

## INTRODUCTION

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

today I would like to welcome you to our 8<sup>th</sup> professional conference for Bible, Theology and Missions in Stuttgart with words from the prophet Isaiah (Isa 55:8-11 ESV):

<sup>8</sup> *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.*

<sup>9</sup> *For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

<sup>10</sup> *“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,*

*<sup>11</sup> so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

What is obvious from these few sentences of the prophet is, firstly, how limited our knowledge is. We have to realize that God's thoughts are much more comprehensive than our „scientific“ understanding, which often makes man arrogant. It is good to know that we are limited in our knowledge, as Socrates put it: „I know that I don't know“<sup>1</sup>, so that we can become reasonable again and are able to comprehend anew, especially in testing and proving things correctly.

The second thing that we can conclude from these lines of the prophet Isaiah is the fact, that

God, the Lord, is the source of all knowledge; whoever listens to him will gladly receive new knowledge. For out of his mouth comes forth the word that teaches us and unlocks new dimensions of knowledge unto us; whoever pays attention to His word can draw knowledge from it, and whoever obeys and honors him, confesses him to be true. This pleases the creator of the entire universe who wants to share his wisdom with us, so that His wisdom can set us free.

### **The influence of Semitic culture in the Middle East**

When enlightenment took hold of Europe in the 18th century people first rediscovered antiquity, the Greek and Latin cultures, which have influenced Europe significantly. This was the age of „intellectual“ renaissance and the re-birth of rationalism in Europe, which were founded by the philosophy of antiquity. Since then Western culture and science have become focused on this discovery so that the influence of Hellenism on all other cultures was generally assumed, also on the cultures of the Middle East. This one-sided view of historical and cultural development has led to a biased notion of the historical development of the Orient which continues to be influential up to our present times.

However, new excavations and research in the Orient brought to light a profound layer of historical and cultural development which was

shaped before Hellenism came up and had its sphere of influence especially in the Middle East. This epoch was mainly shaped by the Aramaic language and culture which reached its peak during the Persian Empire. During this epoch Aramaic language and culture had spread so far that it comprised an entire empire, from Mesopotamia to Egypt and even beyond these borders.

Today it can be assumed, that before Hellenism spread out, a unified world language had already been in existence which influenced all political and social levels profoundly. Therefore, neither Hellenism nor “Koine” Greek were the first culture or world language to form a unified „lingua franca“. On the contrary: the Greek historian Herodotus who reported on the Persian wars during the 5th century BC (the war between the Persian and the Greek petty states – the Ionian Uprising), described in his work “Histories”, how Mesopotamia and Egypt had already reached their cultural peak at that time.<sup>2</sup> This shows us that the Aramaic language has been the bearer of international cultural and political developments and it was precisely this cultural and political predominance in the Middle East of the time which challenged Alexander the Great to start out and conquer it.

After Alexander’s victory over the Persians in the battle of Issus in 333 BC the Hellenistic culture was introduced into the Mediterranean region. This was the beginning of Hellenism, and the Greek language spread out in the known world of that time to gradually replace Aramaic as “world language” starting from the 3rd century BC onwards. Everything that took place in the Middle East before this time and up until the Persian epoch was mainly carried by the Aramaic language and culture.

But even after this historic event the Aramaic language remained to play an important role in the Middle East and was not completely replaced by Koine Greek, as our Western research has tried to persuade us. Rather, Ara-

maic remained the language of the ordinary people in the Middle East and shaped everyday life, at home and in local trade, as many recently discovered documents have proven.<sup>3</sup>

### **The significance of the Aramaic-Semitic culture and language for theological research**

It has to be emphasized that Aramaic is a Semitic language which a non-Semitic people, as the Persians were, employed. This means that the Semitic structures of the Aramaic language inevitably had a shaping effect on the various cultures of the Middle East and beyond. This becomes evident in the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Old Testament, as well as in the text of the New Testament.<sup>4</sup> Hence, these texts cannot be explained adequately if the Semitic character of the underlying text is not evaluated and sufficiently recognized.<sup>5</sup>

