

I. WRITING SYSTEM. THE ALPHABET

CONSONANTS

As is indicated in the Preface, the Syriac script is found in several forms. The one used here is the *serṭā* script used principally by the West Syrian churches. (Examples of other scripts can be found in the Readings section (Texts 2, 9 and 10), and alphabet lists are reproduced on pp. 140-141.)

The Syriac script, like that of Arabic and Hebrew, is basically consonantal, the writing of the signs to indicate vowels being a secondary invention. The direction of writing is right to left.

LIST OF CONSONANTS

	TRANS- LITERATION	NAME	NOTES
ʾ	'	' <i>ālap</i>	This is not the equivalent of <i>a</i> , but accompanies any vowel at the beginning of a syllable and is also used for the glottal stop between two vowels (as in south-eastern and Scots English "bo'el (bottle)").
ܒ	<i>b</i>	<i>Bēṭ</i>	As in "give", not as in "genius".
ܓ	<i>g</i>	<i>Gāmal</i>	
ܕ	<i>d</i>	<i>Dālaṭ</i>	
ܚ	<i>h</i>	<i>Hē</i>	
ܘ	<i>w</i>	<i>Waw</i>	

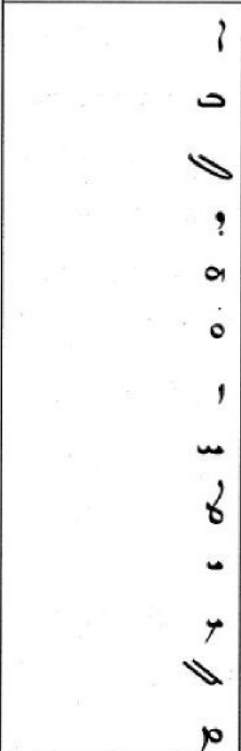
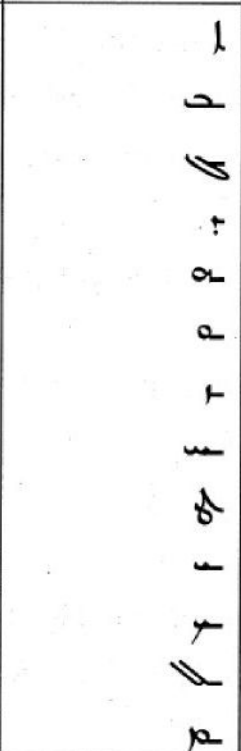

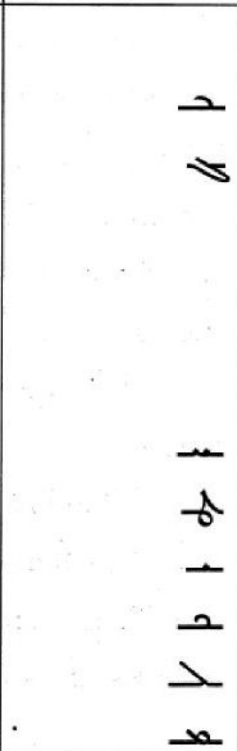
	TRANS- LITERATION	NAME	NOTES
ܙ	<i>z</i>	<i>Zayn</i>	
ܚ	<i>h</i>	<i>Hēt</i>	A more breathy sound than <i>b</i> . Like a stage whisper.
ܛ	<i>t</i>	<i>Tēt</i>	Emphatic <i>t</i> , with the tongue not stiff, but raised towards the velum (fleshy part at the back of the roof of the mouth).
ܝ	<i>y</i>	<i>Yōd</i>	
ܚܘܝܟܐ	<i>k</i>	<i>Kāp</i>	
ܠ	<i>l</i>	<i>Lāmad</i>	
ܡ	<i>m</i>	<i>Mīm</i>	
ܢ	<i>n</i>	<i>Nūn</i>	
ܣܘܪܝܟܐ	<i>s</i>	<i>Semkaṣ</i>	
ܥܘܪܝܟܐ	<i>ē</i>	<i>‘ē</i>	Similar to <i>‘alap</i> , but sustained and with the throat constricted.
ܦ	<i>p</i>	<i>Pē</i>	
ܣܘܪܝܟܐ	<i>s</i>	<i>Ṣādē</i>	Emphatic <i>s</i> , with tongue as for <i>Tēt</i> .
ܩܘܦܐ	<i>q</i>	<i>Qōp</i>	Pronounced further back than English <i>k</i> .
ܪܘܟܐ	<i>r</i>	<i>Rēš</i>	
ܫܘܪܝܟܐ	<i>š</i>	<i>Šin</i>	A single letter in Syriac for <i>sh</i> .
ܬܘܪܝܟܐ	<i>t</i>	<i>Taw</i>	





