family, closely related to Hebrew. Biblical Aramaic, formerly called Chaldee, is the name given to the Aramaic occasionally found in the OT, viz.: (1) two words in Genesis 31:47 used by Laban, whereas Jacob expressed the same idea in Hebrew; (2) one verse in Jer. 10:11 representing the testimony that the house of Israel was to make to the nations; (3) two portions in Ezra (4:8-6:18; 7:12-26), being principally correspondence between the enemies of the Jews and the Persian King Darius, and a letter from Artaxerxes to Ezra; (4) the central portion of Daniel (2:4b-7:28). The language is called "Aramaic" (improperly translated "Syriac" in the AV) in Ezr. 4:7 and Dnl. 2:4.^{2,3}

As seen above, Aramaic has gone under various names through the course of history. Early in the history of the church, the language was known as "Syrian" or as the language of Syria. John Calvin is an example of one who utilized this terminology.⁴ The King James version of the scriptures also utilize this terminology.⁵

Gen:25:20: And Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah to wife, the daughter of Bethuel the Syrian of Padan-aram, the sister to Laban the Syrian.

1 This chapter is the second chapter of the PhD thesis of Lee Carl Finley which was submitted to the doctoral committee of Reformation International Theological Seminary (RITS), of Fellsmere, FL, for consideration. The thesis was entitled: *Aramaic: Its History, Development and Relationship to Biblical Hebrew, from Antiquity to the time of the Israelite Monarchy*. The thesis was submitted to RITS for approval in September 2012 and was approved by the doctoral committee in October 2012.

2 William Sanford LaSor, "Aramaic" in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia: Vol. One A-D*. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, General Editor; Everett F Harrison, Roland K. Harrison, and William Sanford LaSor, Associate Editors; Edgar W. Smith, Project Editor. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmann Publishing Co. 1979) 229

3 some have desired to expand this, by adding Prov 30.1, and Job 36.2, but these have not been commonly recognized within scholarly circles. See Fitzmyer, *A Wandering Aramean: Collected Aramaic Essays*, 1997, p. 22, n. 23 regarding Prov. 30, and Gordis, *The Book of God and Man*, 1965, p. 334, re Job. 36.2.

4 John Calvin (translated by John King), *Commentaries on the Book of Genesis, Vol II* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans publishing Co. 1948) 179-180.

5 oddly enough, in two places, the KJV translators did not translate אַרַם as Syria, but retained the place name "Aram". Note the following:

--Num:23:7: And he took up his parable, and said, Balak the king of Moab hath brought me from Aram, out of the mountains of the east, saying, Come, curse me Jacob, and come, defy Israel.

--1Chron:2:23: And he took Geshur, and Aram, with the towns of Jair, from them, with Kenath, and the towns thereof, even threescore cities. All these belonged to the sons of Machir the father of Gilead.

Deut:26:5: And thou shalt speak and say before the LORD thy God, A Syrian ready to perish was my father, and he went down into Egypt, and sojourned there with a few, and became there a nation, great, mighty, and populous:

2Kgs:5:20: But Gehazi, the servant of Elisha the man of God, said, Behold, my master hath spared Naaman this Syrian, in not receiving at his hands that which he brought: but, as the LORD liveth, I will run after him, and take somewhat of him.

2Kgs:18:26: Then said Eliakim the son of Hilkiah, and Shebna, and Joah, unto Rabshakeh, Speak, I pray thee, to thy servants in the Syrian language; for we understand it: and talk not with us in the Jews' language in the ears of the people that are on the wall.

Ezr:4:7: And in the days of Artaxerxes wrote Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, and the rest of their companions, unto Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the writing of the letter was written in the Syrian tongue, and interpreted in the Syrian tongue.

Dan:2:4: Then spake the Chaldeans to the king in Syriack, O king, live for ever: tell thy servants the dream, and we will shew the interpretation.

Many more references could be brought forth to illustrate this point.⁶ And in each instance above, the term "Syriac" or "Syrian" is a translation of the Hebrew term **אֲרָמִית** or **אֲרָמִי**, and is used in lieu of the terms "Aramaic" or "Aramean," respectively.

In the 1800s, the language was known as "Chaldee" by scholars, possibly due to a verse like Daniel 1.4, which refers to "the writing and language of the Chaldeans"^{7, 8}. Apparently, Jerome was the first individual to term the Aramaic language "Chaldee."⁹ One such book so describing Aramaic in this manner is the 1858 work, written by Elias Riggs¹⁰, entitled: *A Manual of the Chaldee Language*. Although archaic and outdated by our standards (being written prior to the vast majority of recent linguistic discoveries regarding the ancient Near East), such a book was a relatively modern¹¹ attempt to instruct the 19th century student of the word of God as to this obscure and unknown language. On page 14 of this book, he describes the distinguishing characteristics of Aramaic in terms very similar to those found in 20th and 21st century Aramaic grammars.

Although originally speaking a dialect of Akkadian, at an early date the Chaldeans adopted the dominant language of the day: Aramaic. By the time of the rise of Nebuchadnezzar, Akkadian was waning and being eclipsed by Aramaic:

6 See Appendix A

7 ספר ולשון כשדים

8 see also: Alger F Johns, *A Short Grammar of Biblical Aramaic*, Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1963, 1982) 1

9 *Chaldeans*. JewishEncyclopedia.com/The Kopelman Foundation. 2002. Accessed March 31, 2011.

Available at <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=336&letter=C&search=Chaldeans>

10 see Elias Riggs, *A Manual of the Chaldee Language*, (New York: Anson D.F. Randolph & Co. 1858).

11 that is, by 19th century standards of learning and scholarship--lcf

The language used by the Chaldeans was Semitic Babylonian, the same, save for slight peculiarities in sound and in characters, as Assyrian. In late periods the Babylonian language ceased to be spoken, and Aramaic took its place. One form of this widespread language is used in Daniel and Ezra, but the use of the name Chaldee for it, first introduced by Jerome, is a misnomer.¹²

In the 20th century it has become common convention to call the Chaldee language by the name "Aramaic," for this is what the scriptures themselves call the language¹³:

--And in the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam wrote, (along with) Mithredath, Tabheel and the remainder of their colleagues, unto Artaxerxes King of Persia, and the writing of their letter was written (in) Aramaic and was interpreted (from) Aramaic¹⁴.

--Ezr. 4.7

--And they spoke, the Chaldeans, to the king in Aramaic¹⁵, "O king, Forever live! Tell the dream to your servants and the interpretation we will declare."

--Dan. 2.4

And this is the language that is before us: *Aramaic*--the language of Laban, the language of Daniel and the language of Ezra.

The Origin and History of the Aramaic Language

Its Early Origins and Relation to Hebrew

The Hebrew and Aramaic scholar Avi Hurvitz makes the following comment regarding the history of Aramaic and its relation to Hebrew:

One of the most interesting chapters in the linguistic history of Ancient Israel is that of the interrelationship between BH and Aramaic, as known to us from the various dialects current in and around Palestine. For almost 2000 years the two languages were in use side by side; and naturally, this situation engendered mutual influences which affected their history and development.¹⁶

¹² *Chaldeans*. 2002.

¹³ the translation of the above verses (Ezra 4.7 and Daniel 2.4) is my own. See Appendix M for a fuller explanation regarding the making and principles of this translation.

¹⁴ in Aramaic: אַרְמִיַת

¹⁵ in Aramaic: אַרְמִיַת

¹⁶ Avi Hurvitz, *Hebrew and Aramaic in the Biblical Period: The Problem of 'Aramaisms' in linguistic research on the Hebrew Bible*, In *Biblical Hebrew: Studies in Chronology and Typology*, ed. Ian Young. (London-New York: T & T Clark International, 2003) 24

Hurvitz is correct in observing that these languages have a long and storied past. He is also correct in stating that this long co-existence “engendered mutual influences which affected their history and development.” Undoubtedly, this must be the case. The scriptures are full of instances, from the time of the patriarchs onward, of a mutual interaction between these two languages, between the people of Israel and the people of the varied and almost seemingly ubiquitous Aramaic-speaking Arameans, who show up in almost every age of biblical history. Again Hurvitz is instructive at this point:

The biblical tradition, as preserved in both narrative and historiographical compositions, points to a continuous contact between the two languages throughout the entire era—from ‘the Patriarchal Period’ (whose historicity and chronological background are, of course a matter of debate) through to the Restoration and the establishment of the Second Temple. While much detail pertaining to these contacts remains unclear, especially in the earlier periods, sufficient information appears in the biblical texts to enable us to sketch the linguistic picture in general outline.¹⁷

We can also note the following biblical examples of Israelite interaction with early Aramaic-speaking individuals. Although too numerous to list in their entirety, I have included, in Appendix A, the scriptural testimony to the contact between Arameans and Israelites. Although there may be some duplication within the lists, there is ample evidence to demonstrate that Israel, throughout its history, had numerous and repeated contact with Aramaic-speaking peoples, peoples that were identified as Arameans, and who were said to speak the language of the Arameans: Aramaic.

