1. INTRODUCTION

The name 'Syriac' comes into English from the word used by classical Syriac writers to denote their community and language, *Suryaya* (ܣܘܪܝܝܐ). This word had, it seems, nothing to do with the Roman province of Syria on the Mediterranean coast,[1] and in fact it was further east, in Edessa, in Mesopotamia, that Syriac emerged as a written language in the first century CE.

Syriac is a dialect of the Aramaic language. Aramaic is known to readers of the Bible as the language of parts of the books of Ezra and Daniel, and this biblical Aramaic is closely related to the 'official' or 'imperial' Aramaic that was an international language during the time of the Achaemenid Persian empire of the sixth to fourth centuries BCE. Syriac began as one of the local varieties of so-called 'middle Aramaic' that persisted after the breakup of that empire. Syriac itself then became a standard language spoken and written over a wide area of Mesopotamia and Persia, and it is this 'classical Syriac', exhibited in manuscripts surviving from the fifth century CE onwards, that is the subject of the present grammar.

Technically, Syriac is usually taken to belong among eastern Aramaic dialects, along with the Aramaic of the Babylonian Talmud, and Mandaic. The Aramaic of Palestine, hypothetically the language of Jesus and represented

[1] Historically, *Suryaya* has often come into English as 'Syrian' rather than 'Syriac', both as a noun (as in 'St. Ephrem the Syrian') and an adjective (as in 'Syrian Orthodox Church'). The result has been a more or less incorrect association with 'Syria'. The student may have to explain to non-specialist friends that Syriac is not the language of the modern country of Syria (which is, of course, Arabic).

in writing by (for example) some of the Dead Sea Scrolls, belongs to the western group of dialects, and is therefore a slightly more distant relative of Syriac.[2] Hebrew, a sister language of Aramaic within the Semitic family of languages, is more distant yet, although it belongs to the same subfamily usually known as Northwest Semitic. The other major Semitic languages – Arabic, Ethiopic, and ancient Akkadian – are further away linguistically, although between Syriac and Arabic there are close historical connections. After the rise of Islam Arabic became the second, and later the first, language of many Syriac-speakers, and they sometimes wrote Arabic using the Syriac script. The pronunciation of the two languages also interacted.

The place of Syriac in Semitic linguistics is one reason for studying the language; but there are other and, in fact, more usual ones. In Western biblical scholarship, Syriac has been an important subject since the Renaissance, and many students come to it on account of the ancient Syriac versions of the Old and New Testaments and the tradition of commentary writing. Other students want to read the works of native Syriac writers of poetry, history, and theology. Still other students have an interest in one or another of the living Syriac churches and their tradition and liturgy. This book attempts to serve students who wish to learn Syriac for any or all of these reasons.

In ancient times the Syriac language-area overlapped the Roman and Persian empires. Later, this geo-political division was broadly reinforced by ecclesiastical boundaries (and doctrinal differences), so that the Syriac-speaking communities in the two empires were separated from each

[2] It is sometimes heard that Syriac is the language of Jesus. That is so only in the sense that both are Aramaic.

other. The eventual result was two grammatical traditions within the language, the West Syriac and East Syriac.[3] In terms of writing, this development is most apparent in the way that the earliest book-hand (called *estrangela*) evolved into the different East and West Syriac scripts that we find in printed books. As a matter of pedagogy, an introductory grammar must locate itself within one tradition or the other, and use one or another script. This book, for good historical reasons, adopts the Western script, reading-signs, and most other grammatical conventions;[4] but in phonology some compromise is made with the East Syriac system. (On this see §3 below.) An introduction to reading in the estrangela and East Syriac scripts is given in Appendices B and C.

[3] In older literature, often 'Jacobite' (West) and 'Nestorian' (East); but these names are best avoided.

[4] The Western script has been traditional for vocalized texts since the sixteenth century when the study of Syriac was promoted in Europe by Maronite scholars (who belonged to the Western tradition). The learner from Robinson will find that the Syriac New Testament in most general use (British and Foreign Bible Society, 1920 and often reprinted) looks familiar.

