

History of the Peshitta



The Peshitta is the official Bible of the Church of the East. The name Peshitta in Aramaic means "Straight", in other words, the original and pure New Testament. The Peshitta is the only authentic and pure text which contains the books in the New Testament that were written in Aramaic, the Language of Mshikha (the Messiah) and His Disciples.

In reference to the originality of the Peshitta, the words of His Holiness Mar Eshai Shimun, Catholicos Patriarch of the Church of the East, are summarized as follows:

*"With reference to....the originality of the Peshitta text, as the Patriarch and Head of the Holy Apostolic and Catholic Church of the East, we wish to state, that the Church of the East received the scriptures from the hands of the blessed Apostles themselves in the Aramaic original, the language spoken by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and that the Peshitta is the text of the Church of the East which has come down from the Biblical times **without any change or revision.**"*

Mar Eshai Shimun

by Grace, Catholicos Patriarch of the East

April 5, 1957



*Folio 154 verso of Sinai Syriac 2
(Peshitta, V century), John 17:7-17.
Thanks to Jean Valentin.*



Peshitta New Testament Ms. Variouslly identified as 6th or 7th Century.

In reference to Aramaic, the Latin Patriarch Maximus at Vatican II, stated:

*"Christ, after all spoke in the language of His contemporaries. He offered the first sacrifice of the Eucharist in Aramaic, a language understood by all the people who heard Him. The Apostles and Disciples did the same and **never** in a language other than that of the gathered faithful."*



*Codex Ambrosianus - 5th Century
Ambrosian Library, Milan, Italy.
Thanks to Alan Aldawood.*

These are claims that are highly contested in Western Christianity. The common misconception that the New Testament was originally penned in Greek still persists today in a vast majority of Christian denominations. Most scholars and theologians acknowledge that Eshoo Mshikha, the Apostles, and the Jews in general spoke Aramaic indeed many instances of Aramaic survive in the Greek New testament manuscripts. However, they still maintain that the New Testament was penned in Greek by the Apostles and disciples of Mshikha.



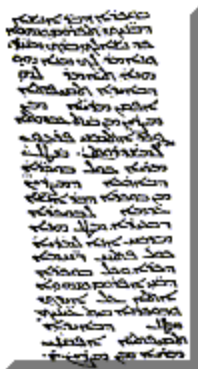
*Aramaic Lectionary - about
A.D. 550. Pierpont Morgan Library
New York, N.Y.*

The Church of the East has always rejected this claim. We believe that the Books of the New Testament were originally penned in Aramaic, and later translated into Greek by first-century Gentile Christians in the West, but

never in the East, where the Aramaic was the Lingua Franca of the Persian Empire. We also hold and maintain that after the books were translated into Greek, the Aramaic originals were discarded, for by now the Church in the West was almost completely Gentile and Greek-speaking. This was not the case in the East, which had a Jewish majority (especially in Babylon and Adiabene) for a much longer period. Even when the Church of the East became mostly Gentile, the Aramaic was preserved and used rather than translated into the various vernacular languages of the regions to the East of the Euphrates river.



Peshitta Old Testament MS. - A.D. 464. Oldest dated Biblical Manuscript in existence. British Museum, Add. Ms. 14,425. Thanks to Alan Aldawood.



*Peshitta MS.
(Exodus. xiii. 14-16)--A. D. 464.
(British Museum, Add. MS. 14; 425.)*

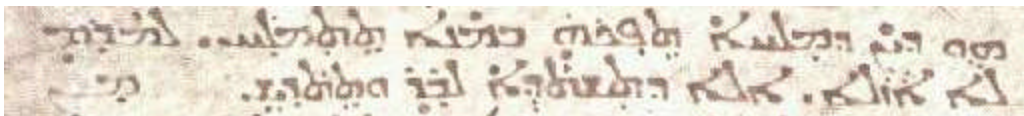
*Four books or the Pentateuch, viz: Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy according to the Peshitta version, in the Estrangela characters. Written in the city of Amid, Assyria A. D. 464: the oldest dated Biblical manuscript in existence.
From the monastery of St. Mary Deiyyara in the Nitrian Desert of Egypt.*

Even to the West of the Euphrates river, in the Holy Land, the main vernacular was Aramaic. The weekly synagogue lections, called sidra or parashah, with the haphtarah, were accompanied by an oral Aramaic

translation, according to fixed traditions. A number of Targumim in Aramaic were thus eventually committed to writing, some of which are of unofficial character, and of considerable antiquity. The Gemara of the Jerusalem Talmud was written in Aramaic, and received its definitive form in the 5th century. The Babylonian Talmud with its commentaries on only 36 of the Mishnah's 63 tractates, is four times as long as the Jerusalem Talmud. These Gemaroth with much other material were gathered together toward the end of the 5th century, and are in Aramaic. Since 1947, approximately 500 documents were discovered in eleven caves of Wadi Qumran near the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea. In addition to the scrolls and fragments in Hebrew, there are portions and fragments of scrolls in Aramaic. Hebrew and Aramaic, which are sister languages, have always remained the most distinctive features marking Jewish and Eastern Christian religious and cultural life, even to our present time.



Khaboris Manuscript. 4th Century A.D. Hakkari mountains (Khda'Yab, "Adiabene"), Assyria.



Readings from the Book of Matti in the Khaboris Manuscript.

The Aramaic in which the Bible called "Assakhta Peshitta" is written, known as the Peshitta Text, is in the dialect of northwest Mesopotamia as it evolved and was highly perfected in Orhai, once a city-kingdom, later called Edessa by the Greeks, and now called Urfa in Turkey. Harran, the city of Abraham's brother Nahor, lies 38 kilometers southeast of Orhai. The large colony of Orhai Jews, and the Jewish colonies in Assyria in the kingdom of Adiabene whose royal house had converted to Judaism, possessed most of the Bible in this dialect, the Peshitta Tenakh. This version was taken over by all the Churches in the East, which used, and still use Aramaic, as far as India, and formerly in Turkestan and China. The Peshitta Tenakh was completed during Apostolic times with the writings of the New Testament.



Sample page from an Aramaic manuscript in Estrangelo script (Beginning of 6th century AD)

For this diglot, I am using the Church of the East text of the Peshitta, in which I will be following the oriental sequence of the books, which places the General Epistles (Yaqub, Keepa and Yukhanan) immediately after the Acts of the Apostles, and before the Epistles of Sha'ul (Paul). The Peshitta does not contain four of the General Epistles (2 Keepa, 2 Yukhanan, 3 Yukhanan and Yehuda), the book of Revelation, nor the story of the woman taken in adultery (Yukhanan 8.) These writings are not considered canonical by the Church of the East, and have never been included in the the Canon of the Peshitta. The script used will be the original Estrangela, without vowel markings that were introduced during the 5th century.

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