Chapter 3--Aramaism:
What Are They and Why Are They Important?¹

Definition

In chapter two we discussed several issues related to the history and development of Aramaic. Near the end of the chapter, I proposed two earlier phases or stages of the development of the Aramaic language, in order to accommodate Aramaic terms and/or Aramaism that we may find within the earlier sections of the text of the Old Testament. Before we proceed, I would like to pause and discuss this term, “Aramaism,” in that this term is a key term in the remainder of this work. Thus a definition at this point is fitting.

Simply stated, an Aramaism is:

...an idiom of the Aramaic.²

Merriam-Webster.com elaborates a bit more and defines “Aramaism” as follows:

...a characteristic feature of Aramaic occurring in another language.³

These Aramaic characteristics may be manifested in either a lexical or grammatical form. Further, these Aramaic characteristics may affect the root or the stem of the word, the entire word, or the grammar in which a word is found. Lastly, these words may have entered another language through direct contact with the target language being studied (in our case, the Hebrew language) or via another linguistic vehicle (e.g.—Akkadian or Persian).⁴

In 1966, Max Wagner, a German Near Eastern Semitic scholar produced a work entitled Die Lexikalischen und Grammatikalischen Aramaismen im Alttestamentlichen Hebräisch⁵,⁶. In this German work, Wagner presents a complete picture (at that time) of

¹ This chapter is the third chapter of the PhD thesis of Lee Carl Finley which was submitted to the doctoral committee of Reformation International Theological Seminary (RITS), of Fellsmere, FL, for consideration. The thesis was entitled: Aramaic: Its History, Development and Relationship to Biblical Hebrew, from Antiquity to the time of the Israelite Monarchy. The thesis was submitted to RITS for approval in September 2012 and was approved by the doctoral committee in October 2012.
⁴ these above-listed variations of Aramaic characteristics can be seen in the work by Max Wagner, Die Lexikalischen und Grammatikalischen Aramaismen im Alttestamentlichen Hebräisch (Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann. 1966) 139ff.
⁵ that is, “The Lexical and Grammatical Aramaisms in the Old Testament Hebrew” (translation mine--lcf)
⁶ Max Wagner, Die Lexikalischen und Grammatikalischen Aramaismen im Alttestamentlichen Hebräisch
the scope of what was (then) considered an Aramaic influence found in the Old Testament. He did this in the following manner. In Chapter One, he examines various lexical Aramaisms, that is, words that were considered to have come from or to have been derived from Aramaic. In Chapter 2, he presents “grammatical Aramaisms”, that is, various grammatical constructions that were found in the Old Testament that were considered as Aramaic-derived or as displaying Aramaic characteristics or influence.

In chapter three of this work Wagner has an analysis7 (auswertung) of the distribution of the Aramaic language in the pages of the Old Testament. His first section of Chapter Three is entitled: “Die Häufigkeit Der Aramaismen im AT”8 (The Frequency9 of Aramaisms in the Old Testament). Here Wagner lists the frequency of each of the categories that I have mentioned above: the use of whole words, words with Aramaic stems or roots and words that are also associated with another language (eg--Akkadian/Persian/Greek). We will examine this frequency momentarily. At present, it is clear from Wagner’s work that there are different types of lexical forms and grammatical/syntactical constructions that can be legitimately considered “Aramaisms” within the pages of the Old Testament.

Near the same time, another author, Robert Gordis, was writing a commentary on the book of Job, The Book of God and Man10. On pages 161-163, after discussing possible Arabisms within the text, Gordis turns to the matter of Aramaisms within the book of Job. He begins by discussing the related nature and history of Aramaic and Hebrew11. Having set the historical relationship between the two languages, Gordis states the following:

It is...methodologically unsound to lump all Aramaisms together, and on that basis to assign a later date to the literary documents in which they occur.

(Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann. 1966)
7 for translation purposes, the following website was consulted for German-English translation: http://dict.tu-chemnitz.de/
8 that is, “Alte Testament”, or, Old Testament.
9 or “Abundance”
11 the expanded quote is provided here:

“Even more frequent are the so-called Aramaisms in Job. Here the situation is more complex because of the close relationship of the two languages and the extensive contacts of the Hebrews with Aramaic at several periods of history. This has often been overlooked or misunderstood. Not only are Hebrew and Aramaic both Semitic languages, but they belong to the same sub-group of North-West Semitic, so that the resemblances are closer than between any other two languages in the Semitic family. The relationship between the Hebrews and the Aramaic-speaking peoples of Mesopotamia and Syria existed throughout the history of the Hebrew nation. According to the Bible, Jacob’s father-in-law Laban, with whom he lived twenty years, spoke Aramaic (Gen. 31:47). Throughout the First Temple period, the Aramean kingdoms and Israel shared a common border and stood in close contact, friendly or hostile, with one another. During the Babylonian Exile and in the post-Exilic period, Aramaic became the lingua franca, universally used for government and business throughout the Middle East.... The decrees from the Persian government archives cited in the book of Ezra are written in Aramaic. So are the letters sent to the Persian governor Bagoas in Jerusalem by the Jewish military colony at Elephantine on the upper Nile, as indeed are all the extant remains of that fascinating outpost of Jewish life. These documents and other inscriptions testify to the extensive use of Aramaic throughout the Middle East during the fifth century B.C.E., if not earlier. Ultimately, Aramaic pre-empted the position of Hebrew in the Jewish of the Second Temple, becoming the language of law, literary composition, and ordinary conversation.” (Gordis, 1965, 161-162).
Actually, the Aramaisms in biblical Hebrew are to be subsumed under four distinct categories: (1) examples of the North-West Semitic vocabulary and usage indigenous to both Aramaic and Hebrew, at times frequent in Aramaic but remaining rare (or poetic) in Hebrew (such forms are generally early and cannot be invoked for a late date); (2) earlier Hebrew borrowing from nearby Aramaic during the pre-Exilic period, especially in the heyday of the Syrian kingdom; (3) later Hebrew borrowings during the Babylonian Exile and the post-Exilic period; (4) idioms and morphological forms introduced into Hebrew and patterned after Aramaic usage, with which the Hebrew writer or speaker was familiar.

