

JBTS

VOLUME 7 | ISSUE 1

JOURNAL OF
BIBLICAL AND
THEOLOGICAL
STUDIES

ARAMAIC AND THE BIBLE

Introduction to Aramaic and
the Bible

by Adam J. Howell

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Introduction

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While the Aramaic portions of Scripture may be minimal, Aramaic studies proves to be fertile ground for understanding biblical linguistics, history, and interpretation. With only 269 verses (Gen 31:47 [partially], Jer 10:11; Dan 2:4b–7:28; Ezra 4:8–6:18; 7:12–26) of the Tanakh written in Aramaic, one may question the attention given here to the topic of “Aramaic and the Bible.” However, as with any topic in biblical studies, deeper investigation into these matters will reveal more and more context into which we place the biblical narratives.

Aramaic particularly becomes helpful in this regard due to its long history as a written and spoken language in the ancient Near East. According to Franz Rosenthal, the earliest Aramaic inscriptions date to the ninth century BC.¹ Beginning as the spoken language of Aramean tribes, the language moved into Assyria and Babylon, eventually supplanting Akkadian as the *lingua franca* of the region.² By the time of King Hezekiah in Judah (2 Kgs 18:26), Aramaic was apparently an international language and continued to be so into the Persian period. Aramaic developed into several dialects both in Palestine and in Mesopotamia. Some of the most notable are Palestinian Jewish Aramaic (Targumic) in the West and Syriac in the East.

This long-standing history of the Aramaic language demonstrates that biblical scholars have much to glean from these topics. Whether one is interested in linguistic development among the Semitic languages or the translation techniques of first century targumists in the ancient synagogue, Aramaic studies, at least in some respect, set the stage for understanding both the Old and New Testaments.

In this journal issue, the reader will find articles that span this history of the Aramaic language. These few articles are by no means exhaustive of the areas of Aramaic study, but I hope that they will prove helpful to those interested in the topic(s). Articles include topics on transliteration and translation technique of the Aramaic Targums, interpretations and readings of the Aramaic portions of Daniel, Egyptian Aramaic, and also more theologically informed studies on how Aramaic informs

1. Franz Rosenthal, *A Grammar of Biblical Aramaic*, 7th rev. ed. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006), 9.

2. Alger F. Johns, *A Short Grammar of Biblical Aramaic* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1972), 1.

John's paraclete title and how the Pentateuchal Targums of Genesis 3:15 are possibly picked up in the New Testament. These articles represent excellent scholarship in these areas of Aramaic studies, and they all can help to shape our understanding of the biblical landscape in the areas of linguistics and historical studies.

It is with great pleasure that I have been able to work with such capable authors on this project and to collaborate on such a wonderful journal topic. Just because a particular topic is small in the larger world of biblical studies does not mean it is insignificant. Since Aramaic is an often-neglected area of study in relation to the Bible, it is nigh time that we invest our time and attention to these matters. I pray that these articles and topics will prove helpful as we seek to understand God's revelation in Scripture at a deeper level.