

George Lamsa's Translation

Who was George Lamsa? ...and what makes this translation so special as to be a treasured part of our library for use in Bible studies? To answer that, let's first look at the big picture.

There are no known existing original manuscripts of the Bible. But copies were made from the originals, and then copies were made from those copies, and so on. Today we do have a few ancient copies and many fragments of copies, although in general it is uncertain what generation of copies these are.

The oldest known existing copies that went with the Western church were written mostly in Hebrew for the Old Testament, and then Greek for the New Testament, (although a few copies of the Book of Matthew were found in Hebrew). So we in the Western church tend to think that the Bible was originally written in Hebrew & Greek with just a few Old Testament books written in Aramaic.

But the copies that went with the Eastern church were all written in Aramaic. It seems likely that the original manuscripts for both Old & New Testament were written in Aramaic. The Aramaic language is so similar to Hebrew that it is like comparing low German and high German, or different dialects of English. Josephus considered them so similar that he quotes Aramaic words as Hebrew, (Antiquities, III, section 10). Abraham, Isaac & Jacob spoke Aramaic. It is the same Aramaic that is spoken in American synagogues today. Jesus and the disciples spoke Aramaic, (from **Acts 6:1 in Contemporary English Version, Acts 21:40 New Living Translation**, plus a number of other verses in these, the NIV, and others).

That is why the Bibles of the church of the East are both in Aramaic and translated from ancient Aramaic manuscripts. There was but one Aramaic Bible and all Aramaic copies are identical. These Aramaic Bibles are called the "Peshitta", which means, "the original". The Aramaic language goes back to the Aramaean people of ancient Syria. These Aramaean people were the descendants of Aram, one of the sons of Shem, son of Noah, (**Genesis 10:22**).

George Lamsa, born in 1890, grew up in the Aramaic (Syrian), culture with the Aramaic language. He understood the idioms & colloquialisms of the Peshitta. He devoted many years to making an English translation of the Peshitta starting in 1916. By 1933 he published the four Gospels, and then the entire Bible in 1956. He called it the "Holy Bible from the Ancient Eastern Text", and it has the subtitle of "George M. Lamsa's Translation from the Aramaic of the Peshitta". It is commonly referred to as "George Lamsa's Translation".

This translation has a fascinating Preface and Introduction, including a side-by-side list of Aramaic words that were mistakenly copied into Hebrew as very different words, understandably so since the words look almost identical in the two languages. Then the Introduction gives a list of examples of how a Bible verse with such a change reads in the Lamsa translation compared to the King James Version. For example, **Matthew 19:24** reads, *“Again I say to you, it is easier for a rope to go through the eye of a needle...”*, not a “camel” as reads the **KJV**.

We have often heard the debate of who wrote the book of Hebrews. It is no mystery to the Church of the East. The Peshitta is clear that it was Paul, for so it is written in their ancient Aramaic manuscripts. The Lamsa translation has footnotes which clarify a few questions, such as for **John 19:20**. This is the verse that states in most translations that the sign by the cross was written in Hebrew and in Greek and in Roman (Latin). The footnote reads, *“Hebrew here refers to nationality, but the language of the inscription was Aramaic.”* This is confirmed by a few translations (such as **NIV2011** & **English Standard Version**), that read “in Aramaic, Latin and Greek”.

A most startling difference is found in **Matthew 27:46**. It is here in most translations that Jesus cries out from the cross, *“...My God, my God why have You forsaken Me?”*, from which many sermons have come. But in the Lamsa translation it reads, *“...My God, my God, for this I was spared!”*. The footnote explains, *“This was my destiny.”* He knew that he was fulfilling the type & shadow for the 1st goat of the sacrifice of the two goats on the Day of Atonement for His Body who would then walk in the role of the second goat. This is covered in detail in our Lessons 9 & 10.

The George Lamsa translation otherwise reads in a style much like that of the New King James Version. This translation is essential for those of us who move beyond questioning vague passages by exploring how other translations read. The George Lamsa Translation is often the key that unlocks the mysteries that we encounter in traditional English translations.

For more in-depth background, read “New Testament Origin” by George Lamsa and published by The Aramaic Bible Society, Inc.

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Eric & Mary Elizabeth Ellis
PO Box 400
Easton, ME 04740
ericandmaryellis@gmail.com
www.bibleconcepts.com