

Holger Gzella, *A Cultural History of Aramaic: From the Beginnings to the Advent of Islam* (Handbook of Oriental Studies / Handbuch der Orientalistik. Section I. The Near and Middle East III; Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2015). Pp. XIV + 451. €162,00. ISBN 978-90-04-28509-5, ISSN 0169-9423.

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Aramaic is attested by written records during a historical period of 3000 years. The first half of its cultural history is the subject of the book under review, written by a specialist in Aramaic linguistics, professor at Leiden University. It is dedicated to the memory of Klaus Beyer (1929-2014), a renowned Semitist. The reviewer will present the book following its chapters.

Chapter 1 situates Aramaic among the Semitic languages (p. 1-51). It offers a brief history of research (p. 3-16) and determines the place of the language in its Northwest Semitic setting (p. 16-51). The grammatical core of Aramaic is clearly presented as well as the evolution of its grammar until the 7th century A.D. Important facts are recorded and remaining questions indicated, especially in syntax, to which the use of verbal forms is closely related. The Author still maintains that historically two distinct forms of a “long” and a “short imperfect” have existed (p. 31 ff.), although the obvious identity of *yrwh* and *yrwy* in the Old Aramaic inscription from Tell Fekheriye (9th century B.C.) shows that such differences are just orthographic or dialectal. In this question, one should also consider the situation in Arabic. Both in the Qur’ân and in the Ḥadīth, one frequently finds verbal forms in which a final long *ī* or *ū* is shortened or elided altogether, like in some recorded dialects. Instead, the Tel Dan / Tell el-Qādi, Zakkūr, and Deir ‘Allā inscriptions (9th-8th centuries) reveal the functioning of the “imperfect” either as “perfective” or as “imperfective”, the latter resulting from an extended use of the jussive or volitive, which is semantically an “imperfective” mood. The place of the accent in the spoken language played here a significant role, as shown by modern Semitic languages. This question is not examined by the Author. The chapter ends with a presentation of a historical-linguistic method and of the question concerning an internal classification of Aramaic, both dialectally and chronologically.

Chapter 2 deals with the emergence of Aramaic dialects in the Fertile Crescent (p. 53-103). The term “emergence” refers to the apparition of some dialects in written form, while they certainly existed since centuries and were quite numerous. The first mentions of the name “Aramaeans” occur in Assyrian cuneiform texts of the 12th century B.C., while the rise of Aramaic chancery documents goes back in Syria to the early 9th century B.C. and is characterised by the use of the “Phoenician” alphabet. Briefly and clearly, the Author presents the Tell Fekheriye inscription, the Aramaic *koine* of Central Syria, which “with all due caution” includes the Aramaic inscriptions from Zincirli (Turkey), Tel Dan (Israel), and Deir ‘Allā (Jordan), while “Šam’alian” royal inscriptions from Zincirli provide records of a different dialect. Distinct sections of the chapter consider the influence of Aram-Damascus, the Tel Dan stele, and the Deir ‘Allā plaster inscription, with a special attention to the use of the so-called “imperfect” (p. 81 ff.), where the unfortunate distinction of “short” and “long imperfect”, as well as the fallacious “historical present” play a role, while comparison with Akkadian and with Arabic apocopate after *law* is completely left aside. The same chapter also discusses the question of Aramaic-Canaanite multilingualism in Syria-Palestine (p. 93-103).

Chapter 3 deals with the spread of Aramaic in the Assyrian and Babylonian empires (p. 104-156). Aramaic appears then as an international language. As expected, a particular attention is given by the Author to the linguistic profile of 7th- and 6th-centuries Aramaic. The question of Aramaic and Akkadian in contact is considered in an apposite section with a further distinction of the Neo-Assyrian and the Neo-Babylonian periods. Particular sections deal with Aramaic as a diplomatic language, used in official letters, with Aramaic funerary inscriptions, private letters, and with literature, embodied in the Aḫiqar tradition.

Aramaic of the Persian period, used by the Achaemenid chancelleries and usually called “Official Aramaic”, is examined in Chapter 4 (p. 157-211). The general presentation is followed by a discussion of characteristic features of the language. The dissimilation by *n* of geminated consonants is considered to be a significant linguistic innovation (p. 170 f.). However, this phenomenon of the spoken language is attested by cuneiform notations of Aramaic personal names at least since the beginning of the 8th century B.C. (*OLA* 200, p. 25). That shows that Aramaic phonetics cannot be studied without examining its onomastics in Akkadian, Arabic or Greek script. The Author’s considerations are only valid for forms written in Aramaic, although writing is a secondary expression of any language. One should notice besides that the dissimilation of *bb* leads to a pronunciation *mb*, like in Σαμβαθαιος.

