

The relevance of the Aramaic heritage

by **Prof. Sebastian Brock**

The Aramaic heritage is thus an essential - but generally forgotten – part of the general cultural heritage of all who live in the Middle East today, of whatever language and of whatever religion. But it is, of course, of particular significance for those communities which have preserved the use of Aramaic, in one or other of its main dialects, to the present day. The fact that these communities span four different religions – Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Mandaism – is a clear indication of the fundamental role played by Aramaic in the course of the past history of the Middle East. It so happens that today the Aramaic heritage is best preserved among the various Christian Churches whose traditional liturgical language is Syriac – Syriac being the name of the main Christian dialect of Aramaic. This means that the ancient Aramaic heritage is of especial importance and relevance wherever in the world these Syriac Churches have spread, whether in the past, across Asia as far as China, or today, when they are present, not only in South India (going back nearly two millennia), but also in the many countries to which their people have emigrated, above all, western Europe, the Americas, and Australia.

But it can also be said that the Aramaic heritage has a much wider relevance, that touches on human history in general. This aspect has been well brought out by the eminent scholar of Arabic literature, Franz Rosenthal, who started out his career in the field of Aramaic. He writes as follows:

In my view, the history of Aramaic represents the purest triumph of the human spirit as embodied in language (which is the mind's most direct form of physical expression) over the crude display of material power... Great empires were conquered by the Aramaic language, and when they disappeared and were submerged in the flow of history, that language persisted and continued to live a life of its own. Of course, there were always many speakers of Aramaic in the heartland [of the Near East], but what they had been before, that they remained – powerless entities, in a world controlled by others for power and domination. Yet the language continued to be powerfully, active in the promulgation of spiritual matters. It was the main instrument for the formulation of religious ideas in the Near East, which they spread in all directions all over the world. Some, as such the gnostic systems, dominated the spiritual world view for centuries and then they lost their identities; others, the monotheistic groups, continue to live on today with a religious heritage, much of which found first expression in Aramaic.

And he concludes with these striking words:

The total sweep of Aramaic history thus presents a marvelous and unique picture. It teaches us that the underdog may in fact have the opportunity to play a decisive role, that it is possible for the word pure and simple to dominate empires and survive their dissolution, that it is possible for the true achievements of the human spirit to live on even after those who attained them are no longer the masters of the material fortunes of themselves and of those around them. In this there seems to be a comforting lesson for our own time. It is a lesson which is plain and inescapable for everyone who has had the good fortune to become acquainted with any segment of the history of Aramaic.

Source: The Hidden Pearl - The Syriac Orthodox Church and Its Aramaic Heritage, by Prof. Sebastian P. Brock (Oxford), Dr. David G.K. Taylor (Univ of Birmingham), Dr. Witold Witowski (Uppsala Univ), Giacomo Pezzali [Producer], Rome, 2001, Vol. 1, p. 6