ἐροῦμεν

α-ω   א־ת

Syriac Course

Lesson 1
The Alphabet
Pronunciation

Thammuz came next behind,
whose annual wound in Lebanon allur'd
The Syrian damsels to lament his fate
In amorous ditties all a summer's day
While smooth Adonis from his native rock
Ran purple to the sea

Paradise Lost I:446
John Milton

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1.   The Alphabet and Pronunciation

1.1   Introduction

Like most Semitic languages Syriac is written from right to left, not from left to right as in (most) Indo-European languages. There are three forms of the alphabet:

- Estrangela. This is the oldest form of the alphabet and is found in the oldest inscriptions and manuscripts.
- Chaldean script. This was used mainly by Nestorian Christians in the Persian Empire; it is also known as Nestorian
- Maronite. This was used mainly by Orthodox Christians in the Roman Empire. It is called in Syriac, Serta, in India Maronite and in Europe Jacobite script.

Semitic alphabets originally represented only the consonants of the languages, and these consonants were modified in the following circumstances:

- When written alone
- Standing at the beginning of a word *or* not immediately joined to the preceding letter
- When joined to *both* the preceding letter *and* the following letter
- When joined to the preceding letter *but not* the following letter

The table on the following page shows Serto (using the font called Serto Batnan) and Estrangelo (using the font Estrangelo Edessa) forms of the letters.
Note that:

- Some letters in the Serto font have different forms when they are preceded, followed by, or preceded *and* followed by other letters.
- Some letters in the Estrangelo font have different forms at the end of the word, like Hebrew and Greek
- The version of the Syriac New Testament that I have and is listed in the Bibliography, is based on the Serto font

Serto				Estrangelo	Hebrew	Transliterate	Name	Keyboard
Alone	Joined to following	Joined to following *and* preceding	Joined to preceding					
ܐ	ܐ	ܐ	ܐ	ܐ	א	’	’Alaph	a
ܒ	ܒ	ܒ	ܒ	ܒ	ב	b	Beth	b
ܓ	ܓ	ܓ	ܓ	ܓ	ג	g	Gamal	g
ܕ			ܕ	ܕ	ד	d	Dalath	d
ܗ			ܗ	ܗ	ה	h	He	h
ܘ			ܘ	ܘ		w	Waw	w
ܙ			ܙ	ܙ	ז	z	Zayn	z
ܚ	ܚ	ܚ	ܚ	ܚ	ח	ḥ	Heth	;
ܛ	ܛ	ܛ	ܛ	ܛ		ṭ	Teth	j
ܝ	ܝ	ܝ	ܝ	ܝ	י	y	Yudh	y
ܟ	ܟ	ܟ	ܟ	ܟ	כ	k	Kaph	k
ܠ	ܠ	ܠ	ܠ	ܠ	ל	l	Lamadh	l
ܡ	ܡ	ܡ	ܡ	ܡ	מ	m	Mim	m
ܢ	ܢ	ܢ	ܢ	ܢ	נ	n	Nun	n
ܣ	ܣ	ܣ	ܣ	ܣ		s	Semkath	s
ܥ	ܥ	ܥ	ܥ	ܥ	ע	‘	‘E	i
ܦ	ܦ	ܦ	ܦ	ܦ	פ	p	Pe	p
ܨ			ܨ	ܨ		ç	Çadhe	x
ܩ	ܩ	ܩ	ܩ	ܩ	ק	q	Qo	q
ܪ			ܪ	ܪ	ר	r	Res	r
ܫ	ܫ	ܫ	ܫ	ܫ	שׁ	š	Šin	v
ܬ			ܬ	ܬ		t	Tau	t

Notes:

1. Some letters in Estrangelo have a different form at the end of the word
2. The above table has been constructed using the Phonetic Syriac Keyboard; the Standard Syriac Keyboard is based on the Arabic Keyboard and the letters are in different places.