Thus, it would seem to follow, that one, in carefully studying the biblical record, could learn of this linguistic relationship and further, at least in part, his knowledge and understanding of both biblical Hebrew and Aramaic (both biblical and extra-biblical or secular Aramaic)¹⁸. Yet not all linguistic scholars agree with this premise. After commenting on some of the more recent studies¹⁹ on early Aramaic inscriptions, Jonas Greenfield makes the following comment re this very issue:

17 Avi Hurvitz, *Hebrew and Aramaic in the Biblical Period: The Problem of ‘Aramaisms’ in linguistic research on the Hebrew Bible*, In *Biblical Hebrew: Studies in Chronology and Typology*, ed. Ian Young. (London-New York: T & T Clark International, 2003) 24-25.

18 “The picture which emerges from the biblical descriptions cited above is evidently partial and fragmentary. Many details are lacking and many questions remain unanswered. Nevertheless, we are in a position to establish the general framework in which the various linguistic forces operated; it is even possible to set up several historical milestones which make a chronological orientation possible (see Lemaire 1988 10-13): 1. The first contacts between Hebrew and Aramaic are found at the dawn of the history of the people of Israel, a period represented in the biblical tradition by ‘the patriarchal stories’ in the book of Genesis. 2. At the time of Sennacherib’s siege of Jerusalem (700 BCE) the knowledge of Aramaic in Judah was limited to the upper classes. The common people, it would seem, neither spoke nor wrote Aramaic. 3. In the period of the Restoration, when Aramaic became the dominant language throughout the Persian empire, the status of Hebrew was undermined. According to the testimony of the book of Nehemiah, already at that time certain sectors of the Jewish population were unable to speak proper Hebrew. This, then, is the linguistic background that emerges from the descriptions found in the biblical literary tradition. As we shall see in what follows, this is also the basic picture that emerges from the linguistic testimony of BH.” (Hurvitz, 2003, 27)

19 ie, at that time, in 1978--lcf

...The late E. Y. Kutscher's wide-ranging critical assessment of studies dealing with Old Aramaic and Official Aramaic is a challenge to all who venture into this field. I present my own viewpoints and in this article do not attempt to discuss those of other scholars.

It is useless to speculate about the Aramaic language in the last quarter of the second millennium when the Arameans make their entry on the stage of history. Nor is anything to be gained by assuming the existence of a vague "Northwest Semitic" common language, of which Aramaic was a part, for this early period. All the material available points to the logical assumption that the Arameans spoke a clearly recognized language when they are identified in the sources as Arameans.

Any discussion of the Aramaic language must begin with the texts in Aramaic. The earliest known inscription, the altar inscription from Tell Halaf (KAI 231), is not of much use for linguistic analysis as the reading is not certain. But the inscriptions from the ninth and eighth century Syria and Turkey, i.e., the Bar Hadad inscription (KAI 201), the Zakkur inscription (KAI 202), the Sfire inscriptions (KAI 222-224), and the inscriptions from Zincirli (Sam'al) (KAI 214-215), place before the scholar sufficient Aramaic texts to enable him to make clear dialect distinctions.²⁰

From this quote we see the importance of the written text for Greenfield in his study of the Aramaic language. And, in part, I agree with his sentiment in this quote. Linguistic research, when it is able, ought to utilize as much of the extant literary data that is available.

However, we can also see from this quote Greenfield's attitude towards Aramaic, in an early form, being found in the pages of the scriptures. Clearly, a passage like Genesis 31.47 (which most scholars agree contains Aramaic) is **not** part of the data that he is considering when he examines *early witnesses* to Aramaic. From his statement (above) it would seem that Greenfield does not consider the Genesis account as a *genuine* reflection of a dialectical distinction between the language of Jacob and the language of Laban. For in the Genesis account we *do* have a text, a very early text, that seems to contain a linguistic distinction between the two men. The material that Greenfield sees as the oldest representations of the Aramaic language are, by his own confession, of the ninth and eighth centuries, B.C. What we have here in Genesis is clearly centuries older than those inscriptions, and may (most likely) represent a time when both Hebrew and Aramaic were much more closely related. Of this we will speak more in subsequent chapters.

Suffice it to say at this point, that not all scholars would agree that the biblical record is an accurate representation of history--linguistic or otherwise. Yet in so doing, these scholars are ignoring a vitally important linguistic witness--the Hebrew scriptures--that witnesses to both the development of Hebrew and Aramaic.

²⁰ Jonas C. Greenfield. "The Dialects of Early Aramaic," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol 37. No. 2 (1978) 93

The Arameans

Complicating the issue of the development of the Aramaic language is the related issue of the Arameans and who they were. Emil Kraeling, who worked extensively with the Brooklyn Papyri²¹ states just that:

A language is carried abroad by a people, and its prevalence is proof of a people's numbers and influence. Behind the Aramaic language stand the Aramaeans. In the classic Bible translations their name has unfortunately been replaced by "Syrians". They appeared on the stage of history in Mesopotamia and Syria at about the same time the Hebrews appeared in Palestine.²²

In spite of the numerous recent archeological discoveries, very little is known concerning the Arameans themselves. It has been observed:

Aramaic takes its name from the Arameans, or the people of Aram. These strange people, whose origins are unknown, probably occupied the stage of history for a longer period of time than any others, yet never developed an empire or even a strong kingdom. They furnished a language that became the medium of international communication in the days of the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian empires, and faded only gradually in the Hellenistic period; yet they gave the world no great literature (others who used their language did) nor indeed any other form of art. They borrowed an alphabet and gave it, in its many forms, to most of the literate world (including even the names for the Greek letters, in most cases); yet the alphabet was so poorly suited to their speech that scholars become confused by the orthography when discussing the phonetics and phonemics of Aramaic. And if any other paradox needs to be mentioned, the Arameans were often the enemies of the people of the (Old Testament)--even though the Israelite was constantly reminded that "a wandering Aramean" was his father (Dt. 26:5).²³

And even with the recent archeological discoveries of the latter half of the 20th century, we have no written testimony of the Arameans themselves older than the first millennium B.C. The only other sources that we have are written records of those who interacted with the Arameans: e.g.--the Assyrians, the Egyptians, and the Hebrews. Kraeling cites Assyrian and Babylonian examples:

The Assyrian inscriptions give us what is known of the early history of the Arameans in Mesopotamia. They invaded that region in the time of Tiglathpileser I in the 12th century B.C., but many also made Syria their promised land and gradually gained the upper hand in some of its principalities--a situation made vivid by inscriptions from those areas. Damascus became "the head of Aram" (Isa. 7.8). No doubt it was in Syria that the Aramaeans evolved their own adaptation of the Phoenician

21 ie--a large cache of Aramaic documents that were found on the Egyptian island of Elephantine early in the last century.

22 Emil G. Kraeling, *The Brooklyn Museum Aramaic Papyri* (New Haven: Yale University Press. 1953) 4-5.

23 LaSor, "Aramaic," 1979, 229.

alphabet, and it was probably in the kingdom of Damascus that the language became a literary medium with a standard spelling and phraseology, for literature goes hand in hand with rising political power.²⁴

In Babylonia, too, Aramean tribesmen, who had presumably pressed into that country and occupied areas depopulated by war, waxed numerous during the area of Assyrian rule. Meanwhile, in the extreme south of Babylonia, in Chaldea, newer Aramean groups were even able to establish some political power.²⁵

William LaSor comments regarding the early Arameans being linked with another term, *Ahlame*²⁶:

The *Ahlame*, long identified with the Arameans, are mentioned in cuneiform texts from Mesopotamia from about the 26th cent. B.C. on; they were principally troublesome marauders, nomads who moved with the flocks according to the season, knowing no boundaries, and constantly raiding the borderlands of civilized peoples. Along with them we should probably group similar nomads, such as the Suti, the Kaldi, and the Arami....They doubtless spoke a common language or closely related dialects of a language, to which we might give the name proto-Aramaic, although we have no literary remains to support this theory. There is, however, much evidence in written records of their existence (cf. Dupont-Sommer, *Les Arameans*). Their principal location was in upper Mesopotamia, within the great bend of the Euphrates known as Aram-Naharaim, "Aram of the Two Rivers" (the Euphrates and the Habor), or Paddan-aram (Gen 28:6).²⁷

24 Kraeling, 1953, 5.

25 Kraeling, 1953, 5-6.

26 Regarding the connection between the *Ahlame* and Arameans, Alan Milard, in the Anchor Bible Dictionary, observes the following regarding the identification of the *Ahlame* with Arameans:

"The scribes of Tiglath-pileser qualified the Arameans as *Ahlamu*....After the texts of Tiglath-pileser I and Assur-bel-kala, the word almost disappears from cuneiform records,...Persons described as Ahlamite appear sporadically in documents of the latter half of the 2d millennium B.C., as far back as the reign of Ammisaduqa of Babylon (ca. 1646-1626 B.C.) a tribe of Ahlamites was living near Sippar... Although the relationship of Ahlamu to Arameans is unclear, the Assyrians saw it as very close, so a scribe of the 9th century might have termed "Aramean" the people whom his predecessor in the 13th century B.C. would have termed "Ahlamite". The situation can be understood if the Ahlamites were the section or group of the Arameans whom the Babylonians first encountered (Milard, 1992, 347-348)."