The consonants are joined to each other in writing, as in Arabic. The slight changes of shape which result will not cause any great difficulty, but the following forms used at the end of a group of letters should be noted:

ܘܢܘܝܟܐ becomes ܘܢܘܝܟܐ

u	becomes	7
v	becomes	8
w	becomes	9
x	becomes	10
y	becomes	11
z	becomes	12

Other letters in final position simply add a short flourish - u, 8, etc. Some letters cannot be joined to the letter which follows. All this is summarized in the following table:

UNCONNECTED	CONNECTED ON RIGHT	CONNECTED ON LEFT	CONNECTED ON RIGHT AND LEFT
			

UNCONNECTED	CONNECTED ON RIGHT	CONNECTED ON LEFT	CONNECTED ON RIGHT AND LEFT
			

Confusion between consonants should not occur. With regard to ܘ (*w*) and ܙ (*q*), it should be noted that ܘ is only joined up to a preceding letter. ܙ can be joined up in either direction. When ܙ is at the end of a word, it has the form ܙ. When ܘ is at the end of a word or group of letters, it has the form ܘ.

There are certain conventional special joins between letters:

ܠ (l followed by *'ālap*) is written ܠܐ;

ܘ is often written ܘܘ.

There are other joins made purely for calligraphic reasons in some manuscripts. The East Syriac (so-called

“Nestorian”) script often combines *t* followed by *'* as in **ܡܝܬ**
 = *myt'*.

Exercise i

(a) The following list of words with transliterations will illustrate how consonants are joined up and may be used for practice by covering one column and attempting to write/transliterate.

ܐܡܐ	'h'
ܒܪܐ	<i>br</i>
ܕܢܐ	<i>dn</i>
ܓܒܪܐ	<i>gbr</i>
ܚܘܐ	<i>hw</i>
ܚܕܐ	<i>hd</i>
ܒܘܘܐ	<i>bz</i>
ܒܬܪܐ	<i>btr</i>
ܩܕܐ	<i>kd</i>
ܩܬܐ	<i>qt'</i>
ܢܫܒܐ	<i>nšb</i>
ܡܠܟܐ	<i>mlk</i>
ܠܐ	<i>'l</i>
ܡܘܩܕܢܐ	<i>pwqdn'</i>
ܣܝܕܐ	<i>syd</i>
ܪܒܐ	<i>rb</i>
ܫܠܡܐ	<i>šm'</i>
ܫܪܝܐ	<i>šyr'</i>

ملا	<i>mlt'</i>
نفس	<i>npš'</i>
عش	<i>yšw'</i>
لوت	<i>lwt</i>
توبن	<i>twbn'</i>
يغبتي	<i>y'gbty'</i>
ملنوت	<i>mlpnwt'</i>
بسيليس	<i>b'syllhys</i>
سنيوت	<i>snwnyt'</i>
دي	<i>'di'</i>
پرسپ	<i>pršp'</i>
يبن	<i>ywbnn</i>

(b) Further practice may be gained by transliterating the following passages. Treat full stops as phrase-dividers.

احص وجمعنا. نامف عص. الال ملكتهم. لوت
 رجب. امنا وجمعنا اف حاونا. هت ح حسنا
 وهنم مينا. معهم ح مهن. امنا و اف م
 محم حسبن. هلا لاج حسنا. الا هي م
 صعا. صها وولج. ه ملكتها سلا لاهنا.
 حنم ملص. امص.

اهت م امنا وملكت ووهنا
 هم لوت محو افه. م حبه ونب مينا م
 مينا. مام مله مينا مينا مينا ووهنا.
 لاهنا مينا مينا مينا مينا. لاهنا
 ووهنا ولا مينا. م مينا اهت مينا م م
 مينا ورم مينا لالا وواوه. م لاهنا مينا

II. VOWELS AND OTHER SIGNS

VOWEL SIGNS

Although the writing system was basically consonantal, various dots and other marks were added to help with reading and to eliminate ambiguity. The West Syriac pronunciation and vowel signs are the basis of this book, but the main features of the more ancient East Syriac tradition of pronunciation are noted below and the East Syriac signs may be found on p. 141.