Rather than merely finding a lexical or grammatical form within the Old Testament that could be linked to Aramaic and calling it an Aramaism, Gordis attempts to classify the type of Aramaic feature that is under consideration, giving expression to its possible source of origin and usage in the Hebrew scriptures. Further, Gordis identifies the possibility of the Hebrew text containing pre-exilic Aramaisms (points 1 and 2 above).

In 1968 and again in 2003 Avi Hurvitz commented upon the matter of Aramaisms within the Hebrew scriptures. And like Gordis, he sets his discussion of Aramaisms within the shared framework of a common linguistic and cultural heritage between the two languages. However, unlike Gordis, Hurvitz is driven to note the nature and origin of the

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12 at this point Gordis inserts an endnote, giving the following information in support of point 1:
As, e.g., 'athah, “come” (Deut. 33:2; Mic. 4:8; Jer. 3:22; often in Deutero-Isaiah and Job), the *Lahmed* accusative, as e.g., after 'habh (Lev. 19:18,34; II Sam. 3:30) of *harag* (II Sam. 3:30; See BDB, p. 512a); *malal*, “speak” (Gen. 21:7).

13 at this point Gordis inserts an endnote, giving the following information in support of point 2:
As, e.g., ra‘ah “chase, desire,” parallel to *radaph* (Hos. 12:2).

14 at this point Gordis inserts an endnote, giving the following information in support of point 3:
Cf. such use as *bar*, “son” (Prov. 31:2).

15 at this point Gordis inserts an endnote, giving the following information in support of point 4:
Cf. such idioms as *‘im* ‘al hammelekh tobh (Esther 7:3; cf. Ezra 5:17), as against the classical Hebrew phrase *tobh b‘einei* (I Sam. 29:6), and the use of *in* as the masc. plur. ending, as in Prov. 31:3; Job 4:2; 24:22; 31:10; Dan. 12:13. Yet this indubitably Aramaic ending occurs in such earlier texts as Judg. 5:10; Mic. 3:12; I Kings 11:33; II Kings 11:13; Ezek. 4:9; 26:18.

16 Hurvitz’ comments regarding the interrelationship between Hebrew and Aramaic are as follows:
“One of the most interesting chapters in the linguistic history of Ancient Israel is that of the interrelationship between BH and Aramaic, as known to us from the various dialects current in and around Palestine. For almost 2000 years the two languages were in use side by side; and naturally, this situation engendered mutual influences which affected their history and development” (Hurvitz, 2003, 24).

And again:
“The biblical tradition, as preserved in both narrative and historiographical compositions, points to a continuous contact between the two languages throughout the entire era—from ‘the Patriarchal Period’ (whose historicity and chronological background are, of course a matter of debate) through to the Restoration and the establishment of the Second Temple. While much detail pertaining to these contacts remains unclear, especially in the earlier periods, sufficient information appears in the biblical texts to enable us to sketch the linguistic picture in general outline” (Hurvitz, 2003, 24-25).

After quoting several passages where a relationship between Aramaic and Hebrew is demonstrated (i.e.—Gen. 31.47; II Kings 18.26-27; Ezr. 4.6-7; Neh. 13.23-24), Hurvitz makes the following comment:
“The picture which emerges from the biblical descriptions cited above is evidently partial and fragmentary. Many details are lacking and many questions remain unanswered. Nevertheless, we are in a position to establish the general framework in which the various linguistic forces operated; it is even
Aramaicisms, due, in part, to his concern over the misuse of Aramaic as an a priori “late date” dating mechanism. Thus, while not denying that some Aramaicisms may be found that originate from the exilic/post-exilic period, Hurvitz has attempted to identify various types of Aramaicisms that may be found, that may have a pre-exilic origin. In so doing, Hurvitz identifies at least four distinct groups or types of Aramaicisms in the word of God. The first type of Aramaism he identifies could also be called an “Archaism”, that is, an ancient form, possibly common to both Aramaic and Hebrew, that has survived in older poetry sections:

One group of so-called ‘Aramaisms” that should not necessarily be categorized as late are lexical items and grammatical forms which appear in poems contained in the Pentateuch and the Former Prophets--poems which are widely assigned to the earliest biblical period...It is possible, then, that these supposed ‘Aramaisms’ are not taken over from Aramaic but, rather, ‘Archaisms’--that is, ancient linguistic elements which in antiquity were part of the common legacy of Hebrew and Aramaic, except that in Hebrew (as opposed to Aramaic) these ‘Archaisms’ simply disappeared from regular usage and survived only in the conservative language of biblical poetry.