Joseph Fitzmyer also identifies the *Ahlame* with the early Patriarchs:

"Hebrew was probably the oldest language still spoken in first-century Palestine. We may speculate about the language that was spoken by the "wandering Aramean" (Deut 26:5) who returned from Egypt at the time of the conquest of Palestine. Was it Old Aramaic of the form known in the early inscriptions from northern Syria? Or had this semi-nomadic people already adopted the *sepat Kena'an* of the inhabitants who preceded them? The likelihood is that the "nomad" was still speaking the tongue of his forebears (*Ahlame*). (Fitzmyer, 1997, 44)"

27 LaSor, "Aramaic," 1979, 229.

And again:

Although it has been asserted that the word occurs from the mid-3rd millennium, the earliest certain references are in the Amarna Letters...and in the records of Adadnirari I (1307-1275 B.C.) who refers to "the hordes of the Ahlami and Suti, the lauri and their lands, who enlarged boundary and frontier (ARAB, I, § 68). Shalmaneser I (1275-1245 B.C.) told of his conquest of "Shattura, king of Hani(galbat), the army of the Hittites and Ahlami with him" (ARAB, I, § 116). But it was Tiglath-pileser I (1115-1077 B.C.) who identified the Ahlami with the Arameans (ARAB, I, § 239).²⁸

Thus, it appears that the Arameans were known to their contemporaries²⁹, although usually as adversaries. And although not leaving a written record, it appears that the Arameans have left an indelible mark on history, even though we know next to nothing of them as a people.

From the scriptural record³⁰, the record of the Hebrew peoples, we find that the Arameans appear on the stage at a very early date. Genesis 10.22 records for us the first reference to the name of Aram:

Gen 10:22: The children of Shem; Elam, and Asshur, and Arphaxad, and Lud, and Aram.

Here we find the name "Aram" associated with Shem, the son of Noah. At least two of the other names found here refer to other Semitic people groups--groups that also represented distinct language groups: Elam and Asshur, representing Elamite and Akkadian, respectively. And both groups appear to be related to the central/eastern area of Mesopotamia, the same area from whence came Abraham and his family.

We also find the name of Aram associated with the family of Abraham. Although Abraham (Abram) left "Ur of the Chaldees" (cf. Gen. 11.31) and settled in Haran, Abraham considered those that he left in Haran, that dwelt in what was now known as Padan-Aram, his family. In Genesis 24.3-4, Abraham commands his servant:

Gen:24:3: And I will make thee swear by the LORD, the God of heaven, and the God of the earth, that thou shalt not take a wife unto my son of the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell:

28 William Sanford LaSor, "Syria" in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia: Vol. 4, Q-Z.*, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, General Editor; Everett F. Harrison, Roland K. Harrison, and William Sanford LaSor, Associate Editors; Edgar W. Smith, Project Editor. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmann Publishing Co. 1979) 687.

29 for a detailed yet brief history of the Aramaic peoples/Hittite peoples see C.F. Burney (cf Bibliography for full citation [lcf]) in his introduction to his commentary on Judges, p. ci-cii, in the footnote. Burney sees possible early Aramaic cultural influence upon the Hittite peoples. This, in turn, may have relevance in relation to Abraham, in his dealings with various Hittites in the book of Genesis.

30 please note, however, that this is a record that most in the scholarly world fail to take seriously as an historical record, either of the Hebrews or the Arameans. In spite of this, I am convinced that when properly understood in its historical and literary context, the Hebrew scriptures can yield a wealth of information as regards the nature of the Arameans in general and the Aramaic language in particular--lcf

4: But thou shalt go unto my country, and to my kindred, and take a wife unto my son Isaac.

And this Abraham's servant did. In Gen. 24.10 we find that the servant went to "Mesopotamia".

Gen:24:10: And the servant took ten camels of the camels of his master, and departed; for all the goods of his master were in his hand: and he arose, and went to Mesopotamia³¹, unto the city of Nahor.

In the King James version of the Bible, the term "Mesopotamia" is a translation of the place name, "Aram Naharaim," literally, "Aram of the Two Rivers". And this was where Abraham's bother lived, in Aram.

In Genesis 25, we find record of the woman that the servant of Abraham brought back for Isaac:

Gen:25:20: And Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah to wife, the daughter of Bethuel the Syrian of Padan-aram³², the sister to Laban the Syrian.

Here we see that Rebekah was from Paddan Aram, and was the sister of Laban the Syrian, that is, the Aramean. Laban and his people, including Rebekah--the relatives, nay, even the family of Abraham, were considered Arameans. This is significant, for in two generations, from the time of the departure of Abraham from Haran, until the marriage of Rebekah to Isaac, a period of some 65 years, the relatives of Abraham were now known as Arameans.

In addition, Abraham may have very well had in his employ Arameans. In Genesis 15.2 we find Abraham praying to God regarding a son:

Gen:15:2: And Abram said, Lord GOD, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus?

Here we see that the steward of the house of Abraham was Eliezer of Damascus. Damascus, as we find repeatedly in subsequent chapters of the word of God, was primarily an Aramean city. And here, at this very early date, we find that the steward of all that was Abraham's, who seemingly shared the faith of Abraham, and who presumably was the servant that Abraham later sent to gather a wife for Isaac, was an Aramean.³³

31 (אַרַם נַהַרַיִם), "Aram of the Two Rivers", a location along the banks of the upper Euphrates River

32 or, more properly, Paddan Aram (פַּדְדַן אַרַם)

33 Milard comments on the modern propensity to discount this early data as genuine:

"The Patriarchal narratives of Genesis claim the presence of Arameans in upper Mesopotamia early in the 2d millennium B.C....It was to Aram-naharaim that Abraham's servant went to find a wife for Isaac, and her relatives are titled "Arameans" (Gen 24:10; 25:20, cf. 28:5; 31:20,24). Commentators usually call these references anachronistic, assuming that they are additions to old stories, or that they came

Although we will speak much of this later, it also appears from the scriptural record that these Arameans were speaking their own language, that is, Aramaic. Genesis 31 records for us the earliest record of Aramaic speech in the Bible:

43: And Laban answered and said unto Jacob, These daughters are my daughters, and these children are my children, and these cattle are my cattle, and all that thou seest is mine: and what can I do this day unto these my daughters, or unto their children which they have born?

44: Now therefore come thou, let us make a covenant, I and thou; and let it be for a witness between me and thee.

45: And Jacob took a stone, and set it up for a pillar.

46: And Jacob said unto his brethren, Gather stones; and they took stones, and made an heap; and they did eat there upon the heap.

47: And Laban called it Jegar-sahadutha: but Jacob called it Galeed.

48: And Laban said, This heap is a witness between me and thee this day. Therefore was the name of it called Galeed;

--Gen. 31.43-48

We find in v. 47 the naming of the cairn or heap of rocks that were set up by both men. What follows is most interesting: they do not use the same terms for the cairn. Jacob names it Galeed, but Laban calls it Jegar-sahadutha³⁴, a term that is clearly Aramaic in its construction. The second term is in the Aramaic "determined" or emphatic state, the Hebrew equivalent of having an article. Here we find witness to the linguistic

naturally to writers of the late Monarchy, the exilic, or postexilic periods, who were rewriting traditional tales, or inventing the stories. If that were the case, their portrayal of a specific region "Aram" in upper Mesopotamia at a time when all independent states had been absorbed into provinces of the Assyrian, Babylonian, or Persian empires reflects knowledge of either an older position, or an ethnic or geographic rather than political terminology, otherwise unknown to us. After the mainly hostile relations between the national states of Israel, Judah, and the Arameans of Damascus during the Monarchy, it would be startling to find Israel asserting her ancestors were Arameans without any qualification, so claiming kinship with a different people, and jeopardizing their national distinctiveness. If, on the other hand, the Genesis and related references to Aram are (seen) as coming from the early 2d millennium B.C. with the narratives in which they stand, they tell of Aramean people living in upper Mesopotamia at least 6 centuries before other sources mention such a people there. Before discounting this as incredible, it is necessary to ask if this is possible. Studies of (Ancient Near Eastern) culture show that it is. Documentation is sporadic even for the major centers like Nineveh and Babylon; knowledge of upper Mesopotamia depends largely upon what was recorded in other places (e.g., Mari, Assur, Nineveh, Hattusas), only a few texts have been found in that area itself....That the Pentateuch preserves very ancient information about the Arameans...should not, therefore, be totally rejected; to do so is to risk deforming the evidence. Of course, the Patriarchal Narratives reached their present form long after the events they describe; Laban the Aramean probably did not speak what is now recognized as Aramaic, any more than Abraham spoke biblical Hebrew. A picture of the Arameans originating as a tribe in Upper Mesopotamia about 2000 B.C., remaining there for several centuries, gradually growing, until increased numbers, drought, famine, and other agents forced them to spread E and W seems plausible. The eruption of the Aramean tribes into Babylonia is comparable with the spread of the Amorites along the same routes a millennium earlier....The declaration of Deut 26:5, "My father was a wandering Aramean,"...reflects the same traditions, and can be understood well in the light of the 2d millennium B.C. society [Millard 1980]" (Milard, 1992, 348).

