



FOR THE FIRST TIME EVER

THE COMPREHENSIVE ARAMAIC LEXICON

Attention all students, instructors, researchers, scholars, and linguists: An international team of scholars, with headquarters at HUC-JIR/Cincinnati, is creating a comprehensive lexicon of ancient Aramaic, spanning the period from 1000 BCE through the Middle Ages. While one can find dictionaries of individual dialects or bodies of literature, a compilation of the entire language does not yet exist. The new lexicon will be a multi-volume comparative dictionary, available in book or electronic form. Each Aramaic word will be presented with a list of the dialects in which it can be found, a list of meanings for the word, and representative citations.

Aramaic, which is a Semitic language that was first used almost 3000 years ago in what is now Syria and Turkey, is still spoken today in certain communities in Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Iran, as well as by immigrant communities in Chicago and Israel. The Assyrians, Babylonians, and Persians used Aramaic for administrative communication beginning in the 8th century BCE; it was the official language of the Babylonian and Persian Empires.

Numerous Jewish and Christian texts and literature were written in Aramaic, which is closely related to Hebrew, including portions of the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, portions of the Bible, *targums* (Aramaic translations and interpretations of Hebrew scriptures), Christian scriptures that were translated from Hebrew and Greek, and Christian writings in an Aramaic dialect called Syriac. Jews worshiped, studied, and conversed in Aramaic for centuries; the eastern wing of the Church has used Aramaic as its official language from the 3rd century through the present day. As a result of their common interest in the language, Jewish and Christian scholars are working together on this project.

Many dictionaries of some part of Aramaic exist, but...it is as though we had a dictionary of Shakespeare, and one of Hemingway, without having a dictionary of English!

Why hasn't this type of project been done before? Dr. Jerome Lund, Senior Research Associate for the project, described Aramaic as a "vast language" since it includes many scripts, in addition to numerous dialects. In the past, funding had not been available for a project of this scope and duration. The lexicon is funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities (which funds about 80% of the budget) and private contributions, which include financial support as well as the donation of documents. For example, the Mandaean Research Centre in Northbridge,

Australia, provided the lexicon project with an electronic copy of the *Ginza Rba*, the Mandaean's main religious document. This donation saved the researchers at least one year of work in reading and encoding the obscure script.

Scholars are currently working on three projects that will be integrated into the lexicon: a dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic, being written by Professor Michael Sokoloff (Bar Ilan University); a dictionary of Samaritan Aramaic, being written by Professor Avraham Tal (Tel Aviv University); and a dictionary of Mandaean Aramaic. Current work also involves entering and lexically "tagging" texts electronically (noting where the individual words would belong in the dictionary), and preparing citations with translations. The next stage of work will include writing the dictionary entries. Lund is currently working on Syriac poetry and texts about Daniel in Syriac (the best attested dialect of Aramaic), as well as Jewish Palestinian Aramaic poetry.

For more information on this project, see <http://cal1.cn.huc.edu/>

Professor Stephen A. Kaufman (HUC-JIR/Cincinnati) and Professor Joseph A. Fitzmyer (Catholic University of America, emeritus) are the editors of *The Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon*; Professor Michael Sokoloff (Bar Ilan University) is the associate editor; Dr. Jerome Lund (HUC-JIR/Cincinnati) is the Senior Research Associate.



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Dr. Jerome Lund, Senior Research Associate, HUC-JIR/Cincinnati



Drawing by Bruce Zuckerman.



ARAMAIC: DID YOU KNOW?

Aramaic is one of the Semitic languages, an important group of languages known almost from the beginning of human history.

What is usually called "Hebrew" script is actually an Aramaic script.

As the imperial language of administration for the Babylonian and Persian empires, which ruled from India to Ethiopia during 700–320 B.C.E., Aramaic held a position similar to that occupied by English today.

Portions of Ezra and Daniel in the Bible, and some of the best known stories in biblical literature, including that of Belshazzar's feast with the famous "handwriting on the wall," are in Aramaic.

Aramaic replaced Hebrew as a dominant language for Jewish worship, scholarship, and everyday life for centuries in both the land of Israel and in the diaspora, especially in Babylon.

Reading the *Targum*, the Aramaic translation and interpretation of Hebrew scriptures and Law, became prevalent in synagogues; the basic language of the vast compilations of rabbinic commentary and debate in the Israel and Babylonian Talmuds is in Aramaic.

The many Aramaic texts discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls provide the best evidence for Palestinian Aramaic of the sort used by Jesus and his disciples.

Although Jesus spoke Aramaic, the Gospels are in Greek, and only rarely quote actual Aramaic words. Reconstruction of the Aramaic background of the Gospels remains a fascinating, but inordinately difficult area of modern scholarly research.

A form of Christian Aramaic, known as Syriac, surpassed in quantity all other Aramaic writings; Syriac became the language of the entire eastern wing of the church, from about the third century C.E. until past the Muslim conquest.

Almost all of the Greek philosophical and scientific tradition was eventually translated into Syriac, and was thus channeled into the Islamic World and thence, into post-Dark Ages Europe.

Aramaic survives as a spoken language in small communities in Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Iran.

Celebrating HUC-JIR's 125th Anniversary in 2000-2001

The year 2000-2001 marks a special moment in Jewish history – the 125th anniversary of Hebrew Union College! From its inaugural class of four young rabbinical students in 1875, HUC-JIR has grown and thrived as the professional development center for the Reform Movement and *khal Yisrael* by training men and women for service to world Jewry as rabbis, cantors, educational and communal professionals, and scholars. Marking this year are an array of special programs coordinated by Rabbi Alan Fuchs and planning committees of Governors, Overseers, administration, faculty, and students. These events will take place throughout our four centers of learning and within Reform Movement congregations. You are cordially invited to join the celebration! Highlights include:

- *Living in the Moment: The Celebration of Jewish Time*, an international exhibition of contemporary Jewish ritual objects, will be on view at all stateside Schools' Museums, September 2000 through June 2001.
- A CD-ROM of the First Cincinnati Haggadah, produced in Germany in the 15th century by Meir Jaffe ha-sofer and housed in the Dalsheimer Rare Book Room of the Cincinnati School's Klau Library, will be presented to each UAHC congregation.
- The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives will sponsor an academic conference, publish a historical calendar, add to its poster series in honor of Rabbi Zimmerman, and publish a special commemorative issue of *The American Jewish Archives Journal*.
- The Cincinnati School will present a major lecture series for the 2000-2001 academic year which will feature distinguished alumni of the School of Graduate Studies, in honor of that program's 50th anniversary.
- The Jerusalem School will hold a conference on Progressive Early Childhood Education, inaugurate a new program for training educators from the former Soviet Union, and celebrate Dr. Avraham Biran's 90th birthday with the establishment of a Chair in Dr. Biran's honor.
- The Los Angeles School and the USC Institute for the Study of Jews in American Life will present a conference, "The Reappearing American Jew: Identity and Continuity," February 6 & 7, 2000.
- The Lee and Irving Kalsman Institute on Judaism and Health at HUC-JIR/LA will sponsor a conference, April 2-4, 2000, designed for rabbis, social workers, educators, cantors, and professional health care givers, which will focus on patient care and the health of our communities.
- Governors, Overseers, and leadership of the College-Institute are invited to participate in an exciting, educational Leadership Trip to Israel, September 9-17, 2000.
- Faculty, students and lay leaders will visit UAHC congregations for *Shabbat* services celebrating HUC-JIR's 125th anniversary.