Three of the consonantal signs developed a secondary use to indicate some vowels. Thus:

- ⌋ (*ʾālap*) was used to represent *e/ē* and *ā*, especially at the end of words.
- (*y*) was used to represent *ī* (*e*).
- (*w*) was used to represent *ō* (only preserved normally in East Syriac pronunciation) and *ū* (as in "moon"). The East Syriac script (see pp. 140-141) distinguishes between ◐ = *u* and ◑ = *o*, and these dots are sometimes imported into the West Syriac script to reflect the original pronunciation. They are not used in the main part of this book, though they do appear where the Eastern script appears.

As the system evolved, further precision was felt necessary and vowel marks adapted from Greek Α, Ο, Ε, Η and ΟΥ (*ou*) were added above or below the preceding

consonant to indicate types of vowel. Although mostly placed above the consonant, they can be placed below to avoid clashes with other signs. The system is not designed to indicate vowel length systematically, though in practice three of the signs are used for long vowels:

○̇ *a* as in ܐܘܪܝܢܐ (*man*). This is the short *a* of British English, as in “hat”, approximately the vowel in American English “dot”.

○̇̄ *ā* as in ܣܐܡܐ (*sām*). In West Syriac tradition this original *ā* is pronounced as in “raw” in British English. In American English it is like the *o* in the word “more”. Hence scholars often transliterate it as *o/ō* (as in the title of this book). In East Syriac pronunciation it appears as a long *a*, as in “father”. In this book, apart from in the title, it is normally transliterated as *ā*, to reflect the most ancient pronunciation.

○̇̆ *e* as in ܡܢܐ (*men*). Short *e* as in English “set”.

○̇̆̄ *ī* (more rarely *i*) as in ܪܝܫܐ (*rīš*). Note in this example that both ○̇̆̄ and ܘ̇̆̄ are used to indicate the (long) vowel.

○̇̆̆̄ *ū* (more rarely *u*) as in ܦܘܩܐ (*pūq*). As we have noted, East Syriac tradition preserves an ancient distinction here between *o* and *u*, and this is shown in its vowel signs. The two are merged in West Syriac pronunciation. Again note in the example given that both ○̇̆̆̄ and ܘ̇̆̆̄ are used to represent the vowel.

○̇̆̆̆̄ is also used, but only in the interjection ܘܗܐ, “Oh”.

OTHER SIGNS

A. Dots or diacritical points and other marks were used, as felt necessary, to convey certain distinctions in sound and meaning. Note:

(1) A dot placed over the letters *b, g, d, k, p* and *t*, indicates their plosive pronunciation (as in English). A dot placed below indicates an alternative, fricative (aspirated) or "soft" pronunciation as *v* (i.e. *bh, gh, dh, kh, f, th* (in transliteration indicated by *ḥ, ḡ, ḏ, ḵ, ṗ, ṭ*). For example, **ب** is hard and **بِ** soft. The soft pronunciations are normal immediately after a vowel, even the vowel of a secondary prefix or closely associated preceding word (but see B (ii) below). These dots are smaller than other dots which appear and are often omitted or used inconsistently. They are not generally used in this book, except in this chapter and when it is necessary to clarify pronunciation. When they *do* appear, take note!

(2) Dots were also used to distinguish words which appeared identical in unvocalized texts. Thus an upper dot on **لَاب** indicates it is to be read as *lāb* rather than *leb*. The upper dot on **قَاتِل** indicates it is to be pronounced *qāṭel* rather than *qṭal*, which can be written **قَاتِلْ** to indicate this. There are some vocabulary items which are distinguished in this way: **مَلِكَا** is *malkā*, "king", while **مَلِكَا** is *melkā*, "advice". Also some verbal forms are identical in unvocalized texts and are distinguished by dots.

- (3) A double dot sign as in **مَلَكًا** (*malke*) is used to indicate that the word is plural. It is placed where convenient in the word and may merge with the dot of **ك**, which then becomes **ك**.
- (4) A line under or above a consonant indicates that it is not pronounced, e.g. **نَاشَا**, pronounced *nāšā*.