2. THE SCRIPT

Syriac is written with an alphabet of twenty-two letters, which is the same, in its underlying form, as that used by other Aramaic dialects and by Hebrew. Syriac uses a distinctive script to write this alphabet. Of the Syriac script there are three main varieties (also usually called 'scripts'), corresponding to the different traditions mentioned in §1. This lesson deals with reading and writing the West Syriac script, also known as *serṭa* or *serṭo*.

The script is written from right to left, and it is cursive: that is, words are written without lifting the pen between every letter, and the letters can take two, or four, different forms depending on their place in a word and the letters around them. The table opposite shows the letters in each form, with the corresponding Hebrew in the last column. The 'transliteration' roughly indicates pronunciation; but on this see the next lesson.

It will be observed that all the letters can join to a preceding letter (that is, from the right), but that the letters ܐ ܕ ܗ ܘ ܙ ܪ do not join to a following letter (to the left).

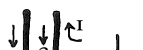
The combination *lamad-alaph* is written ܠܐ (or ܠ- when connected to a preceding letter). Sometimes (although not in this book) the combination *alaph-lamad* is written -ܐܠ.

A curved form of *alaph* (ʾ) is sometimes found at the beginnings of words, but in this book the straight form (ܐ) is used in all positions.

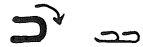
name[1]	*translit-eration*	*alone*	*joined to another letter* *on left*	*on both sides*	*on right*	*Hebrew*
alaph	ʾ	ܐ or ܀			ܐ	א
beth	*b*	ܒ	ܒ	ܒ	ܒ	ב
gamal	*g*	ܓ	ܓ	ܓ	ܓ	ג
dalath	*d*	ܕ			ܕ	ד
he	*h*	ܗ			ܗ	ה
waw	*w*	ܘ			ܘ	ו
zayn	*z*	ܙ			ܙ	ז
ḥeth	*ḥ*	ܚ	ܚ	ܚ	ܚ	ח
ṭeth	*ṭ*	ܛ	ܛ	ܛ	ܛ	ט
yod	*y*	ܝ	ܝ	ܝ	ܝ	י
kaph	*k*	ܟ	ܟ	ܟ	ܟ	כ
lamad	*l*	ܠ	ܠ	ܠ	ܠ	ל
mem	*m*	ܡ	ܡ	ܡ	ܡ	מ
nun	*n*	ܢ	ܢ	ܢ	ܢ	נ
semkath	*s*	ܣ	ܣ	ܣ	ܣ	ס
ʿe	ʿ	ܥ	ܥ	ܥ	ܥ	ע
pe	*p*	ܦ	ܦ	ܦ	ܦ	פ
ṣade	*ṣ*	ܨ			ܨ	צ
qoph	*q*	ܩ	ܩ	ܩ	ܩ	ק
resh	*r*	ܪ			ܪ	ר
shin	*š*	ܫ	ܫ	ܫ	ܫ	ש
taw	*t*	ܬ			ܬ	ת

[1] The names of the letters are spelled conventionally here. For the correct Syriac forms see the headings in the Syriac-English glossary.

The following are models and hints for writing each letter.



Alaph always ends in a down-stroke (not as in Arabic), extending slightly below the line.



Beth is wider and flatter on top than *kaph*.

Gamal is almost all below the line and it extends back below a preceding letter.

Dalath looks like a bold English comma when not joined, but is smaller when joined. It always has a dot below. Compare *resh*.

He is the same height as *beth*.

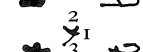
Waw never connects on the left. Compare *qoph*.

Zayn is like *alaph* but shorter, only as high as *beth*. There is no curved form.

Ḥeth has two spikes. It is shorter than *beth*, but ideally a little taller than *yod*.

Ṭeth. The loop goes below the line.

