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Aramaic Expressions in the New Testament

The language spoken by Jesus and his disciples in their daily lives was not Hebrew, Greek, or Latin but Aramaic (pronounced air´uh-may´ik), the Semitic language originally associated with the Arameans of northern Syria. The latter are said to be among the ancestors of Abraham (Gen. 28:2–5; Deut. 26:5) but Aramaic does not become significant as a biblical language until late in the Old Testament period. It appears to have developed the ninth century BCE (well after the time of Abraham) and to have gained currency during the time of the Assyrian empire (eighth to fourth centuries BCE) when Aramean scribes exercised considerable influence. The language continued in widespread use in a number of dialects through the New Testament period until the Arab conquest (seventh century CE). The Dead Sea Scrolls, inscriptions, and many documents show that Aramaic was in common use during the first century CE.

Although the Old Testament is written mainly in Hebrew, a few passages are in Aramaic (Ezra 4:8–6:18; 7:12–26; Dan. 2:4–7:28; Jer. 10:10–11; Gen. 31:47); these are all assumed to be late additions to the body of Jewish Scriptures, probably composed after the return from exile.

A handful of Aramaic words and phrases occur in the New Testament. Most of these occur on the lips of Jesus, and there is a strong likelihood that oral tradition has remembered his exact words in those instances (otherwise, the Gospels, written in Greek, present translations of what Jesus or others said). In other instances, Aramaic words recall names of people or places. In one instance, Paul uses an Aramaic word (“Maranatha”) that seems a little out of place in a Greek letter written to gentiles—perhaps the word had entered Christian discourse because it had been used by Jesus or his Galilean followers.

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| Boanerges | Mark 3:17 | “Sons of Thunder” |
| talitha cum | Mark 5:41 | “Little girl, get up” |
| Corban | Mark 7:11 | “an offering to God” |
| Ephphatha | Mark 7:34 | “Be opened” |
| Bartimaeus | Mark 10:46 | “son of Timaeus” |
| Abba | Mark 14:36; Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6 | “Father” |
| Golgotha | Matthew 27:33; Mark 15:22; John 19:17 | “the place of a skull” |
| Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani? or Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani? | Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34 | “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” |
| Maranatha | 1 Corinthians 16:22 (NASB, KJV) | “Our Lord, come” |