Although I vigorously disagree with his statements regarding the language of both Abraham and Laban, the remainder of his reasoning seems sound--lcf

34 or, more properly, *Yegar Sahadutha'* (יגַר שְׁהַדּוּתָא)

distinctiveness of the Aramean peoples at a very early age.

In sum, we find that the Arameans were, in the scriptures, a distinct people group, having both a distinct language and identity even in the time of the patriarchs. And the Arameans are found throughout the scriptures from this time forward.

As I had mentioned previously, Appendix A is a list of all the verses that refer to the contact between the people of God and the Arameans:

- At least some in Aram were diviners (as witnessed by Balaam, Num. 22-24)
- in the time of Moses, Jacob was considered an Aramean (Deut 26.5)
- we find that at a very early date, they were enemies of the people of God (cf. Jud 3.10 "Chushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia", that is, *Aram Naharaim*³⁵)
- the Arameans soon became idol worshipers (cf. Jud 10.6)
- David, King of Israel, had numerous contacts with the Arameans, mostly within a context of war/battle with various Aramean kings (cf. I Chron 18.5; 19.1-19; cf. also II Sam 8 and 10). But he also had economic dealings with them as well (I Chron 18.6; 19.19).
- even in the time of David, the Arameans seemed to have a loose confederation of small city states and cooperated in battle (cf. II Sam 10.6-8)
- Solomon continued with his economic dealings with the Aramean peoples. His kingdom is said to have encompassed the area where various Aramaic city-states were known to have been (cf. I Kings 8.65).
- during the period of the divided kingdom, Aram was a habitual enemy of the people of Israel.
- Under the reign of Jeroboam II various Aramaic cities were recovered for the Israelite kingdom of Samaria (II Kings 14.28).
- later in the history of Judah, Israel came against Judah and was allied with Aram-Damascus (cf. Isa 7.1-8)

Yet, even with this list, we learn precious little concerning the Arameans. Although kin with Israel at a very early period, for the most part, there was little love or much cooperation between these two peoples. They were idol worshipers very early in their history, and even became a source of sin for various kings of Israel and Judah. And even with all of their dealings with the people of God, we are still ignorant of much of Aramean culture.

This, then, is Aram, and these are the Arameans, of what we know today.

Characteristics, Development and Distribution of the Aramaic Language

אָרַם נַהֲרַיִם 35

Development of Vowel and Consonantal Sounds

The Aramaic language is part of the larger Semitic family of languages, along with such languages as Hebrew, Akkadian, Arabic, and Ethiopic. Specifically, it is part of the Northwest division of this family of languages, alongside, Phoenician, Hebrew, Moabite, Ammonite, and Edomite. Later, as the language developed, it saw numerous dialects develop (e.g.--Palestinian Jewish Aramaic, Palestinian Christian Aramaic, Samaritan Aramaic, Palmyrene Aramaic and Nabataean Aramaic).³⁶

As with many Semitic languages, the Aramaic language has a consonantal alphabet. When it was first written, the language had no means of representing vowel or vowel sounds. Many of the earliest extant inscriptions are consonantal in nature. Further, Aramaic, as it is known now, initially had no written alphabet of its own, but rather borrowed the Phoenician script for the representation of its own language:

The Arameans appear explicitly for the first time in the records of the fourth regnal year of the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser I (1115-1076 B.C.). As far as we can judge today, the Arameans spoke a language that was apparently derived ultimately from a common Northwest Semitic stock, but that developed separately from cognate Canaanite dialects. The first emergence of the language in the Old Aramaic inscriptions reveal it to be written in the alphabet of the Phoenicians. Though it eventually developed on its own specific forms of some of the letters, it is to be noted that the Arameans adopted the Phoenician alphabet and suited it to their distinctively Aramaic sounds³⁷.

In time, Aramaic began using certain letters, (commonly referred to as *mater lectionis*³⁸) to represent, certain vowel sounds in words ("a" as in "father"; "e" as in "hey"; "u" as in Ruth"). First, these letters represented the long vowel sound at the end of the words. Then all long vowel sounds. Over the course of the centuries, other symbols came to be used to represent these sounds. And finally, other shorter vowel and half-vowel sounds were distinguished and represented as well.

Further, Aramaic continued shortening the vocalized vowel sounds in their words. Upon examination of an Aramaic passage from either Ezra or Daniel, one will notice several words that appear almost as Hebrew words, but they almost invariably have some form of a shortened vowel under the first syllable.^{39, 40}

36 Johns, 1963, 1982, 1-2

37 Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Semitic Background of the New Testament--Combined Edition of "Essays on the Semitic Background of the New Testament" and "A Wandering Aramean: Collected Aramaic Essays"*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1997) 63

38 or, "*matres lectionis*." For a brief discussion on such, please see *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, § 8 h, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, E. Kautsch, editor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1910, 1988) 43-44.

39 The issue of vowel shifts, vowel lengthening, changing from one sound to another is a complicated matter and beyond the scope of this work. For a fuller treatment of this issue, see, *A Short Grammar of Biblical Aramaic*, by Alger Johns. (Alger F. Johns, *A Short Grammar of Biblical Aramaic* [Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press. 1963, 1982] p. 6-7) or *A Grammar of Biblical Aramaic*, by Franz Rosenthal (Franz Rosenthal, *A Grammar of Biblical Aramaic* [Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz. 1983] p. 17-18)

40 cf. Johns, 1963, 1982, 8 for lists where these words (and similar words) were found.

--Hebrew: *nathan* (נָתַן)--Aramaic: *nthan* (נְתַן)

This is true even for words that were accented on the first syllable in Hebrew:

--Hebrew: *zr'* (זָרַע)--Aramaic: *zr'* (זְרַע)

As to the consonantal sounds, Aramaic, for the most part, is vocalized in a very similar manner as is Hebrew. There are, however, notable exceptions. Two of the most prominent differences are the letter pairs of “d” and “z”, and “sh” and “th”⁴¹. As with many of the Northwest Semitic languages, sound shifts occurred over the centuries. Both Aramaic and Hebrew are thought to be descended from an ancient language, often called by grammarians, Proto-Semitic.⁴² Proto-Semitic is a hypothetical language thought to represent a very early form of the Semitic languages.

Linguists and grammarians have detected various sound shifts in Aramaic, as the language developed from its Proto-Semitic ancestor, that differed from Hebrew.⁴³ Whereas Hebrew developed a “z” sound from a primal Proto-Semitic “d” sound⁴⁴, Aramaic developed or retained a version of the “d” sound. Note the Hebrew and Aramaic words for “gold”:

--Hebrew: *zhab* (זָהָב)--Aramaic: *dhab* (דְּהַב)

Again, where Hebrew developed an “sh” sound from a primal “th” sound in Prot-Semitic, Aramaic in some cases retained this “th” or “t” sound. Note the Hebrew and Aramaic words for “three”:

--Hebrew: *šālš* (שָׁלֹשׁ)--Aramaic: *ṯlṯ* (תְּלַת)

The Aramaic Script

To the student of Hebrew, if he were to open his Bible to either Ezra or Daniel, he would quickly see that both Aramaic and Hebrew share the same script. In actuality, it is Hebrew that is sharing the Aramaic script, for the “block” letters that we so easily associate with Hebrew are in actuality Aramaic letters. These letters were adopted some time after the return from captivity and prior to the birth of Christ by the Jews that had returned. This adoption was not quick. Even in the time of Christ writings were still produced that utilized the older Hebrew script.

41 ו, ש and ת, ש, ו, respectively.

42 cf. LaSor, 1979, 231; Johns, 1982, 5. In the introduction to his work, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew*, Thomas O. Lambdin calls this language a “Phoenician Prototype” in a chart on p. xxii of his introduction (Thomas O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* [Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentise Hall. 1971] xxii).

43 The following information was gleaned from the Aramaic grammar: *A Short Grammar of Biblical Aramaic*, by Alger Johns. (Alger F. Johns, *A Short Grammar of Biblical Aramaic*. [Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press. 1963, 1982] p. 5). A fuller chart, containing both Semitic language characters as well as phonetic characters/symbols, can be readily found on the Wikipedia webpage, “Proto Semitic Language,” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proto-semitic>)

44 or hard “th” sound, as in the word “this”.

We need to note that this adoption of the Aramaic script was not confined to the Hebrew peoples alone. Joseph Naveh, in an article for the Anchor Bible Dictionary, notes that other Near Eastern peoples adopted the Aramaic alphabetic characters:

It seems likely that the eastern neighbors of the Israelites, i.e., the Ammonites, the Moabites, and Edomites, who spoke dialects akin to Hebrew, learned the alphabet only in the 9th century B.C. Meshah, king of Moab, wrote his stele in the Moabite language but employed the Hebrew script, as it was used at that time by the inhabitants of Israel and Judah. Although no contemporary Edomite inscription is known at present, there is enough evidence to suppose that in the 9th century B.C. the Edomites also wrote in the Hebrew script. The Ammonites, however, adopted the Aramaic script from their northern neighbors Aram-Damascus....⁴⁵

Here we see, that even in the 9th century B.C. other people groups were beginning to use the Aramaic script. Naveh continues:

After the fall of Damascus in 732 B.C. and with the beginning of the Assyrian control of the King's Highway in Ammon, Moab, and Edom, the political and cultural influence of Israel and Judah on Moab and Edom came to an end. Because Aramaic was the official script in the western provinces of the Assyrian empire, Aramaic elements began to intrude into the scripts of Moab and Edom. Thus, while in the 7th century B.C. inscriptions there are Hebrew, Aramaic, and some peculiar local letter forms, in the 6th century B.C. the Aramaic forms prevail, and eventually the Hebrew forms disappear altogether. In the late 6th and 5th centuries no letter forms specifically Ammonite, Moabite, or Edomite are discernable, and the inscriptions were written solely in the Aramaic script, even those written in the Canaanite dialects.⁴⁶

Thus, it appears that this "Aramaising" of local scripts was a regional phenomenon.