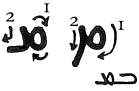
Yod is a single short spike, shorter than *nun*.



Kaph is narrower and rounder than *beth*. The tail of the final form bends to the left.

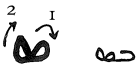
Lamad is the same height as *alaph* and must be clearly taller than *ʿe*. Some teachers say to aim for an angle of 45°. When it is at the end of a word, the finishing stroke goes up in parallel.

Lamad-alaph. The *lamad* loses its slant. When it is not connected from the right, the *lamad* begins on a down-stroke.

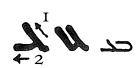


Mem. The tail of the final form is turned down.

Nun has exactly the height of *beth* or *he* and must be made clearly taller than *yod*. The final form tails away below a preceding letter.



Semkath. Ideally the left loop should be slightly higher than the right.



ʿE is like *lamad* but shorter. Its slant distinguishes it from *nun*.

Pe is taller than *beth* but not as tall as *alaph*.

Ṣade has a very small spike, and a large hook below the line.

Qoph always has a finishing stroke to the left, whether it connects to a following letter or not.

Resh is the same shape as *dalath* but always has a dot above.

Shin. Aim for a triangular shape, bringing the pen back to fill it in. It must be larger and bolder than *yod*. A rounder shape (like ) is also acceptable.

Taw finishes with a rightward stroke.

Diacritical points. Syriac is correctly written with a variety of diacritical points intended to distinguish homographs (different words that are spelled alike, for example, ܐܝܕܐ *ayda* 'which' and ܐܝܕܐ *ida* 'hand'). These points are generally redundant when pronunciation is specified by vowel-signs, as it will be in this book, and they will be omitted in the lessons to follow. (Before reading an unvocalized text, see further on diacritical points in Appendix B.)

There are, however, two particular diacritical marks which will be printed here and should always be written. One of these is the pair of points known as *seyame* (literally[2] 'placements') that indicates the plural of nouns, most adjectives, and some verb forms. For example, 'king' is written ܡܠܟܐ and 'kings' ܡܠܟ̈ܐ. *Seyame* may go anywhere on a word, but when writing, it is best to put it near the middle, and over a short letter if possible. The letter *resh* (ܪ) often attracts the *seyame*, which then replaces its dot; for example, ܦܐܪܐ / ܦ̈ܐܪܐ 'fruit/fruits'. The other obligatory diacritical mark is the dot over ܗ in certain pronoun suffixes indicating the feminine. (For these see §§6, 18.)

Punctuation. The history of punctuation in old manuscripts is complex, and it is different in- and outside the Bible. In this book we follow the simplest typographical practice, which is to use a full point at the end of a sentence, as in English, and the double points ܁ to mark a division within the sentence. (Other double points ܂ ܃ have broadly the same function.) Questions are not marked.[3] A more major division in a text is often shown by four points ❖ .

[2] Hereafter in this book abbreviated '*lit*.'.

[3] But modern writers and editors sometimes use '؟'.

Abbreviations may be indicated by a line over the beginning of the word, e.g. ܗܘܕ = ܗܘܕܝܐ 'glory'; ܐܟ = ܐܟܙܘ 'etc.' Sometimes the same line indicates that letters are to be read as numbers (see pp. 137–8); e.g. ܫܟ = 319.

Exercises

Write in transliteration, using the English letters in the table on p. 5.[4]

ܐܚܢܐ	ܩܠܗܐ	ܡܙܡܪ	ܐܡܪ	ܡܕܒܚ
ܚܟܡ	ܗܘܢ	ܐܠܗܐ	ܐܦܣ	ܡܪܝܐ
ܐܠܦܢ	ܒܚܟܡܐ	ܐܝܟܡ	ܐܫܟܚܐ	ܐܡܪ

Write in Syriac characters:

ṣly	*wrdyn*	*ʿlyh*	*ywmtʾ*	*mdyntʾ*
šlmyn	*klbʾ*	*ʿlyhwn*	*klmdm*	*mtqrʾ*
ʿmṣw	*lḥddʾ*	*mṭl*	*mstkl*	*šḥlp*
lʾ	*thwʾ*	*ṭlytʾ*	*sbr*	*ydʿ*
ydʿtwn	*mlk*	*mlkʾ*	*ḥlpwhy*	*nbyʾ*
ʿm	*ʿmmʾ*	*mlʾkʾ*	*wʾzl*	*dyrʾ*
rdʾ	*qṭl*	*gbrʾ*	*ttplḥ*	*ṣbyn*
	ʾnšʾ	*ʾnttʾ*	*msybrnwtʾ*	

[4] Some of these words reappear with vowels in the exercise to §3.

3. PRONUNCIATION

This lesson deals with the pronunciation of consonants and vowels, and how this pronunciation is indicated by the writing system.[1]

Consonants. The letters transliterated as *z l m n s r,* and *h w y* when used as consonants, may be pronounced as in English. The others are as follows.

ܐ is a glottal stop; but more often it is 'quiescent': see p. 13 below.

ܚ corresponds to Arabic ح, a stronger *h* than ܗ. Many students, not strictly correctly, pronounce it like *ch* in German *ich* (as in Hebrew).

ܛ corresponds to Arabic ط, an emphatic *t*. Most English-speakers do not distinguish it in pronunciation from ܬ.

ܥ corresponds to Arabic ع, a stop far back in the throat, like a gagging sound. Some students succeed in making this sound; some make it a simple glottal stop like ܐ.

ܨ corresponds to Arabic ص, an emphatic *s*. The pronunciation *ts*, borrowed from Hebrew, is conventional.

ܩ corresponds to Arabic ق and is a sound further back in the throat than ܟ. It is worthwhile, to avoid misspelling errors later, to try to make this sound distinctive.

ܫ is pronounced *sh* (š).

[1] In this lesson and occasionally in later ones, Syriac is written in English letters. This is simply to help with pronunciation, and there is no attempt at a consistent or scientific system of transliteration.

The letters ܒ ܓ ܕ ܟ ܦ ܬ (*bgdkpt*, pronounced *begadkefath*) have two alternative pronunciations: 'stopped' (hard) and 'spirantized' (soft). When spirantized:

ܒ (*b*) becomes *v*.

ܓ (*g*) becomes like Arabic غ, something like French *r*. Not all students attempt to make this sound.

ܕ (*d*) becomes voiced *th*, as in *there*.

ܟ (*k*) becomes like Arabic خ, that is, like *ch* in German *acht*. Note that this approaches the usual pronunciation of ܣ.

ܦ (*p*) becomes *f*.

ܬ (*t*) becomes unvoiced *th*, as in *thin*.

(In transliteration, the spirantized letters are often shown with underlines: b̲ g̲ d̲ k̲ p̲ t̲.) In some manuscripts and printed books, especially the Bible, the hard and soft pronunciations are indicated by dots: a dot above the letter, known as *qushaya* ('hardening'), or below, *rukaka* ('softening').[2] Thus, ܒ is pronounced *b* and ܒ̣ is pronounced *v*, etc. (Notice that ܕ̣ must be *dalath* with *qushaya*, not *resh*.)

Generally, a *bgdkpt* letter is spirantized after a vowel, and otherwise pronounced hard. Most of the time this rule is easy to apply, but sometimes it is not. An indistinct vowel (in Hebrew, vocal *shewa*) before a *bgdkpt* letter will cause it to be spirantized, and a letter that is doubled is always pronounced hard. Syriac does not show either of these things in the writing system and, unless the text actually uses *qushaya* and *rukaka* points, the reader has to decide on pronunciation from knowledge of grammar and some

[2] Properly, *quššāyā* (ܩܘܫܫܝܐ) and *rukkāk̲ā* (ܪܘܟܟܐ). To distinguish these dots from other diacritical points they are often written in red in manuscripts. In print they should ideally be smaller.

supplementary rules. To avoid overloading the present lesson these rules are set out in Appendix A, and they should become familiar by experience. In this book, *qushaya* and *rukaka* are supplied when the pronunciation is unexpected or might be in doubt, at least on the first occurrence of a word and in the Syriac-English glossary.