The second type of Aramaism Hurvitz identifies is related to a Northern Israelian dialect that may be found in the northern areas of Israel that bordered upon the boundaries of their Aramaic-speaking neighbors to the north:

possible to set up several historical milestones which make a chronological orientation possible (see Lemaire 1988 10-13):1. The first contacts between Hebrew and Aramaic are found at the dawn of the history of the people of Israel, a period represented in the biblical tradition by ‘the patriarchal stories’ in the book of Genesis. 2. At the time of Sennacherib’s siege of Jerusalem (700 BCE) the knowledge of Aramaic in Judah was limited to the upper classes. The common people, it would seem, neither spoke nor wrote Aramaic. 3. In the period of the Restoration, when Aramaic became the dominant language throughout the Persian empire, the status of Hebrew was undermined. According to the testimony of the book of Nehemiah, already at that time certain sectors of the Jewish population were unable to speak proper Hebrew. This, then, is the linguistic background that emerges from the descriptions found in the biblical literary tradition” (Hurvitz, 2003, 27).

17 Note Hurvitz’ words at this point:

“The study of Aramaic has achieved impressive results in the last few decades. The discovery of new texts, reflecting previously undocumented stages in the history of Aramaic, has paved the way for a more profound knowledge of the Aramaic dialects and their linguistic history. Naturally, this development directly illuminates the issue of ‘Aramaisms’ within BH (cf. Kutscher 1970: 358). For our purposes, it is particularly important to note here the discovery of Aramaic inscriptions dated as early as the beginning of the first millennium BCE--that is, the first Temple period. Such findings have completely overturned the older view that every ‘Aramaism’ is necessarily indicative of the late biblical era. This mistaken view, which--as already noted--was especially common among nineteenth-century scholars, was fostered by the absence of written sources testifying to the vitality of Aramaic in the early biblical period. However, since it has become clear from these new sources that Aramaic was widespread and enjoyed high prestige already in the pre-exilic period, it could no longer be maintained that the ‘Aramaisms’ encountered in BH must reflect later linguistic usage.” (Hurvitz, 2003, 30).

18 Hurvitz, 2003, 30.
A second group of ‘Aramaisms’ which should not be attributed uncritically to the period of LBH\(^{19}\) is found in texts (thought) to have preserved dialectical usages. These are linguistic elements which were apparently current, perhaps only in popular speech or in local idioms within restricted geographical districts of Palestine alongside the SBH\(^{20}\) of the First Temple period. ...from the Samaria Ostraca we learn about the existence of a local dialect in the Northern Kingdom which deviates in some significant features from ‘the Jerusalem standard’... In addition to this epigraphic data, there are some indications in the Bible which suggest a certain measure of heterogeneity in both pronunciation of Hebrew and its vocabulary.\(^{21}\)

The third type of Aramaism that Hurvitz identifies is related to texts or passages that deal with an event/happening that took place in an Aramaic-type setting:

A third group of ‘Aramaisms’, to whose appearance in the Hebrew Bible no chronological dimension need necessarily be attributed, is documented in texts describing foreign characters and/or events connected to a non-Israelite background.\(^{22}\)\(^{23}\)

Lastly, Hurvitz identifies certain Aramaisms related to the Wisdom Literature genre:

Finally, there is a fourth group of ‘Aramaisms’, connected with Wisdom Literature....certain compositions within biblical Wisdom Literature (Job, Proverbs) may have absorbed words and forms from Wisdom Literature whose language was ancient Aramaic. In other words, here again the existence of ‘Aramaisms’ is not in itself proof of lateness.\(^{24}\)

Hurvitz follows this discussion with his rationale for identifying Aramaisms that can be genuinely identified as late:

...the three basic conditions required for determining the lateness of an ‘Aramaisms’: (1) the biblical documentation of the ‘Aramaisms’ must be characteristic of distinctively late biblical texts; (2) it must be demonstrated that the ‘Aramaisms’ deviates from standard language usage in the earlier books of the Old Testament; and (3) the ‘Aramaisms” must be shown to have enjoyed widespread usage and vitality in the Aramaic dialects in which it presumably originated.\(^{25}\)

Overall, Hurvitz’ methodology and reasoning appears solid as regards to pre-exilic and post-exilic (or late) Aramaisms. Thus, we have the foundation for the types of Aramaisms may be found in both post- and pre-exilic literature of the Bible.