Although there is much evidence regarding the wholesale adoption of the Aramaic script in the regions of the Near East, much less is known as to the origins of this script. Although there is little extant evidence or remains from this period, the Arameans were known to have adopted the Phoenician script. It is held that this took place somewhere around 1100 B.C.⁴⁷ Prior to this it is unknown as to what form the Aramean script took, whether they employed a variation of cuneiform, similar to Akkadian, that was common to the east, a version of some form of hieroglyphs, as their Hittite neighbors to the northwest, or that they wrote in a yet heretofore unknown Semitic alphabetic script. This answer awaits further archeological work.⁴⁸ Yet once they did adopt this script, it was

45 Joseph Naveh, "Aramaic Script," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary, Vol 1: A-C*. David Noel Freedman, Editor-in-Chief (New York: Doubleday. 1992) 344.

46 Naveh, 1992, 344.

47 Naveh, 1992, 342.

48 But in any case, we know, both from archeology and from the witness of the scriptures, that the Arameans were a developing, organized people. For even in this period (100 B.C.) the Arameans were

used to represent the Aramaic language.⁴⁹

After this point, the picture is clearer:

At the beginning of the 1st millennium B.C. the Aramaic script and language were employed only--or mainly--by the inhabitants of the Aramean kingdoms, but from the 8th century B.C., after the Assyrians conquered these states and realized that the Aramaic script was much more convenient than their cuneiform writing, they granted the Aramaic language and script a special status. Aramaic became an official means of communication in the western provinces of the Assyrian empire. Very soon it turned into an international language in diplomacy and trade. Not only did the ministers of Hezekiah ask Rab-Shakeh to speak to them in Aramaic "for we understand it" (2 Kgs 18:26), but 100 years later, at the end of the 7th century B.C. Adon the king of a certain Philistine (or Phoenician) city wrote to Pharaoh king of Egypt an Aramaic letter in which he asked for military aid against the advancing Babylonian troops that had already conquered Aphek (KAI 266). The diffusion of the Aramaic language and script increased in the Babylonian and Persian kingdoms.⁵⁰

Naveh also notes that there were, in this time (approx eighth century B.C. onward), two forms of the script in use. The first was the "standard" or "formal" or "uniform" style. This was the form that was taught to scribes around the empire.⁵¹ And this is the form that came to be known as Imperial or Standard Aramaic. It was, when compared to Phoenician from whence it was taken, a cursive or simplified form of the Phoenician script. This script was used at all levels of Aramaic society. He also identifies a cursive style and a lapidary style that was used on monuments and statues.⁵²

This cursive, Naveh notes, was the forerunner of the Hebrew block script that is so characteristic of the Hebrew script today:

Whereas in the Hebrew and Phoenician scripts the rightward diagonal down strokes were shaded (or thickened [lcf]), in the Aramaic script the horizontal bars were thickened. The phenomenon can be followed from the 8th century B.C. ink-written texts onward. This kind of shading is characteristic of all the scripts which evolved from the uniform Aramaic script. The modern descendants, like Jewish

rising and organizing to the extent, that in two to three generations they would be a foe of, and later a subject of King David. And we know from this interaction that there was considerable contact between Israel and Aram at this point. This civilization did not arise overnight. Yet we await archeology to fill out the picture of the script of the Arameans prior to 1100 B.C.

49 "The impact of the Phoenician script on people who wrote in Aramaic was so strong that they took over the set of 22 letters employed by the Phoenicians without adding to it a single character, even though the phonetic system of the Aramaic language was much richer than that of the Phoenician" (Naveh, 1992, 343).
50 Naveh, 1992, 343.

51 "Aramaic script was widely used in all the provinces of the Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian empires. In a vast area extending from Asia Minor and Afghanistan to Egypt and North Arabia, the type of Aramaic script encountered was uniform, and no regional variations evolved even in the remotest provinces." (Naveh, 1992, 343).

52 Naveh, 1992, 343.

(square Hebrew), Arabic, and Syriac, follow this tradition.⁵³

The Distribution of the Aramaic Language

As we have just seen above, Aramaic prior to 1100 B.C was known mainly in Aramaic-speaking areas.⁵⁴ But what were those areas? We know that very early on Aramaic was spoken in the upper Mesopotamian valley, in and around the city of Haran--the region known as Paddan-Aram or Aram-Naharaim. This was the location from whence came Rebekah, Isaac's wife, and where Bethuel and Laban, Abraham and Isaac's relatives lived. In commenting on the home of Balaam, Baruch Levine identifies the location of Aram-Naharaim:

Similarly, Deuteronomy 23:5-6 states that Balaam came from Pethor, the very town mentioned here, but there explicitly located in Aram-Naharaim....(This delineates the river country extending from the Orontes eastward across the Euphrates.⁵⁵

And we know from Gen. 31:47 that at this very early date, there was a language distinction between Jacob and Laban, between Hebrew and Aramaic, as evidenced by the grammar of the verse. LaSor, in locating the Ahlame, also identifies their location in this same general area:

(The Ahlame) doubtless spoke a common language or closely related dialects of a language, to which we might give the name proto-Aramaic, although we have no literary remains to support this theory. There is, however, much evidence in written records of their existence (cf. Dupont-Sommer, *Les Arameans*). Their principal location was in upper Mesopotamia, within the great bend of the Euphrates known as Aram-Naharaim, "Aram of the Two Rivers" (the Euphrates and the Habor), or Paddan-aram (Gen 28:6).⁵⁶

Thus, we find the Arameans, at a very early stage, in the upper reaches of the Mesopotamian valley.

We also have early witness of kings of Aram in Judges 3:8. Again the region to which is referred is in the upper Mesopotamian valley. Clearly, Aram has grown, in that a king in Mesopotamia was concerning himself, at this early date, with the land of Canaan, several hundred miles to the southwest.

By the time of the Israelite monarchy, it appears that the language had spread westward. Several Aram city-states have arisen, and who, ultimately become servants of

⁵³ Naveh, 1992, 344.

⁵⁴ "At the beginning of the 1st millennium B.C. the Aramaic script and language were employed only--or mainly--by the inhabitants of the Aramean kingdoms,..." (Naveh, 1992, 343)

⁵⁵ Baruch Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, The Anchor Bible, William Foxwell Albright, David Noel Freedman, gen. editors (New York: Doubleday. 2000) 146.

⁵⁶ LaSor, 1979, 230.

David (cf. II Sam 10.6-8)⁵⁷. And along with their spread so went the Aramaic language.⁵⁸

Throughout the reign of the kings of Israel and Judah, the contact with Aramaic-speaking individuals increased. In fact, in the time of Elisha, an Aramaic general, Naaman, comes for healing from the Israelite prophet. This Aramaic interaction continued until many of the Aramaic peoples were deported under the Assyrians.

Yet, even after this, the Aramaic language continued to spread. The Assyrians granted the Aramaic language and script a special status. As such Aramaic became an official means of communication in the western part of the Assyrian empire.⁵⁹ And with the advent of the Babylonian kingdom, the Babylonians continued using Aramaic for official proceedings and documents.⁶⁰ And it is at this point that the Aramaic language became a *lingua franca*⁶¹ of the Near Eastern world.

Aramaic continued to be a ubiquitous language for at least the next several centuries. After the Babylonians came the Persians. And again, Aramaic was an official means of communication in the western sections of the empire. This persisted well into the Greek and Roman kingdoms, into the time of Christ. However, at this time, Aramaic was losing its official status. Greek was beginning to make inroads in the Hebrew culture and

57 LaSor describes this same spread of the Aramaic language:

“In the 12th cent. B.C., groups of nomads are found along the Tigris and Euphrates from the Persian Gulf to Aram-Naharaim, and along the Levantine coast as far as north Arabia. In the 11th cent. we find the beginnings of the Aramean states, actually small kingdoms consisting of a city or town and its surroundings, with such names as Aram-Zobah, Aram-Maacah, Aram-Dammesek, Aram-Rehob, as well as names not compounded with Aram, such as Geshur, Hamath, and Bit-Adeni (Beth Eden). By the 10th, or at the latest 9th cent., Aramaic inscriptions begin to appear, and the study of Aramaic is put on a basis no longer highly speculative. (LaSor, 1979, 230).