Vowels. By nature, the Syriac alphabetical letters represent consonants only. Anciently, however, some vowels became part of the spelling of words, using the letters *waw* (for *o* and *u*), *yod* (for *i* and *e*), and *alaph* (for *ā*, *a*, *e*, *i*). For example:

ܢܡܘܣܐ	*nāmosā*	ܡܘܫܐ	*Muše*	ܡܢܝ	*Mani*
ܣܝܡ	*sim*	ܗܐܠܝܢ	*hālen*	ܟܝܦܐ	*kip̲ā*.

Later, a system of vowel-signs was superimposed on the alphabet; or rather, each of the two traditions of pronunciation, East and West, developed its own vowel-signs. The West Syriac vowel-signs, invented in the tenth century, are based on Greek letters. They are ◌ܳ ◌ܲ ◌ܴ ◌ܵ ◌ܶ. In this book we use these signs, although, following the custom of scholarly Syriac, we depart from the West Syriac tradition of pronunciation in two places, in order to preserve a more original phonology.[3] First: the sign ◌ܳ will indicate *ā* (as in *father*). Second: we will distinguish an additional vowel *o* and indicate it by a dot above the letter *waw*.[4] Thus we have the following six vowels and vowel-signs.

[3] Both these points are, in fact, features of the East Syriac vowel system. For other differences in this system, see Appendix C.

[4] A student who wants to adopt a more consistent West Syriac pronunciation can pronounce the vowel ◌ܳ as *o*, and then pronounce the vowels ◌ܰ and ◌ܸ indifferently as *u*. In this case, ܚܸܛܳܐ becomes *kṯobo* rather than *kṯābḇā*, and ܝܥܩܘܒ *Yaʿqub* rather than *Yaʿqoḇ*.

sign[5]	*value*	*alone*	*with vowel letters*	*value*
ܐ	*ā*	ܒ	ܒܐ	*bā*
ܒ	*a*	ܒܲ	ܒܰܐ	*ba*
ܓ	*e*	ܒܶ	ܒܶܐ, ܒܶ	*be*
ܗ	*i*	ܒܺ	ܒܺܝ (or ܒܺ), ܒܺܐ	*bi*
ܘ	*u*		ܒܽܘ	*bu*
◌	*o*		ܒ◌	*bo*.

The vowel letter *waw* is always used when the vowel is *o*, and almost always when it is *u*. (The common words ܟܠ *kul* 'every' and ܡܛܠ *meṭul* 'because' are exceptional in not being spelled with ܘ.[6]) Likewise, the sign ◌ܗ does not very often appear without *yod* or *alaph*. As shown above, *waw* attracts the vowel-sign ◌ܘ over itself, and *yod* may also do this for ◌ܗ. Otherwise, the sign is written on the preceding consonant. The vowel-signs (but not usually ◌ܘ) may go upside down below the letters if there is not room above; thus ◌ܼ ◌ܻ ◌ܽ ◌ܾ ◌ܿ.

Alaph and *yod*. When *alaph* is a consonant, it must have a full vowel,[7] as always at the beginning of a word, e.g. ܐܟܰܠ ʾe*k̲*al 'he ate'. Much of the time, however, *alaph* is 'quiescent'; that is, it simply carries the vowel of a preceding letter, as for example in ܟܺܐܦܳܐ *kip̲ā* 'stone'. Grammatically, if *alaph* is preceded by a vowelless consonant, its vowel moves over onto that consonant, as in ܕܶܐܟܰܠ de*k̲*al (from *d*-ʾe*k̲*al) 'which he ate'. *Yod* is somewhat the same: if

[5] By name the signs are: ◌ܐ *zqāp̲ā*; ◌ܒ *pṯāḥā*; ◌ܓ *rb̲āṣā*; ◌ܗ *ḥb̲āṣā*; ◌ܘ ʿ*ṣāṣā*. (These names will not be used again in this book.)