\(^{19}\) that is, Late Biblical Hebrew--lcf  
\(^{20}\) that is, Standard Biblical Hebrew--lcf  
\(^{21}\) Hurvitz, 2003, 30.  
\(^{22}\) Hurvitz, 2003, 31-32.  
\(^{23}\) Hurvitz then illustrates this point from II Kgs 6.8-19  
\(^{24}\) Hurvitz, 2003, 33.  
\(^{25}\) Hurvitz, 2003, 35.
But this is not the end of the matter. Gary Rendsburg, Professor at Rutgers University, has recently coined the phrase “Aramaic-like feature” to refer to various Aramaic-derived features from the Hebrew text. In an article entitled Hurvitz Redux: On the Continued Scholarly Inattention to a Simple Principle of Hebrew Philology, Rendsburg explains his rationale for so doing:

In 1968 Avi Hurvitz wrote a programmatic article on the subject of Aramaisms in BH (Hurvitz 1968). Therein he noted that not every form or lexeme which at first glance looks like an Aramaism can automatically be used to date a specific biblical text to the Persian period and beyond. Clearly, as Hurvitz noted, there is a great increase in the number of Aramaic features in BH during the Persian period (late sixth through to late fourth centuries BCE), as even a surface reading of such books as Esther, Ezra–Nehemiah, and Chronicles demonstrates. But as he also noted, Aramaic (or perhaps better, Aramaic-like) features “appear sporadically in earlier texts of the Bible as well” (Hurvitz 1968: 234).

To these features, that “appear sporadically in earlier texts of the Bible” Rendsburg has given the name “Aramaic-like feature”. He does so to more easily identify those elements that may be pre-exilic as opposed to those elements that are truly post-exilic (for which he reserves the term “Aramaism”). In identifying these “Aramaic-like features” Rendsburg follows Hurvitz in his four types of early Aramaisms that can be identified in the Old Testament. To this Rendsburg adds three more:

In addition to Hurvitz’s four categories, I would posit the following additional three contexts in which Aramaic-like features may appear:

(e) In addition to the ‘obvious’ cases in category (c) above, sometimes we encounter a cluster of Aramaic-like features in compositions which do not disclose a northern setting per se, but which are to be explained as IH texts nonetheless....Moreover, with no overriding Persian-period evidence in such texts, one should assume a pre-exilic date for these compositions.
(f) Instances of addressee-switching, that is to say, prophetic speeches to the foreign nations, especially those which spoke Aramaic, which in classical prophetic times, the eighth–sixth centuries BCE included not only Aram, but also Assyria and Babylonia.
(g) Occasional instances in which lexemes more characteristic of Aramaic than of Hebrew are invoked by authors for the purposes of alliteration, especially in prose texts—for in poetic texts we might have merely another case of category (a) above.

Here we find that Rendsburg is using the phrase “Aramaic-like feature” to refer to an Aramaism that is “pre-exilic,” that is, prior to the deportation of the Jewish people to Babylon. He states that he reserves the term “Aramaism” for any feature that is found in a text that is post-exilic. One would also assume, from his rationale, that Rendsburg would


27 Rendsburg, 2011, 3-4.
also use the term for an exilic document as well, although he does not directly so state.

In any case, what are we to make of this phrase, “Aramaic-like feature”? It seems that Rendsburg is so using this terminology to demonstrate that there are Aramaisms found throughout the Old Testament, within a time frame that is both post- and pre-exilic. And it is this latter period that Rendsburg is defending by use of the phrase “Aramaic-like features.” And while I concur, that there are valid Aramaisms found within the earliest portions of the Old Testament, I hesitate in so using this new terminology for the following reasons:

--first, while I agree, that historically there have been “chronological” abuses related to the term “Aramaism,” this term “Aramaism” does aptly describe that which is found in the text of the Old Testament—a term that describes a lexical or grammatical feature that has its origin and/or use from the Aramaic language. The term Aramaism, in and of itself, does not carry chronological connotations.

--second, Avi Hurvitz, in revisiting his original work in 2003, from whence Rendsburg had derived his “Aramaic-like feature” concept, does not utilize the term. Hurvitz, in an article entitled “Hebrew and Aramaic in the Biblical Period: The Problem of ‘Aramaisms’ in linguistic research on the Hebrew Bible” stated the following regarding the term “Aramaism”:

It clearly emerges, then, from the discussion presented above, that the term ‘Aramaism’ is polysemous and associated with a variety of phenomena, each of which constitutes a matter unto itself. Obviously, the term was coined to designate a non-Hebrew linguistic feature which was understood to have entered the language due to the (direct or indirect) influence of Aramaic—an influence invariably associated with the late biblical period. However, this definition is no longer valid. The term ‘Aramaism’, which we continue to use to this day, “is rather a philological convenience than a demonstrable fact” (G.R. Driver 1953: 38). Consequently, we have to recognize that the linguistic nature of an ‘Aramaism’ is determined by the character of the texts in which it is used, and its appearance in different writings is contingent on several factors: on the one hand, literary genre (ancient poetry, Wisdom sayings) and literary technique (deliberate imitation of a particular style); and, on the other, regional-dialectical differences (north/south) and diachronic developments

--third, in the research that I have done, I have found no other author that has utilized this terminology.

