

# Using Aramaic to Unlock Hidden Meaning of the Gospels Through Prayer

by Mike Potter

Over the last three years, I have been using the ancient method of *Lectio Divina* to pray the scriptures. Through its four-fold movements of Reading, Reflecting, Responding and Resting I have been drawn more deeply into scripture as my awareness began to open to its meaning for me in my life today. From time to time I would come across a word or phrase that seemed out of place or did not resonate with my understanding of the rest of the passage.

I would often stay with a troubling word or phrase, pondering it and seeking its hidden meaning. Sometimes the practice of *Lectio Divina* alone would open me to the true significance of the scripture in my life. At other times I wondered if something was lost in the many translations from the original Aramaic oral tradition, to the writing of the gospels in Greek, to their translation into Latin, and their ultimate translations into English with its many styles of presentation. This is not intended to be a scholarly paper, but merely a personal account of how the Aramaic language has helped to deepen my relationship with God through scripture. It is offered as a simple tool for those who are drawn to use it.

## My First Encounter with Aramaic in Scripture

One passage that gave me pause is Matthew 6:5-6. This familiar scripture is one of the scriptural foundations of Centering Prayer, so I had occasion to reflect on it often as I presented Introduction to Centering Prayer Programs to groups.

There is one word that seemed to be used in two different ways in this passage. The word most often translated as “reward” in Matthew 6:5 and again in Matthew 6:6 seemed to have two different meanings.<sup>1</sup> In the first case it was used to refer to what those who pray publicly with great fanfare receive: praise and admiration from those around them. It is implied that they received what they bargained for. They set out to get affection and esteem (the false self’s program for happiness which can never completely satisfy one’s longings) and that is what they received in return. It is an exchange: if I do this, then I’ll get that. It’s compensation, payment for services rendered.

In the second case, the word is used to show what God bestows on one who seeks God in the silence of one’s “private room”, such as in Centering Prayer. This did not seem to me to be compensatory: a reward for praying well. Surely in this case the word “reward” must have an alternate meaning than its use in verse 5 and our common use of the term. In my heart, I felt that whatever I received from God was pure gift and not

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<sup>1</sup> “<sup>5</sup>And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. <sup>6</sup>But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (NRSV)

conditioned on anything from me other than my intention to be receptive to God's presence and action in that moment, and without any expectations. So this was like a little grain of sand in my contemplative soup. I didn't do anything further about it until I received the tools to do so.

For Christmas 2004, my mother gave me a set of audio recordings by Neil Douglas-Klotz called "Original Prayer – Teachings and Meditations on the Aramaic Words of Jesus" (Sounds True, 2000). On listening to these recordings, I became fascinated with the Aramaic language and the possibility that it brought of unlocking some of the hidden meaning in the scriptures. I also read this author's book, "The Hidden Gospel – Decoding the Spiritual Message of the Aramaic Jesus" (Quest Books, 1999). These resources opened me to an entirely new way of approaching the gospels.

First of all, I learned that the mind of a Semitic language speaker inherently divides and makes sense of reality differently than a Greek or Latin speaker.<sup>2</sup> Second, a single word in Aramaic can often have several seemingly different meanings, several or possibly all of which may apply in a given context depending on the speaker's intention and the capacity of the listener to comprehend what is being said.<sup>3</sup> Finally, as with Hebrew and other Semitic texts, the construction of a word is based on a very systematic method that begins with the root of the word. This "root word" often gives the base meaning for the word and allows one to differentiate it from words which would appear to convey the same meaning.

I then acquired a Syriac grammar<sup>4</sup> so that I could learn the letters of the alphabet and the basic sentence structure. I chose Syriac because it is a dialect of Aramaic for which there are many resources. I also acquired a good Syriac dictionary<sup>5</sup> and a copy of The Peshitta, the Syriac Bible that dates to the 4<sup>th</sup> Century CE<sup>6</sup>. I later discovered a free online resource for researching the Aramaic New Testament at <http://peshitta.org><sup>7</sup>.

I did not pursue the language study very long, because I discerned that my purpose in using these tools was to access those words and phrases that troubled me in my regular scripture reading and not to become a scholar or to learn another language. Once I became somewhat proficient in recognizing words and basic sentence structure, and with these resources at hand, I returned to my initial passage, Matthew 6:5-6.