[6] More correctly, these are *kol* and *meṭol*, but the *o* vowel (a dot above the *waw*) cannot be shown when the *waw* is not written. The West Syriac pronunciations with *u* are conventional.

[7] This is a difference from Hebrew, where א can take *shewa*.

it would be without a full vowel at the beginning of a syllable, it assumes the vowel *i,* as in ܝܗܘܕܝܐ *Ihud̲āye* 'Jews'. The effects of these rules for *alaph* and *yod* will be seen from time to time to in the lessons to come.

Silent letters. Occasionally spelling does not follow pronunciation exactly. In a text with vowel-signs, a consonant that is silent may be indicated by *linea occultans* (*lit*. 'hiding line'), a short line written under the letter, for example in ܡܕܝܬܐ *mḏitā* (not *mḏintā*), ܢܫܐ *nāšā*, ܐܙܛ *ezaṯ*. In suffixes and in a few common words, silent letters are not always marked at all, e.g. ܐܟ *ak̲* (not *ayk*) 'as'.

The words from p. 12, supplied with vowel-signs, are:

ܢܡܘܣܐ	*nāmosā*	ܡܘܫܐ	*Muše*	ܡܢܝ	*Mani*
ܣܝܡ	*sim*	ܗܐܠܝܢ	*hālen*	ܟܝܦܐ	*kip̲ā*.

The following are further examples of words vocalized, with their pronunciation:

ܡܠܟܐ	*malkā*	ܡܠܐܟܐ	*malak̲ā*	ܣܘܪܝܝܐ	*Suryāyā*
ܩܛܠ	*qṭal* (or *qᵉṭal*)	ܢܩܛܘܠ	*neqṭol*	ܘܪܕܐ	*wardā*
ܪܝܫܐ	*riše*	ܛܘܒܝ	*ṭub̲ay*	ܘܘ	*waw*
ܡܥܠܠܘ	*mᵉmalālu*	ܐܘܪܚܬܐ	*urḥāṯ̲ā*	ܕܗܒܐ	*dahb̲ā*.

Exercises

Read the following words aloud. (They are proper names or other terms that might be recognizable.)

ܫܐ	ܢܦ	ܡܟܐ	ܥܒܕ	ܩܗܪܘܢ
ܡܪܝܡ	ܡܕܢܚ	ܐܦܣ	ܡܟܘܪ	ܙܟܐ
ܒܠܐܠ	ܡܦܫܠ	ܡܙܓ	ܡܥܫܐ	ܐܩܥܩܘ
ܒܐ	ܐܒܐ	ܥܒܕܬܐ	ܐܘܟܡ	ܐܡܝ
ܐܘܘܐ	ܡܙܥܩܐ	ܩܗܪܬܐ	ܥܒܕܐ	ܒܘܐ

ܡܟ ܟܫܥ ܘܘܐ

Write the following words in Syriac characters, with vowel-signs and with *rukaka* and *qushaya*. For the purposes of this exercise, write *i* and *ei* with *yod*; *o* and *u* with *waw*; and final *-ā* with *alaph*.

šmayā	*hwāṯ*	*ʾeṯḥzi*	*rišānā*	*šubḥā*
galyaṯ	*hālein*	*ʾamirā*	*ṭubān*	*ʿabdā*
lʾaylein	*nmalel*	*sāʾem*	*šliḥā*	*ṣawmā*
ʾaḥay	*ʾāmrin*	*parṣopā*	*ʿdamā*	*sāymin*
sagiʾā	*hayment*	*ṣbuṯā*	*ʿlawhy*	*mmalālu*

malpānuṯā qdāmaykon petgāmā.

ROBINSON'S PARADIGMS AND EXERCISES IN SYRIAC GRAMMAR

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