Another innovative spelling of the Persian period is the growing use of word-internal vowel letters. They also served to indicate stressed syllables. Among morphological features, the consistent use of third-person plural independent pronouns, instead of a suffixed form, is recorded by the Author (p. 172). Several other grammatical phenomena are mentioned, phonetic, morphological, as well as syntactic. Official Aramaic was promoted intentionally by Achaemenid authorities, but other languages were used as well by chancelleries, hence the need of discussing their interrelations (p. 178-182).

The different kinds of documents are presented in the following section, in particular the economic documents and the Bisitun inscription. An important subject is the use of Aramaic in the various provinces of the Achaemenid empire (p. 185-201), in particular in Egypt, Palestine, North Arabia, Asia Minor, and Bactria. National literatures in Aramaic are discussed next (p. 201-208). Due attention is paid here to the Aḥiqar papyrus from Elephantine, to the fragmentary tale of Bar Puneš, and to the Papyrus Amherst 63 in Demotic script, as well as to the biblical and Jewish literary Aramaic. These are the sole pages (p. 205-208), where biblical texts in Aramaic are presented with their linguistic peculiarities, due not only to their different origins and dates, but also to their transmission through centuries, since only fragments of Daniel manuscripts were preserved at Qumran (*DJD* I, p. 150-151; *DJD* XVI, p. 239-286), beside the three small fragments of the Book of Ezra (*DJD* XVI, p. 291-293). Instead, the language of non-biblical Aramaic texts discovered at Qumran is characterized as “post-Achaemenid material” (p. 202) and briefly presented in Chapter 5 (p. 230-232). This statement is true only in part, because some writings go probably back to late Persian times. They cannot be all ascribed to the Hasmonaean period for the unique reason that fragments of recovered copies date from the 2nd-1st centuries B.C. This chronological problem concerns the Enochic literature in particular. It was noticed long ago that the Aramaic manuscript 4Q201, copied in the early 2nd century B.C., shares archaic orthographic features with the Hermopolis papyri (*Maarav* 1 [1979], p. 203). This does not mean that the Book of Watchers (I En. 1-36) goes back to the 6th/5th century B.C., but such a fact requires an adequate explanation.

Chapter 5 deals with Aramaic in the Hellenistic and the early Roman periods (p. 212-280). Local dialects and multilingualism are problems confronting linguists examining this long span of time. Geographical distinctions have to be made. The Author first presents the situation in Palestine (p. 225-238), on which the readers of *The Biblical Annals* are expected to focus their attention. The economic and legal documents were composed in Aramaic and not in Hebrew, except the religious legal texts, as the Damascus

Document, the Rule of the Community, and some other writings. Aramaic and Greek appear in those times as vernacular and written languages, although a significant use of Hebrew continued in Jerusalem and in Judaea until the 2nd A.D. century. The Hasmonaean literary languages were both Hebrew and Aramaic, the latter witnessing to juxtaposition of conservative Achaemenid features and of local linguistic varieties. After the collapse of the Hasmonaean dynasty in 37 B.C., local Jewish Palestinian Aramaic traits appeared increasingly in epigraphs and undoubtedly characterized the original language of Targum Onqelos and of Targum Jonathan. The Author does not mention here these two major corpora of literary works, probably because they have been transmitted in a language reshaped in East Aramaic by Babylonian Jews, as shown in R.J. Kutty's *Studies in the Syntax of Targum Jonathan to Samuel* (Leuven 2010) (cf. *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* 65/2 [2012] 154-161). The Author briefly deals with this question in Chapter 6 (p. 308-309).

Nabataean is the next West Aramaic dialect presented in the volume (p. 238-246). It was used as written language by the North Arabian populations of the northern area of the Arabian Peninsula, of Transjordan, the Negeb, and the Sinai. There is no comprehensive corpus of the *ca.* 6,000 inscriptions dating between the 2nd century B.C. and the 4th century A.D., and of the legal papyri from the Judaeian Desert. The language is basically the Official Aramaic of the Persian period with some orthographic modernizations and with the use of the West Aramaic accusative marker *yt*. On the other hand, there is a number of North Arabian loanwords, next to the Arabic personal names occurring in these texts.