1.2 Exercise 1

Transliterate the following into English signs as above:

	Serto	Estrangelo	Transliteration
1	ܐܠܦ	ܐܠܦ	'lp
2	ܒܝܬ	ܒܝܬ	byt
3	ܓܡܠ	ܓܡܠ	gml
4	ܕܠܬ	ܕܠܬ	dlt
5	ܗܐ	ܗܐ	h'
6	ܘܐܘ	ܘܐܘ	w'w
7	ܙܢ	ܙܢ	zn
8	ܚܝܬ	ܚܝܬ	ḥyt
9	ܛܝܬ	ܛܝܬ	ṭyt
10	ܝܘܕ	ܝܘܕ	ywd
11	ܟܦ	ܟܦ	kp
12	ܠܡܕ	ܠܡܕ	lmd
13	ܡܝܡ	ܡܝܡ	mym
14	ܢܘܢ	ܢܘܢ	nwn
15	ܣܡܟܬ	ܣܡܟܬ	smkt
16	ܥܐ	ܥܐ	'‘
17	ܦܐ	ܦܐ	p‘
18	ܨܕܢ	ܨܕܢ	çdn
19	ܩܘܦ	ܩܘܦ	qwp
20	ܪܫ	ܪܫ	rš

21	ܣܝܢ	ܣܝ	šyn
22	ܬܐܘ	ܬܐܘ	t'w
23	ܥܘܘܒ	ܥܘܘܒ	'wwb
24	ܫܚܢ	ܫܚܢ	šḥn
25	ܡܬܠ	ܡܬܠ	mtl
26	ܕܒܐܪܥܬ	ܕܒܐܪܥܬ	db'r't
27	ܐܬܕܒܐܘܢ	ܐܬܕܒܐܘܢ	'tdb'wn
28	ܥܡܥܦܪܐ	ܥܡܥܦܪܐ	'm'pr'
29	ܡܗܘܫܡܢܘܬܐ	ܡܗܘܫܡܢܘܬܐ	mhwšmnwt'
30	ܕܫܥܟ	ܕܫܥܟ	dš'k
31	ܥܠܝ	ܥܠܝ	'ly

1.3 Exercise 2

Write the following in Syriac characters:

	Transliteration	Serto	Estrangelo
1	'lyhwn	ܠܗܘܢ ܐ	ܐܠܝܗܘܢ
2	klb'	ܟܠܒܐ	ܟܠܒܐ
3	šlmyn	ܫܠܡܝܢ	ܫܠܡܝܢ
4	mdnt'	ܡܕܝܢܬܐ	ܡܕܝܢܬܐ
5	ywmt'	ܝܘܡܬܐ	ܝܘܡܬܐ
6	'lyh	ܥܠܝܗ	ܥܠܝܗ
7	bgzrt'	ܒܓܙܪܬܐ	ܒܓܙܪܬܐ
8	wrdyn	ܘܪܕܝܢ	ܘܪܕܝܢ
9	çly	ܨܠܝ	ܨܠܝ
10	ḥlpwhy	ܚܠܦܘܗܝ	ܚܠܦܘܗܝ
11	ṭlyt'	ܛܠܝܬܐ	ܛܠܝܬܐ
12	sbr	ܣܒܪ	ܣܒܪ
13	sḥlp	ܣܚܠܦ	ܣܚܠܦ
14	mstkl	ܡܣܬܟܠ	ܡܣܬܟܠ
15	mṭl	ܡܛܠ	ܡܛܠ
16	lḥdd'	ܠܚܕܕܐ	ܠܚܕܕܐ
17	'mçw	ܐܡܨܘ	ܐܡܨܘ
18	mtqr'	ܡܬܩܪܐ	ܡܬܩܪܐ
19	klmdm	ܟܠܡܕܡ	ܟܠܡܕܡ
20	rd'	ܪܕܐ	ܪܕܐ