58 Emil Kraeling postulates that the spread of the Aramaic language was both westward and northward in this same period of time:

“The Assyrian inscriptions give us what is known of the early history of the Arameans in Mesopotamia. They invaded that region in the time of Tiglathpileser I in the 12th century B.C., but many also made Syria their promised land and gradually gained the upper hand in some of its principalities--a situation made vivid by inscriptions from those areas. Damascus became "the head of Aram" (Isa. 7.8). No doubt it was in Syria that the Aramaeans evolved their own adaptation of the Phoenician alphabet, and it was probably in the kingdom of Damascus that the language became a literary medium with a standard spelling and phraseology, for literature goes hand in hand with rising political power. The destruction of Damascus by Tiglathpileser III in 732 involved the deportation of its people. According to II Kings 16:9 they were carried back to Kir, their ancient homeland, as prophesied by Amos 1:5. If Kir designates an area north of Assyria that removal may have helped to spread the Aramaic language farther in Mesopotamia and have led to its literary use in that area. In the declining years of the Assyrian empire it was evidently very widely spoken and written there. Tablets from Tell Halaf in Mesopotamia give evidence that it was in use there in the 7th century, and an Aramaic ostrakon from Assur shows an Assyrian leader of that period communicating with a Babylonian colleague by this medium.” (Kraeling, 1953, 5)

59 Naveh, 1992, 343.

60 as can be seen from the books of Ezra and Daniel.

61 See LaSor, 1979, 230; Fitzmyer, 1997, 6, 29; Joseph Fitzmyer, “Aramaic,” *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls--Vol. 1*, Lawrence H. Schiffman, James C. Vander Kam, Editors in Chief (New York, NY: Oxford University Press. 2000) 48; and, E.Y. Kutscher, “Aramaic” *Encyclopaedia Judaica, 2nd Ed. Vol 2: Alr--Az*. (Macmillan Reference USA, In Assoc with Keter Publ. House, Ltd, Jerusalem. Farmington Hills, MI: Thompson Gale. 2007) 342.

speech.⁶² By this time, Aramaic had begun developing distinct dialects. Classifying the Aramaic of this era as Middle Aramaic, E.Y. Kutscher lists many of these dialects:

Middle Aramaic was used from 300 B.C.E. to the early centuries C.E. Included are documents, in somewhat Aramaic, from Persia, India, Afghanistan, and the Caucasus. The Aramaic inscriptions of Jerusalem, Aramaic words found in the New Testament, the Nabatean Aramaic, the Palmyrean Aramaic, that of Hatra, of Dura-Europos, and (partly) the Aramaic ideograms of Middle Persian are all in Middle Aramaic. The Onkelos translation of the Bible...also seems to belong to this period, as does the language of most of the scrolls from the Dead Sea Scrolls written in Aramaic. The Uruk document which dates from this period is the only Aramaic document written in cuneiform.⁶³

In the decades beyond Christ, the dialects became more pronounced. Some scholars have further classified these dialects broadly as Eastern and Western, fitting the above-mentioned regional dialects into a larger framework. Fitzmyer presents the following:

These Aramaic texts of various geographical areas and dialects have further peculiarities that distance them from standard Aramaic even more than those in the Middle Aramaic phase. They fall into two large geographic subdivisions, Western and Eastern.⁶⁴

He then lists the following under Western:

- Jewish Palestinian [or Galilean] Aramaic⁶⁵
- Samaritan Aramaic
- Christian Syro-Palestinian Aramaic

62 the exact nature of this “infiltration” of Greek is a matter of scholarly debate. Fifty to 100 years ago, most scholars held that Greek was the predominant language of Palestine. However, over the last quarter of the 20th century more and more scholars began to promote the primacy of Aramaic within first century Palestinian culture. Joseph Fitzmyer states a moderate version of the latter:

“If asked what was the language commonly spoken in Palestine in the time of Jesus of Nazareth, most people with some acquaintance of that era and area would almost spontaneously answer Aramaic. To my way of thinking, this is still the correct answer for the *most commonly* used language, but the defense of this thesis must reckon with the growing mass of evidence that bit Greek and Hebrew were being used as well. I would, however, hesitate to say with M. Smith that ‘at least as much Greek as Aramaic was spoken in Palestine.’ In any case, the evidence for the use of Aramaic has also been growing in recent years” (Fitzmyer, 1997, 38).

Although more research needs to be done in this field, and geographic/linguistic distinctions considered, I think that Fitzmyer may not be far from the mark on this issue. Further, more work needs to be done on the use of Hebrew in this time as well. As Fitzmyer also noted: ...the number of Qumran texts written in Hebrew far outnumber those in Aramaic, and these bear witness to a lively literary productivity in the language. (Fitzmyer, 1997, 44).

Thus, one cannot simply discount the influence that Hebrew was still having upon the Jewish culture at this time.

63 Kutscher, 2007, 342-43.

64 Fitzmyer, 2000, 49.

65 the Palestinian Targums belong to this dialect--Fitzmyer, 2000, 49.

And Eastern:

- Syriac (Jacobite/Nestorian)
- Babylonian Talmudic Aramaic
- Mandaic⁶⁶

After this, most scholars see a decline both in the distribution and the use of Aramaic dialects, brought on largely by the rise of Islam. With Islam came Arabic. And with the rise of Arabic, thence came the decline of Aramaic. At present, there are only a few enclaves of Aramaic-dialect speakers on the globe, most being in the Mideast, in Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran. And even these are a far cry from their Aramaic ancestors, usually speaking a version of Aramaic that is heavily influenced by Arabic or Turkish.⁶⁷

This, then, in general terms, is a brief history of the distribution of the Aramaic language.

The Phases of the Aramaic Language

In that we have just reviewed a brief history of the spread of the Aramaic language, it would appear, at first glance, that categorizing or classifying the different phases of the Aramaic language would be a relatively easy task. However, this has not been the case. The classification of the Aramaic language has been anything but easy.

The scholarly study of Aramaic is a relatively recent pursuit. For centuries, Aramaic was known primarily, if not exclusively, as a language that was largely represented by the biblical corpus of texts. In the 1800s, with the discovery of the Elephantine Papyri, and the revealing of these documents in the early 20th century, this all changed. Almost overnight, the Aramaic lexicon blossomed. As the 20th century progressed, more Aramaic findings were unearthed. By the latter end of the 20th century, a language once known almost exclusively from the texts of the books of Ezra and Daniel now had archeological witnesses from all over the Near East, even from Egypt to the Indus Valley.⁶⁸ This, in turn, has necessitated a re-evaluation of the phases or states of the language.

Recent advances in cognate languages and other near Eastern languages have pushed our understanding of Aramaic as well. New research in such languages as Akkadian, Old Arabic, Phoenician/Canaanite and Hebrew can shed light upon obscure words and/or word fragments.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Fitzmyer, 2000, 49

⁶⁷ Fitzmyer, 1997, 62.

⁶⁸ "During this period, this form of Aramaic became the lingua franca, used from the Indus Valley (modern Afghanistan and Pakistan), across the ancient Fertile Crescent (Babylonia and Armenia) into southwest Asia Minor and to southern Egypt; examples have even been found in Greece. To this phase belong the twenty-eight Samaria papyri and fragments from Wadi ed-Daliyeh and the Biblical Aramaic of *Ezra* and probably even that of *Daniel*...." (Fitzmyer, 2000, 49).

⁶⁹ As it relates to the study of the Hebrew language, one such text that considers the cognate languages in a philological context is *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament*, by James Barr (London:

In addition, there is also a philosophical aspect to this endeavor of studying Aramaic, especially as it relates to the biblical texts. Various theories of how the Hebrew text “came to be” in general and how Aramaic is interpreted in these various compositional schemes in particular have colored the objective study of the Aramaic language. In examining commentaries of various biblical books from the last century, there have been numerous scholars that present some form of a “documentary hypothesis” regarding the composition of the Old Testament.⁷⁰ Upon further investigation in these works, it can be seen that Aramaic has historically held a place within these different schemes, usually indicating a “late” date for whatever document or passage in which they were found.⁷¹ And even though various aspects of these theories have been countered and proven false,⁷² Aramaic is still used as a “late date” indicator, and may very well be used in yet another theory to explain the composition of the Old Testament.

Thus, the classification of the various phases of the Aramaic language has not been uniform.

Joseph Fitzmyer, a scholar of the Aramaic language, has addressed this issue. In 1997, Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co published a reprint of Fitzmyer's work, *A Wandering Aramean: Collected Aramaic Essays*.⁷³ In this work, Fitzmyer does two things. First he presents a detailed history of the various attempts at classifying the Aramaic language. And second, he presents his own view as regards this matter. I have found both most helpful in gaining a better understanding of the current state of the classification of the Aramaic language.

On pages 58ff, Fitzmyer details earlier attempts to classify the history and development of Aramaic. Due to its length, I have included a summation of his history in Appendix B.

Fitzmyer follows this, in pages 60-63, with his own attempt to classify the phases of the Aramaic language. Although the quote is somewhat lengthy, I present Fitzmyer's phases of the Aramaic language⁷⁴:

(1) Old Aramaic, from roughly 925 B.C. to 700 B.C. This phase is represented by inscriptions on stone and other materials, written in the borrowed Phoenician alphabet and preserving the earliest known forms of the language that we have come to recognize as Aramaic. The evidence for this phase comes not only from Northern Syria and Upper Mesopotamia, as was known for a long time, but also from Northern Palestine....These texts all represent an archaic form of the language,...the general character of the group is sufficiently homogenous to be

Oxford University Press. 1968).

