

Is the Peshitta Dialect the Same as Messiah's?

By Andrew Gabriel Roth

Let's start with the conventional view. The following was posted on the peshitta.org website by an Aramaic professor at Cambridge:

Dear Sir,

The view that the Peshitta is the purest form of the NT is rightly regarded as a 'rumour'. The Peshitta is in Eastern Aramaic, whereas Jesus certainly spoke Western Aramaic. His dialect will be more closely represented by Qumran Aramaic, Christian Palestinian Aramaic, the Aramaic of the Jerusalem Talmud, and to some extent Samaritan Aramaic (although none of these exactly corresponds to the dialect he is likely to have used). For an introduction to these matters one could consult Matthew Black, *_An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts_* (Oxford: 1967), though no one would agree with all of what he says.

With warmest regards,

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Christos egertheis ek nekron ouketi apothneskei. Rom. 6:9.

The first observation that various members on the forum had regarding this statement was what was *not said*, or rather, proof or examples of Messiah speaking Western Aramaic. No linguistic evidence is proffered, not even in passing or by secondary reference. Instead, it seems that this gentleman expects his position at Cambridge entitled him to a kind of scholarly *carte blanche*, whereby all the proof on our side cannot be weighed against his mere pronouncement to the contrary.

It is also quite odd that someone in such a capacity decides to use such dismissive, and in fact, vague and lazy, language. Rather than give a direct answer that someone can respond to we are instead pelted with evasive phrases like, "certainly", "likely" and "although none of these exactly corresponds to the dialect he is likely to have used". Then there is my personal favorite "though no one would agree with all of what he says"---as if every *other* scholar in the world would agree with everything *he says*!

To counter this "contention" then, I will offer concrete examples that prove the exact opposite of what this professor is saying. What is more shocking though to myself is how little Aramaic knowledge, at least as it is shown in the Peshitta text, this gentleman chooses to relate to us. It may be that he feels such an

exchange is not needed, since we are only amateurs and he has a degree. However, my answer to that has always been that my *heritage is my credential*. Are hallowed halls of secular academia always vastly superior to the fervor of sacred education honed over decades of discipline and reverence? In asking this question, I surely am not referring exclusively to myself, but to every Aramaic Christian who has spent at least as many endless childhood hours learning his sacred language as I have learning mine.


This is not to say however that academia does not have a great deal to contribute to this discussion, but that would involve them actually having the discussion in the first place, with evidence instead of opinion. Until that time however, the following will have to suffice from our end. After all, is not assertion without fact the very definition of the word "rumour"?

Let's take this verse from Mark as an example:

"But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, "Whatever support you might have had from me is *Corban* (that is, an offering to God)"

Mark 7:11 (Greek New Testament)

In the Aramaic of the Peshitta, however, we read:

"But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, "Whatever support you might have had from me is  (*Qurbanee*)"

Mark 7:11 (Peshitta reading)

Now here is what a respected source on Aramaic grammar has to say (emphases mine):

The "I" ("ee"ending) of the first person singular enclitic is pronounced **only when there is no other vowel in the word**, as in *bi* and *li*; otherwise the yodh is silent, as in *menn* "from me" and *lwat* "unto me".

Thackston's Syriac Grammar, section 3.1 "Pronomial Enclitics"

In this case, the word *qorban* has a vowel (waw), and therefore all Syriac dialects that Professor Williams mentioned, and in fact every such dialect known save one, would not add the "ee" sound at the end of a noun.

The same applies to the near ubiquitous use of the phrase "my brother" in the Peshitta, which is rendered as "akhi". By contrast, the western dialects, the ones Professor Williams is sure must reflect the dialect of Y'shua, use the truncated "akh" to say the same thing!

Conversely, in every dialect of Aramaic, this final *yodh* ("**ee**") would be vocalized when no other vowels were present in the word. That is, with the exception of the "Syriac" that this Professor and so many others believe the Peshitta records.

Here is another lesson from Thackston's Grammar:

The pronominal enclitics given in 3.1 are also attached to singular nouns to indicate possession. The stem of the noun to which they are attached is obtained by dropping the final *a* of the lexical emphatic form. Thus from *baytah* (house) we have *bayt* (my house).

Thackston's Grammar, lesson 4.1 "Possessive Pronouns"

The bottom line though from this fancy language is simple. All forms of Aramaic other than Peshitta and what Messiah spoke would say "my house" as *baytah*. However, in the Peshitta, we have this:

[illegible]

And he (Y'shua) would teach to them, "Is it not written that **my house (bayti)** is a house of prayer for all nations, but you have made it a den of robbers"?

Mark 11:17 (Younan Peshitta Interlinear Version)

Is this the "Syriac", or western Aramaic, the Peshitta is supposed to have been written in or that Messiah is speaking? Not according to Thackston's!

Here's another example, and this time we will go from the Greek traditions:

*"And he took the damsel by the hand, and said unto her, **Talitha qumi**; which is, being interpreted, **Damsel, I say unto thee, arise.**"*

Mark 5:41

Luke also records this event in 8:54 of his gospel, but the Greek doesn't preserve this saying in the original Aramaic. Instead, the Greek text translates it this way:

"And he put them all out, and took her by the hand, and called, saying, Maid, arise."

Anyway, the point is that even most Greek scholars admit that Messiah said these words in *his Aramaic dialect* as recorded in this independent Greek witness!

Furthermore, we can assume that the Aramaic of the Apostle Paul would have been the same Aramaic of Y'shua since he too was raised in Israel (Acts 22:1-2). Unfortunately, there are only three instances where the Greek New Testament preserves an original Aramaic reading from Paul, and these are in 1 Corinthians 16:22 (Maran Atha) and two places where Paul says "Abba" (Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:6). The noteworthy aspect of these examples is the huge fact that *all three readings are exactly the same dialect and vocalization as that of the Aramaic Peshitta*.

So while it is true that critics will no doubt scoff at such a small sampling from what they believe to be the original New Testament, the fact is no proof of their assertion is found in any one of them! If it were, then there is no doubt this fact would also be trumpeted against the cause of Peshitta originality.

Examples will beat hollow proclamations any day of the week.