Edward M. Cook

*Dictionary of Qumran Aramaic*


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This recent volume represents an audacious effort on the part of its author. It addresses the lexicographical character of the Aramaic found among the Qumran scrolls (Qumran Aramaic or QA). As such, Edward M. Cook seeks to make the first lexicographic study dedicated to that corpus in a published scientific work. Cook’s work in this regard is an excellent contribution toward filling a significant hole in Semitic studies.

The work follows a common pattern in its genre of providing headwords (lemmata), word classes, glosses, and examples from the corpus for the words Cook finds in Qumran Aramaic. Where multiple glosses are recognized for the same word, these are enumerated with the first meaning set in bold font. Where roots are recognized, they are noted in the entries. The documents used and their sources are listed in a helpful table at the beginning of the work, and sources cited are listed at the end.

As mentioned, this is a first contribution to filling a substantial need in the field. Consequently, the comments that follow should be read as seeking to improve future editions and not to detract from the work of a fine scholar.

The introduction seeks to set the work in its context. Qumran Aramaic, Cook suggests, bridges from earlier biblical texts to be a forerunner of Jewish Literary Aramaic and is thus part of a Jewish Aramaic literary tradition. This, however, represents an unsupported
presupposition. Many of the Aramaic texts from Qumran simply do not have a sufficiently delineated provenance. While they may address Jewish themes and may not be intended for speech, all of the Aramaic texts from Qumran are not necessarily literary on analogy with the Targumim. This thus represents a bias of Cook that deserves fuller discussion.

In illustrating the literary quality of the texts relative to an allegedly different spoken form of Aramaic contemporary with the scrolls, Cook turns to the use of ταλιθα in Mark 5:41. The assumption is that the scene presented in final-form Mark is historically accurate and relatively contemporary with the Aramaic corpus under discussion. But Cook overlooks the fact that the earliest copy of that text is P45 and dates to around 245 CE. There is no evidence that the Aramaic reflected in Mark 5:41 is original to the first century. Rather, given that this particular text may have been modified in 6:3 to refute Celsus (Origen, *Contra Celsum* 2), there is evidence suggesting that the text may have been modified in transmission or the tradition itself may have been modified before being codified. Assumptions notwithstanding, the Aramaic of Mark 5:41 does not necessarily reflect Judaean Aramaic of the first century.

In his critique of Beyer’s categorization, based on orthographic grounds, of QA as Hasmonean, Cook discounts the orthographic concerns as “purely scribal.” Aside from wanting evidence, this comment raises a problem akin to the age-old question of determining when a dialect becomes a language in its own right. Widespread “scribal” tendencies can become their own orthographic standard, but this fact seems inconvenient for Cook’s efforts.

Cook presents characterizations of the language without quantifying the limits of his methods. On the second page of the introduction, one learns that archaisms are “vestiges of an earlier state of the language.” While this is true prima facie, it overlooks the fact that usage of old forms is done throughout history in many languages simply out of respect for tradition. One of the best-known examples of this is found in the Greek of the second century CE. The Atticizing school drew on the language of fifth-century Athens out of respect for it. Even today in the United Kingdom one finds older forms of English in common use when one is asked “whence” one comes and whether one can make an engagement in a “fortnight’s time.” Consequently, older forms may simply be commonly accepted alternative idiom. Cook seems to overlook this in his discussion on archaisms.

Cook then goes on to speculate about what spoken Aramaic may have been like. He supposes that some forms “probably were common in the spoken vernacular” (x–xi). Such a comment demands quantification. What exactly was the spoken vernacular? Cook presumes that irregular memation in 4Q544 1.1 is significant of speech because it varies
from the parallel text of 4Q545. Given the potentially diasporic range of provenance in the QA corpus, spelling variations may just as easily represent different speech communities, and these need not be particularly disparate. Within fifty miles of this reviewer, there are three different indigenous metacommunities (Dundee, Glasgow, Edinburgh) each with a discrete linguistic register representing a unique dialect of the English language. Memation and other linguistic idiosyncrasies can easily occur in one linguistic community and be missing in another, and it is remiss to try to draw such a weighty conclusion as Cook does from single examples in two texts.

Cook then provides a short literature review of QA lexicography, although shorter than one would expect. It would have been more helpful had Cook dialoged with the sundry studies that touch on QA lexicography in general. Further, the aforementioned bias of Cook to keep QA a purely literary dialect keeps him from engaging the wider trends in Judaean Aramaic studies. Of greatest import in this regard is Michael Sokoloff’s Dictionary of Judaean Aramaic. Consequently, the lexicographic considerations of the present work do not engage at all with the wider linguistic trajectory of Judaean Aramaic from the Maccabean period to the Tannaitic period (ca. 165 BCE–200 CE). This is very much to the detriment of the present work.

Like Muraoka’s 2011 grammar, the present dictionary is based on the readings in the series Discoveries in the Judean Desert (DJD) or other editiones principes. While these volumes are recognized as major treatments of the corpus, they are far from flawless. Many emendations to the readings have been argued in the literature, with some relevant for the present work. It would seem a matter of sound practice to engage with the wider literature.

In restricting his consideration to certain treatments alone, Cook biases his textual corpus needlessly. One would like to see a published lexicographic volume engage more widely with the arguments around the text. As a consequence of that restriction, however, Cook is left to define glosses for words that are nearly fully reconstructed in the text (e.g., the *aphel* form of רחס on 165; עדי II, 172). In other words, there are words defined in the dictionary that may not be present in the texts themselves.

Further and perhaps worse than giving preeminence to the DJD volumes, Cook seems to deviate from this method ad hoc. For example, אפר in 4Q 196 fragment 17 ii.15 (cf. אפר, 23) is contested among Beyer, Stadel, and Fitzmyer. Fitzmyer represents the DJD reading of אפר, but Cook dissents and favors אפר and does not explain why.

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Finally, within the entries Cook avoids eliminating the various inflected forms, as opposed to Michael Sokoloff in his dictionaries on Jewish Palestinian Aramaic and Jewish Babylonian Aramaic. Consequently, one is not surprised to find שָׁנַה and שָׁנֵה combined into one entry where Sokoloff respects the differences in orthography and treats them as synonyms. But one is surprised to find the base form שָׁנַה multiplied into entries שָׁנַה, שָׁנַה, שָׁנַה, and שָׁנַה.

These concerns aside, the work represents a great service to students of Qumran Aramaic in that it presents a single repository for many of the glosses they will encounter when using critical editions of the texts. Despite the above issues, Cook’s work is commendable and provides a helpful resource for research in QA. I very much look forward to the next edition of this dictionary and hopes Cook builds upon the good work he has put into the present volume.