

The Bible in Aramaic (01:013:111)

Course Syllabus

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Short Description:

Introduction to Aramaic through biblical literature, including the Aramaic passages in the Bible and the vernacular translations of the Bible into various Aramaic dialects, with a focus on the Syriac version.

Long Description:

Most people are familiar with Aramaic as the “language of Jesus,” a view popularized by blockbuster films such as *Stigmata* and the *Passion of the Christ*. Some people believe that portions of the Bible, or perhaps even the whole Bible, were originally composed in Aramaic before being translated into Hebrew, Latin, Greek, and other languages. This course aims to introduce students to the history of the Aramaic language and literature through the point of reference through which most people are familiar with it: the Bible.

The Syriac Bible offers one of the earliest witnesses to the Judeo-Christian literature of the Middle East. Translated from Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament from the beginning of the second century, it went through a number of revisions for the next seven centuries. At least three Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) revisions are known, and five New Testament ones. These revisions shed light on the literature of neighboring languages including Hebrew, Greek, and Arabic, and are helpful to understand the translation techniques of that time period.

The Hebrew Bible was translated into Syriac probably around the second century, and may have originally served as a *Targum* for the Jews of Edessa. It was later adopted by the Christian community. In the sixth century, a new translation from the Greek Septuagint was made. The earliest witness to the New Testament is the Diatessaron, a harmony of the four Gospels, which is lost in Syriac but is preserved in Arabic and other languages. This was followed by an early translation of the Gospels (and probably Acts and may be the Pauline Epistles) that we now call the Old Syriac Version. This is a free translation that, for the case of the Gospels, replaced the Diatessaron. The Old Syriac version was then revised to become more literal, but still idiomatic, until it culminated in the Peshitta Version (the standard version). During the sixth-seventh centuries, literal non-idiomatic translations from the Greek also took place.

The course aims at introducing the students to these various versions, in English translation, to illustrate the various translation techniques and the literary history of the Middle East from the second century onwards. The course will also cover the use of the Syriac Bible by religious communities and commentaries on these texts up to the thirteenth century. During this, the student will be introduced to the religious developments of Judaism and Christianity as well as their

interactions with Islam. Syriac is a Classical language of the Middle East, and an important tool for understanding the history of the Qur'an as well as the translation activities of the Abbasid period.

Learning Goals:

At the completion of this course, students will be able to:

- Examine critically the composition, transmission, and translation of the Bible from the original languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) into Syriac, engaging with questions of audience, textuality, orality, and vernacularity;
- Analyze the Bible as a work of literature, both in its own respect and in relation to the Aramaic and Syriac-speaking communities that transmitted it;
- Demonstrate “Bible literacy” and an understanding of the Syriac Bible’s role not only within these faith communities but also in broader secular society.

Grading:

I will determine final grades using performance assessments in the following categories:

communication (please see below)	30%
the mid-term	20%
the final exam	30%
the course project	20%
Total:	100%

Class will meet twice weekly. The readings for each lesson should be completed before each discussion section. Some discussion sections will require more reading than others; students are strongly encouraged to begin reading in advance of their discussion sections.

Communication:

Please Note: Communication is an essential component in your occupation as a student, as essential as it is for any other occupation. You cannot succeed in this course without communicating, and your ability to communicate with me and your fellow students to demonstrate your familiarity with the material is an essential component of my assessment of your performance. A failure to engage with the material during the course section (e.g. demonstrating that you have not completed the assigned reading) may result in the deduction of one point (1%) from your final grade per meeting.

If for any reason you are unable to participate in the weekly discussion sessions or submit an assignment in a timely manner, please make use of the Rutgers Self-Reporting Absence Website, <https://sims.rutgers.edu/ssra/> to keep me updated about your participation in the course, in order to avoid losing points. Consider your use of this system to be akin to calling your supervisor to let her know that you are running late or falling sick. Obviously, if you make a habit of not showing up for work without any notice, you demonstrate your unreliability, and you run a real risk of losing your job.

For this reason, only two (2) uncommunicated absences are allowed per semester. Due to the participatory nature of the class, five points (5%) will be deducted for each uncommunicated absence beyond the first one. Six (6) unexcused absences beyond the original 2 (for a total of 8 unexcused absences out of 27 meetings) are grounds for dismissal (which, in this case, means an automatic failure, without room for appeal).

The Course Project

The course project is worth 20% of your final grade, and may be submitted any time before the beginning of Reading Days. I will not accept any assignments submitted late without notice (see **Communication** above).