--fourth, although I am drawn to the attractiveness of Rendsburg’s defense of early Aramaisms within the Old Testament by the use of this term, it would seem

28 that is, “Aramaism = late date”
29 or any old document from this same time period, for that matter.
30 and need not! (lcf)
that the phrase “Aramaic-like feature” may be better suited for the very early (as yet undiscovered) common ancestor of both Aramaic and Hebrew. “Aramaic-like” seems to carry the connotation that an Aramaism under question may not be an Aramaism at all; it is only “Aramaic-like”. And this may not be the case at all. It may truly be an Aramaism.

Although Rendsburg’s phrase is helpful in identifying Aramaisms in his works that he sees as being pre-exilic (and I do appreciate his affirming that there are pre-exilic Aramaisms in the word of God), I prefer to err on the side of caution and continue to use the term “Aramaism” and hopefully begin to correct some of the errant thought and abuse that has gone into the “Aramaism = late date” mentality.

Thus, as we will be using the term in the remainder of this volume:

an Aramaism is a lexical, grammatical or syntactical characteristic that can be traced to the Aramaic language for its origin. This characteristic may be partial, as in the case of an Aramaic root, stem or ending, or complete, as in the case of an Aramaic word or grammatical construction being utilized within the text of the Hebrew scriptures.\[32\]

The Importance of Aramaisms in Biblical Scholarship

As can be seen from the preceding discussion, there has been a certain importance that has been assigned to Aramaic and Aramaisms over the last 150 years or so\[33\]. It was not that long ago when Aramaisms were almost uniformly associated with the Persian period of biblical history and were equated with a late date of authorship.\[34, 35\] Numerous

\[32\] definition is mine--lcf
\[33\] Aramaisms are also found in the New Testament as well. Note the following:

“Aramaic words or forms called “Aramaisms” are often pointed out in other parts of the OT; and a number of Aramaic words, expressions, or names (such as marana tha [1 Cor. 16:22], ephphatha [Mk. 7:34], talitha cumi [Mk. 5:41], Tabitha [Acts 9:36,40], Cephas [Jn. 1:42; 1 Cor 112; etc]), are recorded in the NT (LaSor, 1979, 229).”

Their importance stands out, but clearly for a different reason. This is material for a further study.

\[34\] Note the words of Gary Rendsburg at this point, in condemning such a practice:

“In the recent decades, as is well known, there has been a rush among scholars to date virtually the entire biblical canon to the Persian period. The ideological underpinnings of this movement are manifest. In my reading of this literature—from the pens of such people as Niels Peter Lemche, Thomas L. Thompson, and Keith W. Whitelam—I have been struck as to how infrequently, if ever, these individuals invoke the evidence of language. The reasons for this are clear: the linguistic evidence, in line with the above outline, contradicts the effort to shift the date of clearly pre-exilic compositions to the post-exilic period. Accordingly, those involved in this movement simply ignore the evidence. This is true not only of the aforementioned individuals, who are the most public figures in the minimalist movement, but also of others who have followed suit.” (Rendsburg, 2011, 4-5).

\[35\] this was true, not only of Aramaisms themselves, but also of the Aramaic language that is found in the books of Daniel and Ezra. For an example of such thought, see the 1929 work The Aramaic of the Old Testament, by H.H. Rowley (London: Oxford University Press). Especially note his conclusions on pp. 153ff.
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examples could be cited (indeed, many have already been alluded to). At present, I will cite only two. The first is from commentator Baruch Levine. Levine, in his commentary on the book of Numbers (Chapters 1-20) makes the following statement:

A good example of late language in the priestly materials is the term *degel* (דגל) otherwise known from Aramaic documents of the Persian period as the designation for a military unit arrayed around a fort or command post. Its occurrences are restricted to Numbers 2 and 10, in their references to the plan of the Israelite encampment and the order of the march. Usage of this term by a biblical writer strongly suggests a date for his creativity during the Persian period, beginning in the late sixth century and continuing throughout most of the fifth. It was then that such contemporary vocabulary would have been introduced into the priestly source. In this instance, we should not conclude that the texts of Numbers 2 and 10, in which this distinctive term occurs, were initially composed during the time of the Achaemenid period, only that they were redacted or adapted at that time.36

Here we find Levine stating that the material contained within the book of Numbers was redacted at a time of the Persian/Achaemenid period, simply based upon Aramaic content. He continues:

In other instances, the likelihood that a particular text from the P source was initially composed in the Persian period is much greater. A case in point is Numbers 30, which repeatedly employs the legal term, *‘issar* (רשי’ב) in the context of legislation governing the vows pronounced by Israelites. This term is basic to the entire votive system embodied in that chapter, and in no way can it be regarded as editorial. What is more, this very term has turned up in the Samaria Papyri from Wadi Daliye, dated to the third quarter of the fourth century (Cross 1985). The logical conclusion to be derived from the existence of such comparative evidence is that Numbers 30 was also composed during the fifth or fourth century, when this previously unattested term was in use. It occurs nowhere else in the Hebrew Bible but, significantly, it does occur in the Aramaic sections of Daniel--repeatedly in Daniel 6, in its final form a product of the second century.