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<sup>2</sup> Douglas-Klotz notes, "The Western mind divides cosmology, that is, the way we view our place in the universe, from psychology, the way we view our inner life. It considers neither to be the stuff of historical or scientific facts. The Semitic language view differs entirely from the Western, reflecting the notion that there is a single community that includes everything from planets to the voices of the subconscious." The Hidden Gospel by Neil Douglas-Klotz (Quest Books, 1999) at p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> Introduction to Syriac by W. M. Thackston (IBEX Publishers, 1999)

<sup>5</sup> Compendious Syriac Dictionary by J. Payne Smith (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999)

<sup>6</sup> While there is no proof of the supremacy of this translation over the original Greek, and none is claimed here, it seems to me to be very possible that the Peshitta is an accurate rendition of the gospels in the language of a Semitic people who were relatively close to the oral traditions on which the Greek gospels were based, and I believe that it is a reliable resource for the purpose of researching the gospels.

<sup>7</sup> This site is no longer available. A comparable site is <http://dukhrana.com/peshitta/> (Ed. 11/10/07)

I found that the Aramaic word translated as “reward” in Matthew 6:5 is ܐܘܡܝܢ, which means “reward, recompense, pay” (all underlining is my emphasis). The root of this word is ܝܢ, which means “prolonged, long, patient, hire.” This is fitting, since those who pray in public splendor have their intent fixed on how they are getting what they intended: affection and esteem from those around them.

The Aramaic word translated as “reward” in Matthew 6:6, however, is an entirely different word with a different root. This word is ܘܥܝܢܐ, which also means recompense. But the root of this word, ܥܝܢܐ, yields an insight that is not apparent on the surface. It means “spring up, recompense”. As I explored this further, I pondered alternate meanings and derivatives in Payne’s Compendious Syriac Dictionary, which included “to bloom, flourish”. Using the monastic method of *Lectio Divina*<sup>8</sup>, I stayed with these meanings and pondered them in the context of Centering Prayer, moving into silence, then back to reading, then silence, then reflecting, as the words began to penetrate my very being. It then occurred to me that the Fruits of the Spirit listed by St. Paul in Galatians 5:22-23 (charity, joy, peace, meekness, faithfulness, gentleness, goodness, long-suffering and self-control) are what bloom in one’s life, which then flourish with the Seven Gifts of the Spirit listed in Isaiah 11:2 (wisdom and understanding, counsel and fortitude, knowledge and fear of the Lord, and piety) as the result of praying in secret in the manner described by Jesus in Matthew 6:6. It is pure gift which is bestowed, in God’s time and in God’s way, on one who consents, in silence and solitude, to God’s presence and action within.

This simple exercise opened me to a depth of meaning that was not available by applying customary Western logic and analysis to this scripture. The fluidity and depth of the Aramaic language, which was the language that Jesus used in his teachings, in the context of the Semitic mindset<sup>9</sup>, allowed me to let go of restrictive meanings and open to hues and shades which brought out a deeper connection between scripture and my understanding of Centering Prayer.

### **My Second Encounter with Aramaic in Scripture**

My next opportunity to apply the Aramaic language in interpreting scripture came during a retreat of the Episcopal clergy of West Tennessee. As part of a presentation on The Method of *Lectio Divina*, we used John 20:19-23<sup>10</sup>, the gospel reading for the following Sunday, as our passage for *Lectio Divina* practice. After reflecting on the

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<sup>8</sup> The monastic method of *Lectio Divina* enters the four movements (Reading, Reflecting, Responding, and Resting) at any point and then moves among them effortlessly as the Spirit directs.

<sup>9</sup> See Footnote 2 above.

<sup>10</sup> “<sup>9</sup>When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.”<sup>20</sup> After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.<sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”<sup>22</sup> When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.<sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (NRSV)

passage for some time, one of the priests remarked “I wonder if the Aramaic word for ‘locked’ in verse 19 has the same meaning as the word “retained” in verse 23?”

After the session was over, I used a nearby computer to look up the passage on the PESHITTA.ORG website<sup>11</sup>. I discovered that the same Aramaic word, ܠܘܨܩܐ, was used in both verses. This word and its root, ܠܘܨܩ, both mean “close”. In this context, the disciples had closed themselves off from “the Jews” out of fear. Jesus teaches them forgiveness, which is the ultimate acceptance (i.e., opening), and that they had the authority to “retain” sins by not forgiving them, the ultimate non-acceptance (i.e., being closed off from the community).