70 For a brief, recent history of documentary theory and its relationship to the biblical texts, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Documentary_hypothesis

71 Hopefully, this will be seen in abundance in the subsequent chapters of this work.

72 one example of such an attempt can be found on the [Associates for Biblical Research](http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2010/09/24/the-documentary-hypothesis.aspx) website. (cf. <http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2010/09/24/the-documentary-hypothesis.aspx>)

73 This work is now in a combined edition entitled: *The Semitic Background of the New Testament--Combined Edition of "Essays on the Semitic Background of the New Testament" and "A Wandering Aramean: Collected Aramaic Essays."*--Fitzmyer, 1997.

74 Fitzmyer, 1997, 60-62.

recognized as representatives of "Old Aramaic."

(2) Official/Standard Aramaic, from roughly 700 B.C. to 200 B.C. The Aramaic of this phase, also called Reichsaramäisch, Imperial or Standard Aramaic, is a form of the language which was not only relatively standardized, but also widespread. "Standardized" may, indeed, be too strong a word for the language of this phase and may seem to fail to reckon with minor local differences that too appear from time to time. But it was used to stress the otherwise striking homogeneity of the language at this period despite the vast range of geographical areas in which it has been found to have been in use. Moreover, it is this form of the language that we normally use to judge whether that of other phases is really related to it or not. In this phase Aramaic is attested in Egypt,...in Arabia and Palestine, in Syria and in scattered areas of Asia Minor, in Assyria and Babylonia, in Armenia, and in the ancient Indus Valley....The vast corpus of Official Aramaic texts knows of letters written on papyrus and skin, contracts or deeds of various legal proceedings, literary texts, graffiti, ostraca messages, wooden labels, clay tablets, etc....In any case, to Official Aramaic certainly belongs the Aramaic of Ezra (minus the Masoretic encrustations), and undoubtedly also the Aramaic of Daniel (at the very end of this phase).

(3) Middle Aramaic, from roughly 200 B.C. to A.D. 200. Here one notes the development of Official Aramaic and the emergence of "real local dialects" (such as)...Nabatean, Qumran, Murabba'at,...early Palestinian rabbinic literature,...(p. 62) Palmyra, Edessa and Hatra....

(4) Late Aramaic, roughly A.D. 200 to 700. (This phase falls) into two large geographic subdivisions: (a) *Western*: the dialects of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic, Samaritan Aramaic, and Christian Syro-Palestinian Aramaic; (b) *Eastern*: the dialects of Syriac,...Babylonian Talmudic Aramaic, and Mandaic.

The closing limit of this phase of the language is not easily set. 700 is taken merely as a round number close to the Muhammadan Conquest and the consequent spread of Arabic which put an end to the active use of Aramaic in many areas of the Near East.

(5) Modern Aramaic, (is the Aramaic that is) still spoken in various areas of northern Syria, Iran, Iraq and related regions....The language spoken in these regions is a remnant of Aramaic or Syriac, heavily influenced, however, by other modern local languages such as Arabic, Kurdish, or Turkish.

One other has attempted to classify the phases of the Aramaic language: Klaus Beyer. Beyer, in his work, *The Aramaic Language: Its Distribution and Subdivisions*, approaches this issue from a different viewpoint. Beyer postulates three overall phases (or, sections) of Aramaic, which he subsequently breaks down:

The history of Aramaic is best divided into three main sections: Old Aramaic, Middle Aramaic and Modern Aramaic of the present day. The term Middle Aramaic refers to the form of Aramaic which appears in pointed texts. It is

essentially reached in the 3rd cent. A.D. with the loss of short unstressed vowels in open syllables...and continues until the triumph of Arabic.⁷⁵

Beyer further subdivides these as follows:

Old Aramaic is the term used to cover Ancient Aramaic, Imperial Aramaic, Old Eastern Aramaic and Old Western Aramaic. The boundary between Ancient and Imperial Aramaic is thus provided, the most decisive point being around 500 B.C. Lesser breaks around 700 and 200 B.C. separate early and late Ancient Aramaic from each other on the one hand and Achaemenid from post-Achaemenid Imperial Aramaic on the other. Hence both Ancient Aramaic and Imperial Aramaic begin as unified written languages, which dissolve into looser groupings in late Ancient Aramaic and post-Achaemenid Imperial Aramaic. By Old Eastern and Old Western Aramaic are meant the initially unwritten dialects of Eastern Syria, Mesopotamia, Babylonia and the eastern Tigris area on the one side and of Western Syria and Palestine on the other. These developed into local written languages only after the end of Imperial Aramaic.⁷⁶

Beyer further divides Middle Aramaic as well into both Eastern and Western Aramaic, which, in turn, are divided into the numerous smaller groups of various Palestinian/Samaritan/Syriac/Mandaic/etc.⁷⁷ This, in turn is followed by his discussion of Modern Aramaic, which is also divided into Modern Eastern and Modern Western Aramaic⁷⁸.

Although there are some elements and emphases that I appreciate of Beyer's scenario, overall, the framework of Fitzmyer appears to have the most merit and it is the framework in which the remainder of this work will follow.

However, there is one deficiency that I note in Fitzmyer's framework. It does not address the Aramaic language *prior to* approximately 1000 B.C. As we have seen before in a comment by Jonas Greenfield⁷⁹, the reason for this is obvious--the lack of any texts of witnesses of Aramaic prior to this point. However, as we have seen above, that which was known concerning the Arameans far precedes the archeological findings that we have on hand. Fitzmyer himself acknowledges that the Arameans were "on the scene" for several centuries prior to our first archeological discoveries of their culture:

75 Klaus Beyer, *The Aramaic Language: Its Distribution and Subdivisions*. John F. Healey, translator (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht. 1986) 10.

76 Beyer, 1986, 10-11.

77 Beyer, 1986, 43ff.

78 Beyer, 1986, 53ff.

79 as quoted above, on page 22-23:

"It is useless to speculate about the Aramaic language in the last quarter of the second millennium when the Arameans make their entry on the stage of history. Nor is anything to be gained by assuming the existence of a vague "Northwest Semitic" common language, of which Aramaic was a part, for this early period. All the material available points to the logical assumption that the Arameans spoke a clearly recognized language when they are identified in the sources as Arameans....Any discussion of the Aramaic language *must begin with* the texts in Aramaic (emphasis mine--lcf)." (Greenfield, 1978, 93).

As a result of the discoveries of the last fifty to seventy-five years, we realize that the starting point for the discussion of the phases of the Aramaic language is the relation of it to the Northwest branch of the Semitic languages. It emerges in history as a language only several centuries after the earliest attestation of the Arameans as a people, and its character is discerned in any given phase from a comparison with other phases of the language and with cognate Northwest Semitic languages.⁸⁰

This fact has not been neglected by others as well:

Nomads from the Syrian-Arabian Desert, the Aramaeans gradually settled in the city-states in northern Syria in the late twelfth century BCE. In the Assyrian annals of the fourth regnal year of Tiglath-pileser I (c. 1115-1076 BCE) the Aramaeans are mentioned for the first time. Ancestral traditions recorded in the Hebrew scriptures refer to Aramaeans who lived in Padan-Aram (*Gn.* 25.20), Aram-Naharaim, and the city of Nahor (*Gn.* 24.10; Nahor, the brother of Abraham, *Gn.* 11.27). Although Aramaeans are traced to the end of the twelfth century BCE, only in the ninth century BCE do Aramaic texts begin to appear.⁸¹

And:

The scribes of Tiglath-pileser qualified the Arameans as *ahlamu*....Persons described as Ahlamite appear sporadically in documents of the latter half of the 2d millennium B.C., as far back as the reign of Ammisaduqa of Babylon (ca. 1646-1626 B.C.) a tribe of Ahlamites was living near Sippar... Although the relationship of Ahlamu to Arameans is unclear, the Assyrians saw it as very close, so a scribe of the 9th century might have termed "Aramean" the people whom his predecessor in the 13th century B.C. would have termed "Ahlamite". The situation can be understood if the Ahlamites were the section or group of the Arameans whom the Babylonians first encountered.⁸²

And, in commenting upon the related term, *Ahlame*:

The *Ahlame*, long identified with the Arameans, are mentioned in cuneiform texts from Mesopotamia from about the 26th cent. B.C. on; they were principally troublesome marauders, nomads who moved with the flocks according to the season, knowing no boundaries, and constantly raiding the borderlands of civilized peoples. Along with them we should probably group similar nomads, such as the Suti, the Kaldi, and the Arami. They seem to have come from the Arabian desert, and they spread into Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the western and northern edge of the Syrian Desert, better known as the Fertile Crescent. They doubtless spoke a common language or closely related dialects of a language, to which we might give the name proto-Aramaic, although we have no literary remains to support this theory. There is, however, much evidence in written records of their existence (cf. Dupont-Sommer, *Les Arameans*)....In the 12th cent.