The usage of language in dating biblical texts emerges as only one among several significant criteria relevant to this process. The language of P incorporates both early and late usage and diction but, in the last analysis, does more to suggest a relatively late date for the composition of P.37

Cleary, in the mind of Levine, the Aramaisms are part of his rationale for a later date of composition for these sections of the book of Numbers.

The second example is from the book *The Book of God and Man* by Robert Gordis. Concerning the use of Aramaisms within both the prose and poetry sections of the book of Job, Gordis makes the following comments:

...the occurrence of a few Aramaisms in a Hebrew text is insufficient to determine its age or origin. Only when we encounter a heavy concentration of words, idioms, or grammatical forms patterned on Aramaic, is it a fair presumption that the author was accustomed to thinking in Aramaic and used it freely in his daily speech. This last situation obtains in Job, where Aramaisms are plentiful both in vocabulary and in morphology.

Gordis then continues discussing Aramaisms after a brief discursus into the Hebrew of the Midrash:

The frequency of Aramaisms in Job supports the conclusion, to which other criteria also point, that Job was written in a period when Aramaic was widely used for conversation and that the author was thoroughly familiar with the language. To be sure, there are relatively fewer Aramaisms and late Hebrew locutions than in other biblical books that emanate from the same era. The reason inheres in the important distinctions in style between poetry and prose. In poetry, the author has a tendency to use exalted speech and therefore to archaize and to retain the vocabulary and forms of the classical language. Thus, even the latest of the Psalms are far freer of Aramaisms than the prose works of the post-Exilic period, like Ecclesiastes, Esther, and Chronicles. The Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit the same feature....The dialogue of Job may therefore be described as the supreme example of late biblical poetry in both style and vocabulary.

Clearly, for Gordis, Aramaic being found in the book of Job is a very important reason for dating the book of Job with a late date. And even being aware of the fact that there are fewer Aramaisms in the book, the remaining Aramaisms seemingly become even more important in the dating of this text, so much so that Gordis is bold to state: “The dialogue of Job may therefore be described as the supreme example of late biblical poetry in both style and vocabulary.”

However, recently, some scholars have begun to see that Aramaisms may not, as a matter of course, indicate a later date of composition. We have already mentioned Rutgers Professor Gary Rendsburg (2011) and Near East Semitic scholar Avi Hurvitz (2003) as proponents of this view. However, others have voiced this same concern. John E.
Hartley, in his commentary on the book of Job addresses this issue:

...(another) point that (is) used to favor the late date (is) the number of Aramaisms throughout the book,...Nevertheless, (this point is) debatable. The advance in understanding of the interplay between Aramaic and Hebrew, going back to the 9th century B.C., has shown the fallacy in dating documents late because of Aramaisms.  

In speaking regarding a disagreement that he had with the scholar/philosopher Baruch Levine (quoted above), Jacob Milgrom, in his commentary on the book of Leviticus, makes the following statement related to the practice of dating a text based upon (in whole or in part) the presence of Aramaic terms or Aramaisms:

...I no longer will accept the occurrence of Aramaisms as a (late) dating criterion.

First, we now possess Aramaic inscriptions from the Syro-Palestinian area, such as Bar Hadad, Hazael, and Zakkur, that stem from the ninth and eighth centuries B.C.E.--that is, a time preceding the composition of the priestly material in the Pentateuch.

Moreover, during this period trade and commerce between North Israel and Aramaic principalities flourished, characterized by the negotiation of reciprocal-trade agreements and the establishment of trading posts in both countries (1 Kgs 20:34, cf. Malamat 1973: 144; Bright 1981: 240-241). David and Solomon controlled Aramaic-speaking areas and established garrisons in them (2 Sam 8:6). After all, Hadadezer of Zobah and Resin of Damascus, to mention two Arameans with whom they had contact (2 Sam 8:3; 1 Kgs 11:23), assuredly did not communicate in Hebrew!

Thus the intrusion of an occasional Aramaic word into the biblical text is of no chronological significance. Only if a plethora of Aramaisms floods the text is it suspect of being a late composition and, even then, only if the Aramaisms are accompanied by characteristically late Biblical Hebrew words (details in Hurvits 1968).

And again, J. A. Thompson, in his commentary on Jeremiah, commenting on Jeremiah 10.11, the only entire Aramaic verse in the word of God outside of the books of Daniel

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47 an example of the type of mentality against which Milgrom is writing can be found in Baruch Levine’s commentary on Numbers, where, on the basis of one or two Aramaic words, Levine assigns considerable sections of Numbers a late date. Cf, p, 107ff of B. Levine, Numbers 1-20, 1993.
and Ezra, states the following:

Presumably this verse, which interrupts the flow of vv. 10, 12, 13, represents a scribal comment. It is not impossible that it was a well-known saying. That it is in Aramaic is no necessary argument for a late date, since Aramaic was widely known in western Asia and among people on Israel’s borders. Even so, it may represent a marginal note added later by an Aramaic speaker. The thought is in any case not inconsistent with Jeremiah’s outlook.49, 50

Lastly, Edwin Yamauchi, in an article in the New International Dictionary of Biblical Archeology, states the following regarding the use of the Aramaic language and Aramaisms as a dating tool:

Though some critics have claimed that the Aramaic of Ezra and especially of Dan(iel) is late, biblical Aramaic is essentially the same kind of Imperial Aramaic as that of the Elephantine documents....The Aramaic of Daniel and Ezra reveals the strong influence of Akkadian and of Persian in numerous loan words.