The next section deals with Syria, where the encounter of old local dialects with the scribal tradition of Official Aramaic and with the Greek *koine* has produced a number of different language situations (p. 246-263). The Author deals first with Palmyrene Aramaic, influenced by the North Arabian dialects of the majority of the local population (p. 248-256). Instead, the traces of an old Amorite background (*Syria* 51 [1974] 91-103) and some Phoenician linguistic elements are not recorded. Next comes the Old Syriac of Edessa, present-day Urfa (Turkey), and of the Osrhoene (p. 256-261). With the consolidation of Christianity in the 4th century A.D., Syriac spread from Edessa through Syria and Mesopotamia and became the main literary language of Aramaic speaking Christians, the Classical Syriac presented in Chapter 7 (p. 366-379). A particular case occurs at Dura Europos (p. 261-263), where the Greek *koine* was used as official language, although Aramaic or Arabic were spoken by the local population.

The situation in Mesopotamia is presented next (p. 264-276), where early innovations of East Aramaic are described first, without referring to the early

role of Adiabene in the creation of the Peshitta and the possible impact of its West Aramaic targumic background. Babylonian Aramaic of the Seleucid-Parthian period is examined on the basis of the Aramaic incantation text in cuneiform script from Uruk/Warka, without referring to the linguistic study of M.J. Geller (*JEOL* 35-36 [1997-2000] 127-146). Ashur, Hatra, and smaller centres of eastern Mesopotamia are presented next (p. 271-276) with their large number of Aramaic inscriptions, especially from Hatra, where some 600 epigraphs and graffiti have been unearthed. They bear dates between 44 B.C. and 238 A.D., although their overwhelming number must go back to the 2nd century A.D. and the first half of the 3rd century. Distinctive innovations are listed by the Author, who thinks that Hatraean Aramaic was closer to the vernacular than some other dialects. This chapter ends with an evaluation of the Aramaic linguistic heritage in post-Achaemenid Iran, represented mainly by the employ of Aramaic heterograms.

Chapter 6 deals with the West Aramaic of the Byzantine age, spoken in the late antique Palestine (p. 281-329), an appellation which goes back to the British mandate after World War I and includes Judaea, Samaria, Galilee, and Transjordan. The Author thus presents the three Aramaic written languages of the region: Jewish Palestinian Aramaic, Samaritan Aramaic, and Syropalestinian or Christian Palestinian Aramaic. Jewish Palestinian Aramaic is represented by a number of inscriptions and, to some degree, by the language of Targum Pseudo-Jonathan or Yerushalmi I, of the Fragment Targum or Yerushalmi II, of the *Codex Neofiti I*, whose basic idiom may go back to the 4th/5th century A.D., and of the Aramaic portions in Talmud Yerushalmi and in the Tosefta. As the Author rightly stresses (p. 301), the Cairo Genizah fragments, datable between the 8th and 14th centuries A.D., offer the most reliable texts, often misshaped later by successive copies and the influence of the East Aramaic language spread through the Babylonian Talmud. The reviewer thinks that a warning is useful here against the false opinion that *Codex Neofiti I* preserves the language of Jesus' time.

Having characterized the Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Targumim, the Author deals with Samaritan Aramaic (p. 310-317). The written language is probably based on an older West Aramaic dialect and betrays little impact of the Official Aramaic of the Achaemenid period. Beside the Samaritan Targum to the Pentateuch and a few inscriptions, there is the important midrashic and poetic work *Memar Marqa* or *Tibat Marqe*, as well as some other writings. Their language is briefly characterized by the Author who deals thereafter with Syropalestinian (p. 317-326), which is a Palestinian dialect written in Classical Syriac script, used by Christians. M. Sokoloff's two volumes obviously reached the Author too late to be used,

viz. *A Dictionary of Christian Palestinian Aramaic* (OLA 234; Leuven 2014) and *Texts of Various Contents in Christian Palestinian Aramaic* (OLA 235; Leuven 2014), planned to be used together with the dictionary. Presenting this dialect as Christian, H. Gzella seems to forget that there was only a handful of Christian speakers of Aramaic in Palestine before the Byzantine period. Not a single fragment of an Aramaic version of the Gospels has been found, while the earliest remains of Syropalestinian texts date from the 5th century A.D. Since their language is closely related to Jewish Palestinian Aramaic, one can assume that this dialect was spoken by Jews living in Judaea who had embraced Christianity, often forced to do so by the circumstances prevalent under Byzantine rule. The Syropalestinian translation of selected biblical passages was designed first for them (cf. *OLA* 230, p. 185-208). The linguistic characteristics are presented by the Author, who deals thereafter with the use of Aramaic, Greek, and Arabic among Palestinian Christians. One should recall here that some of them, living in the Negeb, were converted Nabataeans, while some Judaeans were in reality descendants of Idumaeans converted to Judaism.