21	dyr'	وَىٰ	ܕܝܪܐ
22	w'zl	ܘܶܐܙܰܠ	ܐܙܠ
23	ml'k'	ܡܠܐܟܐ	ܡܠܐܟܐ
24	'mm'	ܥܡܡܐ	ܥܡܡܐ
25	'm	ܥܡ	ܥܡ
26	nby'	ܢܒܝܐ	ܢܒܝܐ
27	thw'	ܬܗܘܐ	ܬܗܘܐ
28	mlk'	ܡܠܟܐ	ܡܠܟܐ
29	mlk	ܡܠܟ	ܡܠܟ
30	yd'twn	ܝܕܥܬܘܢ	ܝܕܥܬܘܢ
31	yd'	ܝܕܥ	ܝܕܥ
32	gbr'	ܓܒܪܐ	ܓܒܪܐ
33	'ntt	ܐܢܬܬ	ܐܢܬܬ
34	'nš'	ܥܢܫܐ	ܥܢܫܐ
35	'r'kwn	ܐܪܟܘܢ	ܐܪܟܘܢ
36	ttplḥ	ܬܬܦܠܚ	ܬܬܦܠܚ
37	sybrnwt'	ܣܝܒܪܢܘܬܐ	ܣܝܒܪܢܘܬܐ
38	qṭl	ܩܛܠ	ܩܛܠ

1.4 Pronunciation

Some of the lettes are used to indicate vowel sounds as will seen later.
The letters *b, g, d, z, k, l, m, n, s, p, r* and *h, w, y* when used as consonants, may be pronounced as in English. The following should be noted:

1.4.1   (ܐ or ܐ) Alaph and (ܥ or ܥ) 'E

'Alaph and 'E indicate the emission of breath necessary to the enunciation of a vowel at the beginning of a

syllable. Of the two ܥ or ܥ represents the 'deeper' sound, the flow of breath being compressed low down

in the throat.

1.4.2   (ܚ or ܚ) Ḥēth

Ḥēth also had two sounds. One was a strong H, often confused (by Western ears) with; the other was a rough sound like the ch found in the German Ba*ch*.

1.4.3   The four sibilants

Of the four sibilants,

- Semkath (ܣ or ܣ) is pronounced as in the English *s*,

- Zayn (ܙ or ܙ) is pronounced as in the English *z,*

- Šin (ܫ or ܫ) is pronounced as in the English *sh*.

- Çadhe (ܨ or ܨ) is pronounced as an intermediate between the hissed Semkath and Šin. The pronunciation *ts*, often used adopted in Europe is useful for distinguishing the letter, but 'it has no philological or phonetic justification'.

2. Additional Signs

In Syriac there are several additional signs:

- Qussaya and Rukkaka
- S^eyame
- Distinguishing the 1st and 2nd persons in the perfect
- Distinguishing the perfect from other parts of the verb
- Words similarly written but differently pronounced

2.1 Quššāyā and Rukkākā

The letters ܬ, ܓ, ܕ, ܟ, ܦ, ܬ (or ܬ, ܓ, ܕ, ܟ, ܦ, ܬ) sometimes indicated by the mnemonic word *bghadhkphath*, each have two sounds, a hard and a soft sound. The soft form is properly an aspirated form and the hard one unaspirated. The hard form (called Qussaya) is indicated by placing a dot *over* the letter thus:

Serto: ܬ ܦ ܟ ܕ ܓ ܬ   Estrangelo: ܬ ܓ ܕ ܟ ܦ ܬ

The soft form (called Rukkaka) is indicated by placing a dot *under* the letter thus:

Serto: ܬ ܦ ܟ ܕ ܓ ܬ   Estrangelo: ܬ ܓ ܕ ܟ ܦ ܬ

The rules regarding the places where the hard and soft sounds are used can be fully learned only by experience, usually by careful reading. There are some general principles for the use of Quššāyā:

1. When these letters (*bghadhkphath*), stand at the beginning of a word, for example ܒܪܐ = bra

2. When within a word they are immediately preceded by a consonantal sound, for example:
   a. = kethbath
   b. = ktabht

3. When within a word the letter was originally doubled, for example:

   the form ܫܡܬܐ (ܫܡܬܐ) represents ܫܡܬܬܐ (ܫܡܬܬܐ) but…

… as in most other Semitic languages, there is a strong tendency *not* to write the same letter twice unless there is a vowel sound between them. Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic have means of indicating that a letter is doubled, but Syriac does not, so that there has been a large emasure of dropping the distinbction between single and double letters.