Some scholars have used so-called Aramaisms, that is, the use of certain Aramaic roots, idioms, noun patterns, or syntax to detect late elements in Ezek, Ps, Prov, Eccl, and S of Sol. But many of these are not indisputable Aramaisms, and others may reflect northern rather than later influences.51

Clearly, over the last several years, the pendulum has been shifting as regards the import of Aramaisms within the text of the Old Testament. The reasons for this are as follows: First, the recent archeological discoveries of the last few decades have greatly expanded our understanding of both the Aramaic language itself and its distribution in the ancient Near East as well:

The study of Aramaic has achieved impressive results in the last few decades. The discovery of new texts, reflecting previously undocumented stages in the history of Aramaic, has paved the way for a more profound knowledge of the Aramaic dialects and their linguistic history. Naturally, this development directly illuminates the issue of ‘Aramaisms’ within BH (cf. Kutscher 1970: 358). For our purposes, it is particularly important to note here the discovery of Aramaic inscriptions dated as early as the beginning of the first millennium BCE—that is, the first Temple period. Such findings have completely overturned the older view that every ‘Aramaism’ is necessarily indicative of the late biblical era.52

And:

As a result of the discoveries of the last fifty to seventy-five years, we realize that the starting point for the discussion of the phases of the Aramaic language is the

50 If the thought is not inconsistent with the flow of Jeremiah’s argument, why state that it may be a scribal gloss??--lcF
52 Hurvitz, 2003, 30.
relation of it to the Northwest branch of the Semitic languages. It emerges in history as a language only several centuries after the earliest attestation of the Arameans as a people, and its character is discerned in any given phase from a comparison with other phases of the language and with cognate Northwest Semitic languages.\(^{53}\)

Second (which is related to the first), the relationship between Hebrew and Aramaic has been coming into a new light. Hurvitz comments upon this aspect of Near East Linguistic study:

> One of the most interesting chapters in the linguistic history of Ancient Israel is that of the inter-relationship between BH and Aramaic, as known to us from the various dialects current in and around Palestine. For almost 2000 years the two languages were in use side by side; and naturally, this situation engendered mutual influences which affected their history and development.\(^{54}\)

And again,

> The biblical tradition, as preserved in both narrative and historiographical compositions, points to a continuous contact between the two languages throughout the entire era--from ‘the Patriarchal Period’ (whose historicity and chronological background are, of course a matter of debate) through to the Restoration and the establishment of the Second Temple. While much detail pertaining to these contacts remains unclear, especially in the earlier periods, sufficient information appears in the biblical texts to enable us to sketch the linguistic picture in general outline.\(^{55}\)

C.F. Burney sounded a similar call in his commentary on the book of Judges. While commenting on the song of Deborah in Judges chapter five, Burney states the following regarding the relationship and the origin of both Hebrew and Aramaic:

> ...it may be claimed that such evidence as we do possess as to the relationship between the two languages at a later period (and therefore \textit{a fortiori}, at this period) tends all in the other direction; i.e. it is more likely that, if we possessed ample evidence as to the character of the Hebrew or Canaanite\(^{56}\), and Aramaic, which were spoken at this period, we should find that both languages existed in dialectical forms exhibiting so many common characteristics that we should (at any rate in some examples) find it difficult, if not impossible, to draw a distinction between the two, and to say, “This is Hebrew (Canaanite), and this is Aramaic.”\(^{57}\)

\(^{53}\) Fitzmyer, 1997, 63.

\(^{54}\) Hurvitz, 2003, 24.

\(^{55}\) Hurvitz, 2003, 24-25

\(^{56}\) In a footnote, Burney here adds: “The fact is well recognized that Hebrew is ‘the language of Canaan’ (cf. Isa. 19:18); and that Phoenician, Moabite, etc., are examples of the same language, with dialectical variations.” Although this may be overstating the case, it does demonstrate that, for Burney, these languages were, in their earliest forms, related languages.

\(^{57}\) Burney, 1970, 173.
Third, there has been an increasing understanding that the Aramaic sections of the word of God may actually represent an earlier form of the Aramaic language—earlier than that which has been widely held for the past several decades. In 1992, the Australian periodical *Abr-Nahrain* published a supplement to their journal, regarding Qumram Aramaic. In this article, J.C. Greenwood and M. Sokoloff, while commenting regarding the dating of the Qumran Aramaic corpus, make the following comment regarding the dating of the Aramaic portions of both Daniel and Ezra:

> The dating of the composition of Daniel remains an issue of scholarly dispute, but there can be no doubt that it contains early material. The same is true for Ezra, which quotes what is surely authentic material from the Achaemenid chancellery. On the whole, the Aramaic portions of these books represents a phase of the language anterior to the third century B.C.E., the earliest date for any of the compositions discovered at Qumran.  

