



PROJECT PROFILE

Aramaic M-South

ENCOUNTER WITH HISTORY

From a manger in Bethlehem to the Mount of Olives, the everyday language Jesus heard and spoke when he walked the earth was the language of Aramaic. Several dialects of Aramaic are still spoken in the world today, but the one that has remained most like that of Jesus and his disciples is Aramaic M South. Amazingly, God has preserved this ancient tongue over the centuries. In fact, it is still spoken by nearly 18,000 people in a small community sequestered in the forbidding mountains of a barren desert.

COMMUNITY ON THE EDGE OF TIME

Hidden from harsh desert winds in a steep mountain pass at 5,000 feet lies the largest of the three villages of the Aramaic community. To set foot in this enchanted hamlet is to step back in time. For centuries, its residents have lived simple lives in stone and mortar homes dug deep into the sides of the rocky crags and cliffs that surround them. In this mountainside amphitheatre, houses are built on top of each other and connected by narrow pathways, stone stairways and wooden ladders. The roofs of buildings below form footpaths for those above. Green vines course through old balconies while fig trees and flowering vines frame antiquated homes painted blue as the sky, making the village seem to float serenely on the edge of time.

OASIS IN THE WILDERNESS

Living mostly in isolation, the people of Aramaic M South draw their livelihood from the spring-fed land below. At the base of the barren slopes lies a carpet of green with vineyards, small orchards, stands of fir and poplar, and patches of grazing land. The peaceful, hardworking mountain dwellers devote themselves to the fundamental task of living in dignity. Most are peasant agriculturalists, herding goats and sheep, tending vineyards, harvesting small fields of grain or legumes and gathering fruits and nuts from family orchards. Some are skilled silversmiths, making a variety of jewelry and knives; others are skilled weavers, creating colorful textiles for garments and furnishings.

In times past, travel to other areas was a forbidding task. The miles of open desert can be scorching in summer, bitterly cold in winter, and prone to sandstorms year round. Donkeys and camels are still used as beasts of burden. Aware of the harsh realities of desert travel, the community has traditionally provided food, water and shelter for weary strangers, often welcoming them into their homes. The people are renowned for their friendliness; hospitality is a cornerstone of Aramaic life. Unleavened bread is eaten with every meal. Common foods include wheat, barley, rice, lentils, chickpeas, fava beans, figs, raisins, olives and pine nuts. Dishes are seasoned with garlic, lemon and spices. Spit-roasted lamb or chicken, apricot and semolina cakes and falafel are favorites.



- **Location:** Worldwide
- **Number of Speakers:** 15,000



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WORDS FROZEN IN TIME

Most Aramaic peoples became Christians in the early centuries of the church. According to local legend, those of Aramaic M South trace their Christian heritage to the conversion of a young woman who heard the preaching of the Apostle Paul. The Byzantine monastery now used as a church was built in the 4th century on the ruins of a pagan temple. Early Aramaic churches were blessed to have one of the first translations of the Bible, the Peshitta. However, this translation has been frozen in time; it is now so archaic, modern day speakers can no longer understand it.

For the past 1,000 years, lay people have not had access to God's Word in a translation they can read and understand. This has been a great challenge to the steadfastness and growth of the church. In the 7th century, when people of another religion took over their territory, the Aramaic people were strong and resisted pressure to forsake their faith. However, religious pressure and persecution has mounted over the past 150 years and many have set aside their religious heritage in order to cope in the surrounding culture.

Despite this, 50 percent of the population in the main village remains Christian. Many are spiritually hungry for a Bible in their mother tongue. Without it, they have only age-old traditions that may distort the truth of Christ. Though they are able to read the dominant language of the area, they are unlikely to read Scripture in that language because they do not consider it a proper vehicle for spiritual truth. However, if the Bible were to be published in their own language, many predict that even those who have turned from the faith will desire to read it.

JOINING THE TEAM

Aramaic M South believers who love the Word of God and want to see their people reading the truth about Christ for themselves have initiated this project. The primary goal over the next four years will be to produce the New Testament, printed Bible booklets, and audio recordings of Scripture materials. The primary translator is a capable speaker of the language. He is committed to Christ, has a love of God's Word, a good knowledge of the Scriptures, is experienced in translation, and has the academic training and skills needed for the task. A highly qualified Aramaic-speaking exegetical consultant and other Aramaic volunteers will be assisting the translator. The translator and consultant will be donating fifty percent of their hours. The Seed Company will provide both with a partial salary as well as cover travel, office and computer expenses through the generous gifts of those God leads to become partners with the Aramaic M South team. We invite your prayer and financial partnership in this significant project.

- **Project Goal:** New Testament plus OT portions
- **Year Project Began:** 2002
- **Expected Completion Date:** 2009