2.2 S^eyāmē

Two dots are placed over the plural of all nouns, both masculine and feminine (Syriac, like Hebrew, has two genders for nouns, masculine and feminine), and the feminine plural of verbs (Syriac, also like Hebrew, makes a distinction in the second and third persons between a masculine form and a feminine form), for example:

ܫܡܗܐ (ܫܡܗܐ) = names

ܐܡܪ̈ܝܢ (ܐܡܪ̈ܝܢ) = they (feminine) have said

These dots are called S^eyāmē.

2.3 Distinguishing the persons in the perfect

Two distinctions are made here:

- First person
- Second and Third person

2.3.1 First person

The first person takes a dot *above*:

ܩܶܛܠܶܬ (ܩܛܠܬ) = I have killed

Note that the dot appears above the *first* letter.

2.3.2 Second and Third person

The second and third persons take a dot *below*:

ܩܶܛܠܰܬ (ܩܛܠܬ) = she has killed

Note that the dot appears under the *first* letter.

2.4 Distinguishing the perfect from other parts of the verb

A dot is used to distinguish the perfect from other parts of the verb especially the participle.

2.4.1 The perfect

The dot is placed *below* the (first) letter:

ܩܛܰܠ (ܩܛܠ) = he killed

2.4.2 Other parts of the verb

The dot is placed *above* the (first) letter:

ܩܳܛܶܠ (ܩܛܠ) = he is killing

ܢܶܩܛܽܘܠ (ܢܩܛܘܠ) = he will kill

2.5 Words similarly written but differently pronounced

Such words are often distinguished by the use of dots above and below.

ܐܰܝܕܳܐ (ܐܝܕܐ)	'ayda	= which	ܐܺܝܕܳܐ (ܐܝܕܐ)	'idā	= hand
ܗܰܘ (ܗܘ)	haw	= that (demonstrative)	ܗܽܘ (ܗܘ)	hū	= he (personal)
ܗܳܝ (ܗܝ)	hāy	= that (feminine)	ܗܺܝ (ܗܝ)	hī	= she (personal)
ܡܳܢܰܘ (ܡܢܘ)	mānaw	= what is it?	ܡܰܢܽܘ (ܡܢܘ)	manū	= who is it?

Notice that the weak letters () when used as consonants have the dot *above*, when used as vowels they have the dot *below*.

Further examples:

ܡܲܠܟܐ	malkā	king	ܡܷܠܟܐ	melkā	counsel
ܫܲܢܬܐ	šantā	year	ܫܷܢܬܐ	šentā	sleep
ܚܕܰܬܐ	ḥdattā	new (f)	ܚܲܕܬܐ	*ḥadtā	new (m)
ܦܪܝܩܐ	parīqā	separated	ܦܪܝܩܐ	prīqā	saved
ܒܪܝܟܐ	barīkā	kneeling	ܒܪܝܟܐ	brīkā	blessed

2.6   Linea Occultans

The letters underlined in words marked * in the above table are not pronounced, as they coalesce with those which immediately follow. The line beneath the Syriac letter is commonly known as 'linea occultans' and is regularly used where a consonant becomes silent.