Thus, we can see why Aramaisms, in and of themselves, are no longer de facto indicators of a late date. As with many other characteristics of language, an Aramaism also needs to be examined individually, each within its context, to ascertain its true character and import.

**The Distribution of Aramaisms in the Old Testament**

We have discussed the nature of Aramaisms and we have also discussed their importance to the study of the Hebrew text. Lastly, I would like to mention a brief word regarding their distribution within the word of God. As mentioned above, Max Wagner compiled a comprehensive study on the distribution of Aramaisms within the word of God in the mid 1960s. Although somewhat outdated, the work is a good starting point for examining the distribution and frequency of the Aramaisms that are found in the Old Testament.

In his book, Wagner first examined various lexical Aramaisms, that is, words that were considered to have come from or to have been derived from Aramaic. Then he presented “grammatical Aramaisms”, that is, various grammatical constructions that were found in the Old Testament that were considered as Aramaic-derived or as displaying Aramaic characteristics or influence.

In chapter three of this work is an analysis (auswertung) of the distribution of the

59 In fact, the presence of Aramaisms in certain early texts may actually give validity to an earlier date of composition. Hopefully, this can be shown in the remainder of this work.
60 especially from the standpoint of recent archeological/philological discoveries from the ancient Near East.
61 Unfortunately, this work is not accessible to the English reader, being written in German.
62 for translation purposes, the following website was utilized for German-English translation:

In Table 1, Wagner presents this information in tabular form. I have included this table in part in Appendix D⁶⁵, where I have attempted to translate this table. He states in the introduction to this table, that he has not marked every possible Aramaism. He further divides his table unto “more or less certain” (mehr odor weniger sichere A[maraische]) and uncertain (unsichere A[maraische]).

In sum, Wagner had the following totals of Aramaic words/Aramaic stems/Aramaisms in the Old Testament:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Totals</th>
<th>Verbs</th>
<th>Nouns</th>
<th>Particles</th>
<th>Words</th>
<th>Stems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pentateuch</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former Prophets⁶⁶</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latter Prophets⁵⁷</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psalms, Proverbs, Job⁶⁸</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Megilloth⁶⁹</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, I-II Chronicles</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the most part, the distribution appears to be as we would expect it to be, with one exception: the Pentateuch. What we would expect (and what modern scholarship expects and teaches) is that, the Aramaic content of the scriptures is expected to be nil from a very early age. As the Aramaic kingdoms in the upper Mesopotamian valley expanded, so would contact with Aramaic-speaking peoples. As such, the number and frequency of Aramaisms would increase with the increase of their influence.

And this is what we seem to have, from the time of the Judges onward--a small but gradual increase in the Aramaisms found in the word of God.

http://dict.tu-chemnitz.de/
⁶³ that is, “Alte Testament”
⁶⁴ or “Abundance”
⁶⁵ Wagner’s table also included information regarding the Apocrypha. That information was not included in this work.
⁶⁶ that is, Joshua, Judges, I-II Samuel, I-II Kings
⁶⁷ the prophetic books of the Bible, from Isaiah to Malachi
⁶⁸ including Elihu speech
⁶⁹ that is, the books of Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther
But the Pentateuch does not appear to fit this model. We find here more Aramaic words used in the Pentateuch than in the time of Israel possessing the promised land, through the time of the monarchy until the time of the exile. The Pentateuch appears to have numbers that are consistent with later books.

We have the book of Genesis having the same number of Aramaic words as the book of Jonah, a book where the main character was sent to preach to an Aramaic-speaking\textsuperscript{70} population. Further, the book of Deuteronomy, according to Wagner’s numbers, uses more Aramaic terms than does the books of Ecclesiastes, Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah, and is one word shy of matching the book of Esther.

In addition, if the book of Job is also from this era, then again we find another large section of the word of God that has some manner of Aramaic influence at an early age.

For the modern scholar, who has “Aramaic = late date” as a tenant or pillar of his biblical understanding, these Aramaisms are troubling. Thus, we have all manner of recourse to some manner of “documentary hypothesis” theories. Or, we find author after author finding “scribal gloss” after “scribal gloss”. Rare is the author that sees these Aramaisms as original to the text, as a witness to an earlier shared history of the Hebrew and Aramaic language.

I grant that Wagner’s work is now over 40 years old and that there have been numerous archeological and linguistic discoveries since the time of his authoring this work. Nevertheless, some of these same discoveries have supported rather than denied the possibility of earlier Hebrew-Aramaic contact. And this we shall see, God-willing, in due course. In addition, proper study of these early Aramaic usages may be a window into the very early developments of, not one but two, Semitic languages: Hebrew and Aramaic. And this, I hope to show in the remainder of this work.

I also grant that mere numbers (that we find in this table) cannot prove or disprove anything in and of themselves. Numerous factors may have contributed to the composition of the books of the Old Testament that we have before us today. Yet, these numbers can be a starting point for further discussion and for possibly identifying various patterns, linguistic or otherwise. And thus, we shall begin our examination of the books of the Bible and the distribution of Aramaic found therein.

\textsuperscript{70} or possibly, an Aramaic/Akkadian-speaking population.