Chapter 7 deals with East Aramaic in late antique Syria and Mesopotamia (p. 330-381). The Author rightly stresses that Neo-Aramaic dialects, currently described by various scholars, still require a rigorously diachronic study before one could present a solid synthesis on East Aramaic. Its condition in late Antiquity can be described at present on basis of manuscripts copied by generations of scribes, but the most reliable sources are provided by a sizeable corpus of Jewish, Mandaic, and Christian magic bowls and amulets. A major linguistic innovation, recorded by the Author, is the emphatic state /ē/ of the masculine plural instead of the West Aramaic /-ayyā/. The reviewer could add here that this ending /ē/ occurs also in later Palmyrene inscriptions, what shows that the frontier between East and West Aramaic can be fluid. A second major innovation is the regular Babylonian use of the /l-/ prefix of the imperfect 3rd pers. masc., while /n-/ is the normal prefix in Classical Syriac. Besides, the 3rd pers. masc. sing. possessive suffix with vocalic bases is /-ayhī/, monophthongized into /-ēhi/, instead of /-awhī/ in West Aramaic and in Syriac. Still other changes are listed by the Author before examining the relation of Aramaic, Greek, and Iranian in a historical perspective. Particular dialects are presented in the following sections.

Jewish Babylonian Aramaic is examined in the first place (p. 348-359). A massive literature appeared with the redaction of the Babylonian Talmud, with the later Geonic literature, and with the numerous magical texts. However, the situation is complicated and several regional dialects seem to be involved. The reviewer could add the problem created by the Yemenite copies

of the Babylonian Talmud, without mentioning the errors, the changes, and the additions of its later European copies. Concerning the magic bowls and amulets, the Author means that their use for linguistic purposes requires great care, because research in this area is still quite recent (p. 350). However, the reviewer thinks that their use is an inescapable way to tangle the problem, the fragments of the Cairo Genizah providing the other, quite reliable source. Some of these fragments predate the year 1000 and may even date from the 9th century A.D., bringing us within a century of the completion of the Babylonian Talmud. True, most Genizah fragments cover only individual pages, but this might suffice for linguistic considerations. The Targums Onqelos and Jonathan present their own problems, already recorded above. The Author does not hesitate to list some linguistic features of the Babylonian Talmud and even records evident linguistic variations, so far unresolved or controversial.

Classical Mandaic is presented next (p. 359-366). This is certainly an East Aramaic dialect (cf. *OLA* 230, p. 209-266), whose speakers seem to have migrated to southern Mesopotamia from an area close to the Zagros, even if the Author still seems to admit the possibility of their Palestinian origin (p. 366). The third major literary tradition of East Aramaic is Classical Syriac (p. 366-379), which is a standardized literary language with a few dialectal peculiarities. Instead, two separate scribal and reading traditions of Syriac appeared after the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. The richness of Syriac literature and the firm scribal traditions of Syriac are briefly presented in the last section of the chapter (p. 374-379; cf. *OLA* 230, p. 34-88). It is followed by an Epilogue of the whole work (p. 382-390), in which the Author deals with the relations between history and internal classification of the language varieties, and between spoken and written language. The question of language contact in multilingual ambient is once again raised at the end.

This excellent presentation of the history of the Aramaic language is completed by a bibliography (p. 391-429), an index of modern authors (p. 430-435), an index of subjects (p. 436-444), and a list of sources quoted (p. 445-451).

Notwithstanding its dense linguistic contents, the book under review is written fluently in a very accessible language. It offers a valuable, first-hand overview of the Aramaic language, dialects, and records from the beginning of the first millennium B.C. to the advent of Islam. It aims at a larger group of readers, either dealing with the history or the languages of the biblical world, or interested in Semitic or Afro-Asiatic linguistics, or confronted with linguistics in general. The work deserves a close attention of these groups of potential readers, but its spreading will be unfortunately hampered by the exorbitant price of the book, that nothing seems to justify.