There are four such lines:

- a horizontal line *under* a vowelless letter
- a horizontal line written *over* a letter
- an oblique line written *under* a letter
- an oblique line written *over* a letter

2.6.1   a horizontal line *under* a vowelless letter - ܡܚܘܝܢܐ

The horizontal line written *under* a vowelless letter indicates that it is to be pronounced with a half-vowel:

ܘܝܚܠܐ (ܪܘܝܠܐܬܐ) = dehĕltā

2.6.2   a horizontal line written *over* a letter – ܡܙܥܘܪܐ

The horizontal line written *over* a letter marks a still lighter pronunciation:

ܡܟܬܐ (ܡܠܟܬܐ) = malktā

2.6.3   an oblique line written *under* a letter – ܡܚܘܝܢܐ

The oblique line written *under* a letter indicates that it is not pronounced at all:

ܡܕܝܢܐ (ܡܕܝܢܬܐ) = mdītā

2.6.4   an oblique line written *over* a letter – ܪܗܘܝ

The oblique line written *over* a letter shows that the sound is to be sustained:

ܢܫܠܘܢ (ܢܫܠܘܢ) = nešlun

Over time some confusion has arisen; a short line, called ܡܚܘܝܢܐ, and written either above or below a letter, with the force of ܡܚܘܝܢܐ, being the only one now in common use.

2.7   Use of long lines

There are two such uses:

- Contraction
- Numerals

2.7.1   Contraction

ܩܘ () = ܩܘܕܡܐ

2.7.2   Numerals

ܩܝܛ () = 319

3. Vowel Letters

Semitic philologists recognise three primnitive vowels, from which others have in most languages been developed. In Arabic these three alone are written, though their pronunciation varies; the three vowels being A, I and U. The three vowels became five as follows:

a as in h**a**t

ā as in f**a**ther

e as in f**e**te

i as in p**i**que (this is sometimes short as in p**i**n)

u as in r**u**le

Originally, these were not represented in writing at all, as is seen in the earliest inscriptions. The first step was to use three of the consonants as vowels and these are:

?		'ālaph	this letter has the peculiarity of surrendering its vowel to the preceding consonant, except when it stands at the beginning of a *syllable*, so it may, in theory, stand for *any* vowel. In practice, the a-sound rarely has a consonant to represent it
ܜ		yūdh	represents the **i**-sound, but sometimes represents **e**
ܘ		waw	represents the **u**-sound

These letters are known as the *weak* letters.

3.1 Exercise 3

Write the following in Syriac characters:

	Transliteration	Serto	Estrangelo
1	b'r'ā		
2	špirā		
3	špirtā		
4	kulhun		
5	qum		
6	dāklā		
7	çlutā		
8	gbre		
9	nhwe		

10	knikutā	ܣܟܘܩܬܐ	ܟܢܝܟܘܬܐ
11	qritā	ܩܪܝܬܐ	ܩܪܝܬܐ
12	sniqā	ܣܢܝܩܐ	ܣܢܝܩܐ
13	lā	ܠܐ	ܠܐ
14	tub	ܬܘܒ	ܬܘܒ
15	ʾitutā	ܐܝܬܘܬܐ	ܐܝܬܘܬܐ
16	meklā	ܡܐܟܠܐ	ܡܐܟܠܐ
17	riše	ܪܝܫܐ	ܪܝܫܐ
18	krihin	ܟܪܝܗܝܢ	ܟܪܝܗܝܢ
19	ʿumqā	ܥܘܡܩܐ	ܥܘܡܩܐ
20	kube	ܟܘܒܐ	ܟܘܒܐ
21	tlitā	ܬܠܝܬܐ	ܬܠܝܬܐ
22	metitā	ܡܬܝܬܐ	ܡܬܝܬܐ
23	ʾurhā	ܐܘܪܚܐ	ܐܘܪܚܐ
24	ʾna	ܐܢܐ	ܐܢܐ

4. Special vowel Signs. The Greek Vowels

In Syriac, as in other Semitic languages, it became necessary to have a complet system of vowel signs and the Greek capital letters A, E, H, O, Y were used fo rthis purpose. They were not written beside the consonants but above or below the consonants to which they applied. Furthermore, they were not written upright, but on their side as follows:

ܿ	= a	pṯáḥā	
ܿ	= ā	zqāpā	
ܿ	= e	rḇáṣā	
ܿ	= i	ḥḇáṣā	
ܿ	= u	ʿṣáṣā	

4.1 Exercise 4

For the purpose of these two exercises, vowels represented by a weak letter are written with ^, for example:

Write in English letters the following, observing the notes given above:

	Serta	Estrangelo	Transliteration
1	ܟ݁ܠܚܐܢ	ܟ݁ܠܚܐ	ka'kwan
2	ܡܟܚܦܢܐ	ܡܠܦܢܐ	ma'pana'
3	ܐܢܥܐ	ܐܢܥܐ	
4	ܐܢܐ	ܐܢܐ	
5	ܐܢܐ	ܐܢܐ	
6	ܐܝܠܝܢ	ܐܝܠܝܢ	
7	ܝܗܡܚܐܬ	ܐܗܡܚܠܬ	
8	ܐܬܘܚܘܡ	ܐܬܘܚܘܡ	
9	ܬܠܬܡܐܐ	ܐܠܬܡܐܐ	
10	ܘܚܬܢܐ	ܘܚܬܢܐ	
11	ܠܐ	ܠܐ	
12	ܡܗܡܐܕܠܝܢ	ܡܗܡܕܠܝܢ	
13	ܚܠܝܗ	ܚܠܝܗ	
14	ܥܢܙܘܐ	ܥܢܙܘܐ	
15	ܘܟܐܠ	ܐܟܐܠ	
16	ܘܡܢܐ	ܐܡܢܐ	
17	ܘܡܢܐ	ܐܡܢܐ	
18	ܘܡܢܠܐ	ܐܢܠܐ	
19	ܐܘܟܠܐ	ܐܘܟܠܐ	

20	ܪܘܿܪܳܟܳܐ	ܟܟܚܳܐܘܪܪ	
21	ܥܠܝܿܘ	ܘܥܠܠ	
22	ܥܠܝܿܘ	ܘܿܥܠܠ	
23	ܐܚܢܳܐ	ܟܐܚܢܐ	
24	ܐܪܚ	ܟ ܝܚ	
25	ܗܘܿܠ	ܣܐܗ	
26	ܐܩܡܿܘ	ܟܡܢ̈ܐ	
27	ܣܢܿܩ	ܩܢܬ	
28	ܐܢܠܐ	ܟܐܗܐܗܟ	
29	ܐܠܢܡܿ	ܟܐܗܢܢܟ	
30	ܟܠܘܩܘܣܗ	ܣܐܩܪܗܠܬ	
31	ܠܡܚ	ܠܝܚ	
32	ܝܘܗܠܡܐܠ	ܟܪܬܘܚܡܐܘ	
33	ܐܠܝܗܩ	ܟܠܬܝܚ	
34	ܪܘܘܩܡ	ܟܬܐܗܪ	

4.2 Exercise 5

Write the following in Syriac characters:

	Transliteration	Serto	Estrangelo
1	šmayâ		
2	hwāt		
3	ʾethazî		
4	rîšānâ		

5	sûbḫâ		
6	'lawḫy		
7	hāleyn		
8	'amîrê		
9	ṭûbānâ		
10	sagî'ê		
11	l'ayleyn		
12	metqarbîn		
13	qdāmaykûn		
14	hayment		
15	sā'em		
16	šlîḥâ		
17	mmalâlû		
18	mazleq		
19	'eškaḥ		
20	ki'pâ		
21	'ālmâ		
22	laḥmâ		
23	malpānûtâ		
24	nmalel		
25	çawmâ		
26	šemšâ		
27	yarḫâ		

28	'amrîn		
29	tawdîtâ		
30	ḥûšābâ		
31	çbûtâ		
32	parçûpâ		
33	petgāmâ		
34	'egartâ		
35	'aḥay		
36	ma'mûdîtâ		
37	'damâ		
38	mapaq		
39	hayklâ		
40	'atrwātâ		

4.3 Note

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