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Summary Article: **Aramaic**
From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

(âĤmā'ĭk), language belonging to the West Semitic subdivision of the Semitic subfamily of the Afroasiatic family of languages (see Afroasiatic languages). At some point during the second millennium B.C., the Aramaeans abandoned their desert existence and settled in Syria, bringing their language, Aramaic, with them. By the beginning of the 7th cent. B.C., Aramaic had spread throughout the Fertile Crescent as a lingua franca. Still later the Persians made Aramaic one of the official languages of their empire.

After the Jews were defeated by the Babylonians in 586 B.C., they began to speak Aramaic instead of Hebrew, although they retained Hebrew as the sacred language of their religion. Although Aramaic was displaced officially in the Middle East by Greek after the coming of Alexander the Great, it held its own under Greek domination and subsequent Roman rule. Aramaic was also the language of Jesus. Following the rise of Islam in the 7th cent. A.D., however, Aramaic began to yield to Arabic, by which eventually it was virtually replaced.

In the course of its long history the Aramaic language broke up into a number of dialects, one of the most important of which was Syriac. Parts of the books of Ezra and Daniel in the Bible were written in an Aramaic dialect, as were some notable Jewish prayers, such as the kaddish. Other important documents in Aramaic include portions of the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds and the Targum Onkelos, a commentary on the Pentateuch. Nabataean (the form of Aramaic current among the Nabataean Arabs), Samaritan, and Palmyrene were other significant ancient dialects of Aramaic. Modern forms of the language (including Syriac) are still spoken today, though not by more than a few hundred thousand people scattered in the Near and Middle East.

Grammatically, Aramaic is very close to Hebrew. The Aramaic alphabet is a North Semitic script that is first attested in the 9th cent. B.C. After c.500 B.C. its use became widespread in the Middle East. Descended from the Aramaic alphabet are the Square Hebrew alphabet, which is the ancestor of modern Hebrew writing; the Nabataean, Palmyrene, and Syriac scripts; and the Arabic alphabet, among others. It is believed that the alphabetic writing systems of India and Southeast Asia also have the Aramaic script as their source.

See Rosenthal, F. , ed., *An Aramaic Handbook* (4 vol., 1967).

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