I shared this with the priest who raised the question. He was very pleased to learn this. It confirmed the insight that had arisen in his mind, but which he had not been able to articulate. The Aramaic helped us both bridge the limitations of the English language and our customary usage of these terms.

### **Holding Words Lightly**

Words are at best an approximation of the thought behind them. They are filtered by the writer/speaker’s own prejudices and perceptions. They are also filtered by the reader/listener’s prejudices and perceptions. Fortunately, we have the Holy Spirit, which is present “in and among us”, to help us bridge any gaps in our respective experiences and points of view, to make the necessary connections, and to bring us to a deepening awareness of the Word of God.

In the first example above, the same word was used to express two different meanings. In the second example, two different words were used to express the same essential meaning. Therefore, we cannot hold on too tightly to fixed ways of interpretation and must be open to the leadings of the Spirit as we hold words lightly and truly listen, in silence, for the movement of the Spirit in, behind and through the words, opening us to the Mystery of the Word of God.

### **An Example of Using Aramaic in Reading Scripture**

The following exercise can be done by anyone with a computer and an internet connection.<sup>12</sup> It does not require any knowledge of Aramaic or any other foreign language. This method can be applied to any word or phrase that troubles you in your scriptural reading. This particular resource is limited to the gospels.

**John 3:3** – “*Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.*” (NRSV)

“... born again ...” (KJV)

STEP 1 – Go to <http://dukhrana.com/peshitta/>

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<sup>11</sup> This site is no longer available. A comparable site is <http://dukhrana.com/peshitta/> (Ed. 11/10/07)

<sup>12</sup> Internet Research Example Updated 11/10/07

STEP 2 – In the box “Show verses from:” select John 3 in the drop-down panel.

STEP 3 – Check the box “Interlinear KJV translation”.

STEP 4 – Click on “Show me the verses!”

STEP 5 – Scroll down to John 3:3. The Aramaic verse is presented just above the English translation. Note that in Aramaic, the words are read right-to-left.

STEP 6 – Click on “(analyze)” at the end of the Aramaic verse. A new window will open with the selected Aramaic verse at the top, followed by three English translations. The Grammatical Analysis section at the bottom analyzes each Aramaic word, giving its root, category and meaning, along with other grammatical information.

STEP 7 – Scroll down the Grammatical Analysis section following the words displayed in the Meaning column, keeping the general sense and flow of the verse in mind, until you come to the meaning “head, beginning, chiefs”, which is the meaning given to the Aramaic word translated as “anew” or “again” or “from above” in the English translations. The Aramaic word in the far left column is ܘܢܝܢܘܢ and the root of this word is ܘܢܝܢ .

STEP 8 – Look up the meaning of the root of this word as follows:

1. Highlight the Aramaic root word shown in the Root column with your cursor and copy it to the clipboard.
2. Go back to the original window and click on “LEXICON” at the top of the page. This will take you to the Dukhrana Analytical Lexicon of the Syriac New Testament.
3. Paste the Aramaic word in the Search window, click on the radio button “Root”, and click “Search!”

STEP 9 – Spend some time pondering the various meanings given to see which of them presents itself as the most likely one to express the intent of the writer/speaker. In this case the following meanings are given for the use of this word as a noun: beginning, fruits; head, beginning, chiefs; chief; principality, sovereignty. For example, it may occur to you that rather than a spatial reference implied by “above”, it may mean a new spiritual beginning, a casting off of old ways of living and opening to new life. Be open to the possibility that two or more of the meanings may be taken together for a richer derivative word or thought that may be more applicable to today’s reading. For example, the word “beginning”, when considered in conjunction with the words, “head” and “chief”, may suggest that this beginning is to be a life centered in Christ as its head. The word “fruits” may help in revealing Jesus’ message of personal transformation as discussed above concerning Matthew 6:6.

STEP 8 – Return to the original text, substituting the word or words that have resonated with you. Read it again, pondering the meaning that it has for you in your life right now.

### **Conclusion**

Aramaic is a very beautiful and rich language. As the language spoken by Jesus and his followers, it holds the potential of conveying the meanings originally intended by Jesus that may have been lost or distorted as it made its way into the English language of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Therefore, there is great value in using it as one of the tools to unlock the true meaning of scripture.

We must remember, however, that language is simply a tool of communication among human beings and that even if we could be confident that the words in the Aramaic scripture accurately represent the original words of Jesus, we must still be open to the leadings of Holy Spirit in discerning the true meaning of those words in our life today.

(8/6/05)