The course project consists of a “Targum” of a biblical passage no fewer than 20 verses, such as the ones we shall discuss in class. It does not require any reading knowledge of Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek (although such knowledge obviously wouldn’t hurt). Rather, it will require you to demonstrate mastery of the structure of a targum on four axes:

- **Vernacularity** (5): Your Targum reflects the spoken language of your daily life, rather than a ponderous and affected literary style.
- **Omnisignificance** (5): In the words of James Kugel, “Every detail is put there to teach something new and important, and it is capable of being discovered by careful analysis.” Your job is to discover the significance of each detail.
- **Editing** (5): A good editor will correct any evident grammatical errors, resolve any apparent logical contradictions (without doing violence to the original text), elaborate upon any seemingly extraneous details (keeping in mind that everything is potentially significant and therefore cannot be discarded), and generally improve the readability of the text.
- **Pedagogy** (5): You should include a translator’s statement about why you selected this particular passage, what you have learned from it and what you hope to impart to your audience by creating a Targum about. Your Targum will also be assessed on the degree to which it reflects this mission.

Academic Integrity:

As defined by the university’s Academic Integrity Policy (http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/files/documents/AI_Policy_2013.pdf), plagiarism is “the use of another person’s words, ideas, or results without giving that person appropriate credit.” To avoid even the appearance of plagiarism or cheating, kindly identify all direct quotations and even paraphrases from other people and other sources with an appropriate citation. Due to their public nature, the theft of another person’s original words or ideas has ramifications beyond the classroom.

Required Texts:

The main textbooks for the course will be:

Sebastian Brock, *The Bible in the Syriac Tradition* (Gorgias, 2006) ISBN 1-59333-300-5

John Bowker, *The Targums and Rabbinic Literature: An Introduction to Jewish Interpretations of Scripture*, 1st edition reprint (Cambridge University Press, 1979) ISBN 0-52109-771-1

In addition, readings will be assigned from monographs and academic papers, which will be made available to the students through the course website on Sakai. These include:

Sebastian Brock, *An Introduction to Syriac Studies*, 3rd edition (Gorgias 2017)

Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Semitic Background of the New Testament* (Eerdmans 1997)

Emmanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible, Qumran, Septuagint: Collected Essays*, Volume 3 (Brill 2015)

Fall Semester Course Schedule

Week 1: Introduction

Week 2: Aramaic in the Bible, I

- Aramaean Origins, and Aramaic during the Achaemenid and Hellenistic Eras. **READ:** “The Phases of the Aramaic Language” in Fitzmyer 1997.
- The Aramaic Portions of the Old Testament. **READ:** Ezra 4:8–6:18 and 7:12-26 (67 verses), Daniel 2:4b–7:28 (200 verses), and Jeremiah 10:11 (one verse), taking notes of when, where, and how Aramaic is used in these verses.

Week 3: Aramaic in the Bible, II

- Late Aramaic and the Aramaic glosses in the New Testament. **READ:** Matt 5:22; 27:46; Mark 5:41; 7:34; 10:51; 14:36; John 1:42; 20:16; Acts 9:36, 40; Rom 8:15; 1 Cor 16:22; and Gal 4:6, taking notes of the Aramaic words transliterated.
- The “Language of Jesus.” **READ:** “The Languages of Palestine in the First Century A.D” in Fitzmyer 1997.

Week 4: Textual Criticism and the Study of Bible Translations. **READ:** “The Aramaic, Syriac, and Latin Translations of Hebrew Scripture vis-à-vis the Masoretic Text” in Tov 2015.

Week 5: The Aramaic Targums, I. **READ:** “Preface” in Bowker 1979;

Week 6: The Aramaic Targums, II. **READ:** “Ps. Jonathan on Selected Chapters of Genesis” in Bowker 1979.

MIDTERM

Week 7: Introduction to the Syriac-speaking people and their interactions with other peoples. **Read:** “Appendix” in Brock 2017.

Week 8: Syriac-speaking Judaism and Christianity during the first five centuries. **Read** “Classical Rabbinic Literature” in Bowker 1979.

Week 9: Translations techniques: free translations vs. idiomatic translations vs. mirror translations; pros and cons of each method. **READ:** “Translation and Interpretation” in Bowker 1979.

Week 10: Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible in Syriac. **READ:** Chapter 1 in Brock 2006.

Week 11: Textual Criticism of the Greek New Testament in Syriac. READ: Chapter 2 in Brock 2006.

Week 12: The Syriac Bible in Arabic: the case of the Diatessaron. READ: Chapter 3 in Brock 2006.

Week 13: Biblical Commentaries: methods and examples. Read: Chapter 4 in Brock 2006.

Week 14: The influence of the Syriac Bible upon later Syriac Literature. Read: Chapter 5 in Brock 2006.

Week 15: Review. Course Project Due.