The Bible in Aramaic (01:013:111)

Course Syllabus

Short Description:

Introduction to Aramaic through biblical literature, including the Aramaic passages in the Bible and the vernacular translations of the Bible into various Aramaic dialects, with a focus on the Syriac version.

Long Description:

Most people are familiar with Aramaic as the "language of Jesus," a view popularized by blockbuster films such as *Stigmata* and the *Passion of the Christ*. Some people believe that portions of the Bible, or perhaps even the whole Bible, were originally composed in Aramaic before being translated into Hebrew, Latin, Greek, and other languages. This course aims to introduce students to the history of the Aramaic language and literature through the point of reference through which most people are familiar with it: the Bible.

The Syriac Bible offers one of the earliest witnesses to the Judeo-Christian literature of the Middle East. Translated from Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament from the beginning of the second century, it went through a number of revisions for the next seven centuries. At least three Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) revisions are known, and five New Testament ones. These revisions shed light on the literature of neighboring languages including Hebrew, Greek, and Arabic, and are helpful to understand the translation techniques of that time period.

The Hebrew Bible was translated into Syriac probably around the second century, and may have originally served as a *Targum* for the Jews of Edessa. It was later adopted by the Christian community. In the sixth century, a new translation from the Greek Septuagint was made. The earliest witness to the New Testament is the Diatessaron, a harmony of the four Gospels, which is lost in Syriac but is preserved in Arabic and other languages. This was followed by an early translation of the Gospels (and probably Acts and may be the Pauline Epistles) that we now call the Old Syriac Version. This is a free translation that, for the case of the Gospels, replaced the Diatessaron. The Old Syriac version was then revised to become more literal, but still idiomatic, until it culminated in the Peshitta Version (the standard version). During the sixth-seventh centuries, literal non-idiomatic translations from the Greek also took place.

The course aims at introducing the students to these various versions, in English translation, to illustrate the various translation techniques and the literary history of the Middle East from the second century onwards. The course will also cover the use of the Syriac Bible by religious communities and commentaries on these texts up to the thirteenth century. During this, the student will be introduced to the religious developments of Judaism and Christianity as well as their interactions with Islam.

Syriac is a Classical language of the Middle East, and an important tool for understanding the history of the Qur'an as well as the translation activities of the Abbasid period.

Learning Goals:
At the completion of this course, students will be able to:

- Examine critically the composition, transmission, and translation of the Bible from the original languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) into Syriac, engaging with questions of audience, textuality, orality, and vernacularity;
- Analyze the Bible as a work of literature, both in its own respect and in relation to the Aramaic and Syriac-speaking communities that transmitted it;
- Demonstrate "Bible literacy" and an understanding of the Syriac Bible's role not only within these faith communities but also in broader secular society.

Grading:
Grades will be determined by:

- participation (20%),
- the mid-term (30%), and
- the final exam (50%).

Class will meet twice weekly. The readings for each lesson should be completed before each discussion section. Some discussion sections will require more reading than others; students are strongly encouraged to begin reading in advance of their discussion sections. Attendance is mandatory for this course and up to two absences are allowed per semester. Due to the participatory nature of the class, 5 points (5%) will be deducted for each class you miss beyond the first two. Six unexcused absences are grounds for failure. If for any reason you are unable to participate in the weekly discussion sessions or submit an assignment in a timely manner, please make use of the Rutgers Self-Reporting Absence Website, https://sims.rutgers.edu/ssra/ to keep me updated about your participation in the course.

Academic Integrity:
As defined by the university's Academic Integrity Policy (http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/files/documents/AI_Policy_2013.pdf), plagiarism is "the use of another person's words, ideas, or results without giving that person appropriate credit." To avoid even the appearance of plagiarism or cheating, kindly identify all direct quotations and even paraphrases from other people and other sources with an appropriate citation. Due to their public nature, the theft of another person's original words or ideas has ramifications beyond the classroom.

Required Texts:
The main textbooks for the course will be:

- Sebastian Brock, *The Bible in the Syriac Tradition* (Gorgias, 2006)
- Sebastian Brock, *Introduction to Syriac Studies* (Gorgias, 2006)

In addition, readings will be assigned from monographs and academic papers, which will be made available to the students through the course website on Sakai.

Course Schedule

Week 1: Introduction

Week 2: Aramaic in the Bible, I

- Aramaean Origins, and Aramaic during the Achaemenid and Hellenistic Eras
- The Aramaic Portions of the Old Testament

Week 3: Aramaic in the Bible, II

- Late Aramaic and the Aramaic glosses in the New Testament
- The "Language of Jesus"

Week 4: Textual Criticism and the Study of Bible Translations

Week 5: The Aramaic *Targum*s

Week 6: Introduction to the Syriac-speaking people and their interactions with other peoples

Week 7: Syriac-speaking Judaism and Christianity during the first five centuries.

Week 8: Translations techniques: free translations vs. idiomatic translations vs. mirror translations; pros and cons of each method.

Week 9: Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible in Syriac

Week 10: Textual Criticism of the Greek New Testament in Syriac

Week 11: The Syriac Bible in Arabic: the case of the Diatessaron

Week 12: Biblical Commentaries: methods and examples

Week 13: The influence of the Syriac Bible upon later Syriac Literature

Week 14: Review