

Bible Manuscripts in the ancient

Estrangeli Alphabet

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When the King James version of the Holy Bible was published in 1611 A.D., the ancient Aramaic Bible manuscripts of the Peshitta texts of the Churches of the East written in the Old *Estrangeli* characters were unknown in Europe. The 16th and 17th century scholars had to rely chiefly on the Latin version, the Vulgate. The knowledge of Greek had declined in Europe and complete Bible manuscripts were rare.

Moreover, England was beset with many difficulties. The country had just emerged from centuries of darkness and was confronting both internal and external difficulties — the threat of war with Spain, and opposition against the Reformation. The victorious Turkish armies were advancing into the heart of Europe. Indeed, it was a miracle that the Reformation in England survived after the death of Henry VIII. Such was the state of England and such were the conditions under which King James summoned scholars to make a compilation of the former translations, which resulted in the publication of the King James version of the Holy Bible.

Aramaic texts of the Holy Scriptures were introduced into Europe in the 18th century A.D. by a Lebanese scholar named Assemani, a Maronite (a sect in union with the Roman Catholic Church). At that time the only available copies of Aramaic Peshitto texts in Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine were the new copies of the Monophysite sect and the translations from the Greek into Aramaic for the Jacobites, who had joined the Monophysite Church. These comparatively new copies were written on paper in the modern Jacobite characters with vowels and not in the ancient original *Estrangeli* characters.

The real, ancient, original and authoritative manuscripts of the Peshitta text of the Holy Bible were discovered later in the Euphrates Valley and Iran among the ancient Christians. A manuscript dated A.D. 464 containing five books of Moses was procured by the British Museum. This manuscript is the oldest dated Biblical manuscript in existence. A complete copy of the whole Bible written in the early 5th century was purchased by Cardinal Ambrosianus.

These manuscripts of the ancient Peshitta text of the Church of the East are written on sheepskin in ancient *Estrangeli* characters without vowels. This is the oldest known alphabet in Semitic languages, containing twenty-two characters wherein anything can be expressed without doubt and misunderstanding.

This script without vowels, the *Estrangeli*, was used many centuries before the Christian era. Apparently, it had superseded both the cuneiform and the sign system of writing. It is this old script the Jews used to write a portion of the Commandments on their phylacteries, their clothes, their lintels and on memorial stones. These characters could easily be read by the people.

Demetrius, the royal librarian, in his report to King Ptolemy of Egypt relative to the Jewish Holy Scriptures states: "The characters in which it is written are like the proper characters of the Syrians (Aramians) and are pronounced like theirs also" (Josephus Book XII, Chapter 11). Arabic superseded Aramaic as the lingua franca about the tenth century A.D. The Greeks called this alphabet Syrian letters. They also called Aram "Syria." Josephus states that even though a number of Jews had tried to learn the language of the Greeks hardly any of them succeeded (Antiquities XX, XI 2).

It is important to know that all ancient and original Biblical manuscripts were inscribed in the above or ancient *Estrangeli* characters. During the rise of the Islamic empire of the 7th century A.D., the Moslem rulers wrote *Firmans* decrees in Arabic language in *Estrangeli* characters. This kind of writing was called *Girshoni*. We are told the first copy of the Koran was written in *Girshoni*. Then later the Arabs modified the *Estrangeli* letters into the present Arabic alphabet.

These ancient characters were in use by the scribes of the Church of the East until the 11th and 12th centuries A.D.; and in the 7th and 8th centuries A.D. the *Estrangeli* alphabet was already introduced by the missionaries of the Church of the East into Mongolia, Manchuria, China, and Tartary. Then the Christians in the Near East began to use what is known as the Nestorian letters. The Jews and Christians in Syria also adopted this new form of writing which is known as the Assyrian letters. The change in the alphabet and the introduction of the vowel system is responsible for many errors which crept into later manuscripts.

Today, one can find manuscripts of the Holy Bible translated back from the Greek into Aramaic and there is also a translation from the King James Version into the Aramaic vernacular spoken in Iran, which was made more than a century ago by the Congregational and Presbyterian missionaries in Iran for their proselytes. It is these latter translations, written on paper, which have confused Western scholars

relative to the origin of the ancient and authoritative Peshitta text of the Holy Bible, written on sheepskin. The Peshitta was quoted by the early Church Fathers.

The writer of this article was also confused when he began to search for the copies of the original Peshitta manuscripts of the Bible. In many libraries and universities he was presented with the translations from the Greek, the Jacobite Peshitto, or the translation from the King James version. But, having been educated in the Church of the East, he knew that these new versions did not conform with the ancient texts he was brought up on.

Any Bible scholar who can read *Estrangeli* characters can easily see that there is a vast difference between the original Peshitta and translations from the Greek, the Peshitto, and other languages into Aramaic. He also would know that the ancient Peshitta is the original. Peshitta upholds its name, which means clear, straight, sincere and true. The Holy Bible was written by inspired men, who were admonished by God to write plainly. And the writings of the Apostles were called *Pshetta* or *Peshitta*, which means clear and simple.

Fortunately, today many sincere Bible students and scholars, who are tired of constant revisions of the Scriptures from the Greek, are turning to the Aramaic. Now many of them are admitting that there was an original written in Aramaic, the language which Jesus and his disciples spoke, from which the Greek was translated, but that it was lost. It is probably true that all ancient texts of the Holy Scriptures perished in the lands west of the Euphrates, Syria and Palestine during the Roman and Byzantine persecutions, but original or very early Bible manuscripts survived in the Euphrates Valley in an inaccessible region known as Hakari; and in Iran (Persian Empire) among the ancient Assyrian Christians, and the remnant of the Ten Tribes.

Dr. A. Grant, first American (Congregational) missionary, who discovered the Assyrian Christians, and the remnant of the Ten Tribes, states "The Nestorians (Assyrians) have preserved their Scriptures with great care and purity." These regions in Kurdistan were inaccessible and rarely traversed by Western Christians prior to World War I.

There are thousands of differences between the ancient Peshitta text and the Western versions of the Holy Bible. Thousands of passages which were obscure and meaningless through mistranslations become clear and meaningful when translated from the ancient Peshitta manuscripts.

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