For theological research it is a specifically important question, how these two world languages, Aramaic and Greek, influenced the development of the text of Holy Scripture. While theology in the last decades emphasized the influence of the Greek language, especially the LXX, the more recent research proves more and more that the Aramaic language was as important, if not even “more” important, in developing the text of the Bible, especially for the interpretation and exposition of the life and words of Jesus in the NT.<sup>6</sup>

Since the texts of the Second Temple Period partially overlap with the Aramaic inscriptions found in the excavations at Tayma, it is therefore appropriate to compare the texts of this period with each other. In order to illuminate this historical issue more generally and to discuss the relevance of the Aramaic language for the development of the biblical revelation, we have summarized this conference under the topic: *“The influence of Aramaic language and culture in the Orient during the Second Temple Period”*

## Topic of lectures

This morning we want to investigate the archeological and historical question of the Aramaic language based on the excavations which have taken place at Tayma, Saudi Arabia. In the afternoon we will discuss the influence of the Aramaic language for the formation of biblical text and which hermeneutic questions result from this for understanding the biblical text and for theological research.

We are very thankful to the German Archeological Institute in Berlin (DAI) that it accepted our invitation in order to report on the latest results on the excavations at Tayma. Since all staff is currently employed in these excavations and since these excavations in Saudi Arabia can only be carried out during certain seasons due to the climate (from October onward), it was not easy for the staff of the German Archeological Institute to find time for this lecture. Prof. Dr. Ricardo Eichmann, who wanted to be here today, already predicted this at the beginning of the year. But due to the above mentioned reasons he has sent his colleague and deputy, Dr. habil. Arnulf Hausleiter, and released him from his work for this lecture. He will speak to us on the topic: „*The archeology of the oasis Tayma*“.

The second lecture in the morning will be held by Dr. habil. Peter Stein on the topic: „*Aramaic in Tamyā: on the linguistic situation of the oasis in the second half of the first millennium B.C.*“.

Dr. Stein is a private lecturer at the University of Jena and is known as one of the few experts in the Aramaic of this period. He has significantly contributed to the translation of the Aramaic texts in Tayma and other locations in the Middle East. We are very thankful to Dr. Stein that he accepted our invitation in order to speak to us about the latest results of the research of the Aramaic language in the Middle East.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> οἶδα οὐκ εἰδώς!

<sup>2</sup> From him comes the saying: „But Babylon was not only a quite large but also the most beautiful of all cities we know of.“ Herodotus, Histories I, 178.

<sup>3</sup> Cf for expample Mur 18 (55/56 n. Chr) on <http://www.deadseascrolls.org.il/explore-the-archive/manuscript/MUR18-1>. Cf. K. Beyer, Die Aramäischen Texte vom Toten Meer (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984), 306ff.

<sup>4</sup> If one compares John 1:14 „... full of grace and truth“ with Exodus 34:6 „... grace and truth“ one realizes, that in the Greek text in each case ALETHEIA was used, but into German it was translated differently: in the OT „steadfast love“ und in the NT „truth“! This shows how the Hebrew text of the OT influenced the translation of the word ALETHEIA and its' meaning. For more on this topic cf. also the article by M. Piennisch in this volume.

<sup>5</sup> On the general influence of the Persian empire and its language on Israel and the formation of the OT canon cf. also the article „Perserreich und Israel“, TRE II, 211f. Already in the Assyrian period Aramaic was employed as means of international trade and diplomacy. This importance of Aramaic continued in the Middle East until the turning point in time after which Aramaic remained in use beside koine Greek.

<sup>6</sup> On this compare the article by C. Wassermann: Der biblisch-semitische Hintergrund des Neuen Testaments, Teil 2: Die grammatischen Semitismen, STT Band VII (2012), 7-19.

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