80 Fitzmyer, 1997, 63.

81 Fitzmyer, 2000, 48.

82 Milard, 1992, 348-49.

B.C., groups of nomads are found along the Tigris and Euphrates from the Persian Gulf to Aram-Naharaim, and along the Levantine coast as far as north Arabia. In the 11th cent. we find the beginnings of the Aramean states, actually small kingdoms consisting of a city or town and its surroundings, with such names as Aram-Zobah, Aram-Maacah, Aram-Dammesek, Aram-Rehob, as well as names not compounded with Aram, such as Geshur, Hamath, and Bit-Adeni (Beth Eden) By the 10th, or at the latest 9th cent., Aramaic inscriptions begin to appear, and the study of Aramaic is put on a basis no longer highly speculative.⁸³

And yet we have no documents or archeological findings representing this earlier time. Does this, then, negate our hypothesizing or theorizing as to what form the language took prior to the known data, especially in light of recent archeological and philological findings of various cognate languages? No it does not. And will not such a scholarly examination better prepare us to analyze and critique future archeological paleographic findings, in light of that which is already know, not only of the fields of archeology but also of the field of comparative linguistics? Yes, it will.

However, others have suggested that, even in spite of factual evidence (eg--inscriptions/ocstrata/papyri/etc), that one can hypothesize re the facts and the form of the language. C.F. Burney, in his commentary on the book of Judges is found commenting upon the song of Deborah in Judges 5. At this point, Burney lists several words within the song whereby some other NW Semitic cognate language is enlisted to elucidate a Hebrew word found in the Song. He lists the following cognate languages: Arabic, Babylonian, Phoenician, Aramaic, New (or late) Hebrew, and Moabite. He then gives his rationale for so doing:

These facts (referring to the list of cognate words he has just mentioned [lcf]) do not, of course, imply that, e.g. the list of words which are explained from the Arabic are to be regarded as Arabisms, *i.e.* that their use in the Song is *due to the influence of Arabic* (emphasis his--lcf); but simply that Hebrew and Arabic being from common stock, and our knowledge of the Arabic vocabulary being much more extensive than our knowledge of the Hebrew, Arabic helps us to explain some of the otherwise unknown Hebrew words, which may have been, and very likely were, in common daily use at the early period represented by the Song.⁸⁴

On page 172, Burney continues this line of thought:

The claim that these forms⁸⁵ are proofs of a late date of the Song (Vernes), and the assertion that they are late alterations of the text, (Rothstein), are, therefore, equally unwarranted; and scholars generally recognize the fact that Hebrew of northern Cana'an must have exhibited certain dialectical peculiarities--as indeed is seen to be the case in the lengthy narratives in Kings which must have emanated from the prophetic schools of the Northern Kingdom...

⁸³ LaSor, 1979, 230.

⁸⁴ C.F. Burney, *The Book of Judges with Introduction and Notes and The Hebrew Text of the Book of Kings with an Introduction and Appendix (Two Volumes in One)* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, Inc. 1970) 171.

⁸⁵ Aramaic forms of words found within Judges 5--lcf

Many scholars, however, while admitting the existence of such dialectical forms, express their doubts as to the possibility of so marked an Aramaism as יתנני⁸⁶ in an early poem, and are inclined to regard it as a textual corruption; and it is somewhat surprising to find so learned and judicious a scholar as (G.F. Moore) asserting roundly that “as equivalent of Heb. שנה the word is not conceivable in old Hebrew.”

Such a statement appears to imply a preconceived conclusion as to the sharp differentiation between early Hebrew and early Aramaic which, in default of evidence, we are scarcely justified in drawing. Indeed, it may be claimed that such evidence as we *do* possess as to the relationship between the two languages at a later period (and therefore *a fortiori*, at this period) tends all in the other direction; *i.e.* it is more likely that, if we possessed ample evidence as to the character of the Hebrew or Cana'anite⁸⁷, and Aramaic, which were spoken at this period, we should find that both languages existed in dialectical forms exhibiting so many common characteristics that we should (at any rate in some examples) find it difficult, if not impossible, to draw a distinction between the two, and to say, “This is Hebrew (Cana'anite), and this is Aramaic.”⁸⁸

Thus, for Burney, seeing a relation between Aramaic and Hebrew was not a problem, but rather, was to be expected, given what we know of linguistics and the development of languages. For Burney, Aramaic and Hebrew were languages that most likely sprang from the same or a similar source. And with him I concur.

But that is not the whole of the issue. As we have mentioned before, the scholar of today who dismisses the biblical witness as a reliable linguistic witness is ignoring a vitally important witness to the early manifestation of the Aramaic language. And in considering that witness the biblical scholar can better understand, by the grace of God, the development of not only the Aramaic language, but also of the Hebrew language as well. Please note: The fact that the *exact* relation between Hebrew and Aramaic has yet to be shown *does not deny* that the two languages are related linguistically and that they developed from a common or similar tongue(s). *Further, this understood relationship, rather than being a difficulty, may assist in explaining and furthering our understanding of the early development of both of these languages.*

⁸⁶ יתנני (instead of ישנה, that should have been found in Hebrew--lcf)

⁸⁷ In a footnote, Burney here adds: “The fact is well recognized that Hebrew is ‘the language of Can‘aan’ (cf. Isa. 19:18); and that Phoenician, Moabite, etc., are examples of the same language, with dialectical variations.” Although this may be overstating the case, it does demonstrate that, for Burney, these languages were, in their earliest forms, related languages.

⁸⁸ Burney, p. 172-173

Therefore, I would like to propose my own addendum to the phases of the Aramaic language developed by Fitzmyer:

--Paleo-Aramaic	prior to 1850 B.C.
--Proto-Aramaic	1850 B.C. to 1100 B.C
--Old Aramaic	1100 BC to 700 B.C
--Official/Standard Aramaic	700 B.C. to 200 B.C.
--Middle Aramaic	200 B.C. to A.D. 200
--Late Aramaic	A.D. 200 to A.D. 700
--Modern Aramaic	A.D. 700 to present

The reader will immediately note that I have not modified the original five phases of the Aramaic language as proposed by Fitzmyer. What I have done, however, is propose two new phases *prior to* his five. I have done this in order to provide a loose framework in which to place the Aramaic and Aramaisms that are found in the early sections of the Old Testament, namely from the time of the patriarchs on forward. And I am proposing two earlier phases: *Proto-Aramaic* and *Paleo-Aramaic*.

Regarding the these divisions, of Proto- and Paleo-Aramaic, I would like to make the following comments:

1.) *Proto-Aramaic*

Regarding the division between the terms Proto-Aramaic and Old Aramaic (Fitzmyer's first division, and my third division), please consider the following: In following Burney, I concur that, in spite of a lack of sources, one can postulate the existence and development of both the Hebrew and the Aramaic languages prior to 1100 B.C. (the beginning point of Old Aramaic and the upper limit as provided by current archeological Aramaic inscriptions). Fitzmyer, when presenting his outline of the phases of Aramaic, limits the upper extent of Old Aramaic to 950 B.C. It would seem from reading his presentation, this is primarily due to his recounting of the various Aramaic paleographic finds of Aramaic. I have no problem with this, *per se*. However, Aramaic did not just "appear" at this time. The fact that this form of the language was used on official documents of the time by necessity demands that this form of the language was in existence prior to this upper date of 950 B.C.

Further, at or around this same time, the Hebrews were using their own form of a Phoenician script, that has been called Paleo-Hebrew. It was a script that was used by the Hebrew peoples in or around the 10th-9th century B.C. onwards⁸⁹. Thus, the date of 1100 B.C. for a lower limit seems reasonable, again, because this

⁸⁹ Bruce K. Waltke and m. O'Conner, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona lake, IN:Eisenbrauns. 1990) 17-18.

Hebrew script did not just “appear” on the scene at this time.

Further, in examining other relevant data regarding this period, one may also consider the Phoenician script (from whence came the Aramaic script). There is a scholarly convention to refer to the script used by the Phoenicians as “Phoenician” after 1100 B.C. Prior to this, it is common to refer to this script as “Proto-Canaanite.”⁹⁰ Thus, prior to this point, it would be difficult to state what the nature of the Aramaic script was. Thus, the break at around 1100 B.C.

2.) *Paleo-Aramaic*

As to the break between Paleo- and Proto-Aramaic, the date of 1850 is the earliest attested form of the Proto-Canaanite script. If the Aramaic-speaking peoples had indeed adopted this script prior to 1100, this date of 1850 B.C. is the next major milestone in the development of that language. Thus, I propose the date of 1850 B.C. for the break between Paleo-Aramaic and Proto-Aramaic.

As to the exact nature of the script, since we have no written example, it is impossible to ascertain the form by which either of these phases were represented.

As to the characteristics of the Aramaic language that would be distinctive of either of these phases, I hope to show in the subsequent pages of this work. As stated before, my primary source for such characteristics will be the Hebrew scriptures as a template which accurately represents these early forms.

⁹⁰ *Phoenician Alphabet*. Wikimedia Foundation, San Francisco, CA, USA. 16 February 2011. Accessed 19 February 2011. Available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phoenician_alphabet