



## The New York Times

# ARAMAIC, JESUS' LANGUAGE, IS STILL SPOKEN IN SYRIA

By JUDITH MILLER  
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**MALULA, Syria**— There is no indication that Jesus ever set foot in this village whose houses are carved out of the salmon-colored stone of Mount Qalamun. But here in this Christian enclave in the mountains of Socialist, predominantly Sunni Moslem Syria, the ancient language that He and His disciples spoke can still be heard.

Malula, population 4,000, is the largest of three villages near Mount Qalamun where Aramaic is the spoken language. Aramaic mingled with Arabic is also heard in masses at the Syrian Orthodox Church in the old part of Damascus.

But religious leaders and scholars of the language say the ancient tongue is rapidly dying and little can be done to prevent its extinction.

"The language will die in 40 years," said Msgr. Francois Abou Mokh, the Archbishop of Damascus, who was born in Malula. "The new generation has never learned Aramaic. They only speak Arabic." *The Causes of Decline*

Aramaic has fallen victim, as have dozens of other languages, to economic progress and social mobility in Syria. Only 30 years ago, there were no schools here. Now children of the villages learn Arabic, Syria's national language, in state-run schools.

In addition, more than a third of the village residents are in Damascus, either for advanced education or for work. Many people commute daily to the Syrian capital to sell sheep and goat products, the mainstay of the village.

Aramaic as spoken here is a lovely language to hear: more flowing and, in the view of some, less guttural than modern Arabic. But Bishop Abou Mokh said the two languages, as well as Hebrew, are similar and are derived from the same lost language.

"Consider our Arabic greeting - salaam, that is, hello, or peace," the Bishop said. "In Hebrew it's shalom. In Aramaic it's schlomo." Aramaic has had a distinguished and long history in this region. Scholars here say Aramaic emerged at least 900 years before the birth of Christ.

Jews learned Aramaic in Babylon before the birth of Christ during their exile from Palestine. When they returned, Hebrew had been relegated to a religious language, like Latin for Catholics today, and Aramaic was the spoken tongue, the Bishop said.

All of what is now Syria had become Christian and spoke Aramaic by the second century, Bishop Mokh said.





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