B. Features which are not indicated by special signs.

- (1) It is important to note that Syriac words are frequently found without any vowel between the first two consonants in the word (or two consonants at the beginning of a new syllable within a word). In most cases this is historically the result of the *loss* of an original full vowel, which has been shortened and is eliminated in later pronunciation. This shortened or eliminated vowel (sometimes called *shewa*) can be represented in transliteration by [◌]e (as, e.g., in Exercise ii) or simply omitted.

Thus: **ܚܬܐܦ** is *h^etāp*, or *h'tāp*.
ܟܬܐܒܐ is *k^etābā*, or *k'tābā*.

Note in the last example, *k^etābā*, that the softening of the *t* has arisen from the original vowel preceding it, despite the fact that it has been reduced to a *shewa* (see A (i) above).

- (2) Also lacking any distinctive sign in Syriac is the doubling of consonants when no vowel intervenes. In fact double pronunciation of consonants was virtually lost at least in West Syrian pronunciation, which is why there is no

distinctive sign for it. Rare examples of a consonant being written twice do, however, exist: *sammānē*. Knowledge of where consonants were originally doubled will come with knowledge of the grammar.

The letters *b, g, d, k, p, t*, when originally doubled, are always pronounced hard. Hence latent doubling reveals itself in the unexpected hard pronunciation of these consonants after a vowel (see A (i) above). Thus in a dot placed above the indicates hard pronunciation. Since there is a vowel immediately before the letter, the hardening must result from original doubling (*qabbel*).

Students are recommended to become familiar with Chapters I and II before proceeding further.

NOTE ON PUNCTUATION

Punctuation is not very systematic and both MSS and printed books contain great variations. However,

- ❖ is used at the end of a paragraph.
- . is used for full stop, semi-colon and comma.
- : : : usually indicate lesser breaks.

There is no question mark.

Exercise ii

- (a) Practice transliterating and writing vocalized Syriac using the following list.

بَقْرًا	<i>baqrā</i>
مَلِكًا	<i>malkā</i>
هَنَا	<i>hānā</i>
مَدْبْرًا	<i>madb^rrā</i> (later pronounced <i>mad^ḍbrā</i>)
أَلَاهًا	<i>'alāhā</i>
كَنْشًا	<i>kenšā</i>
إِتَا	<i>'itā</i> (<i>'ittā</i>)
هَكَاةً	<i>hākanā</i>
أَتَا	<i>'atā</i>
تَاوْرًا	<i>tavrā</i>
كِتَابًا	<i>ke'tab</i>
أَرَاءَ	<i>'ar'ā</i>
شَلِيَّةً	<i>šaliṭ</i>
پَاغْرًا	<i>pagrā</i>
مَرْجًا	<i>q'reh</i>
مَلِكًا	<i>š'lihā</i>

كُمْرًا	<i>kūmrā</i>
سَیْطًا	<i>saypā</i>
بَظًا	<i>n̄pal</i>
أَبَهَ	<i>'abē</i>
نَآرِینَ	<i>nā'rīn</i>
مَدِیْتًا	<i>m̄ditā (m̄dittā)</i>

(b) Practice further transliteration and the reading aloud of the following texts:

أَجَسَ وَجَعَصْنَا. تَدَقَّبَ عَصَبًا. نَالِبًا مَلَكُهُ بِأَمْرٍ. تَهَوًّا
 رَجَسْنَا. أَسْجَلًا وَجَعَصْنَا أَوْ تَارُوْنَا. هَبَّ كَحْ كَسْفًا
 وَهَهْصَفَ مَهْصَلًا. هَجَّهَمَ كَحْ مَهَخَّتْ أَنْضًا وَأَوْ مَسَّ
 عَجَّصَ حَسْتَجَّجَ. هَلَا نَأَكُ حَسْهَنُنَا. أَلَا جَبْرًا مَحْ
 صَبًا. مَهَلًا وَيُوكِرُ هَبَّ مَلَكُهُ بِأَمْرٍ هَسَلًا
 هَبَّعْهَسْنَا. حَلَّكُمُ حَلَّصْتُمْ أَصْبَ ❖

أَهْ أَسْبًا هَبَّ أَيْدِيًا وَأَمَّا كَهْ حَصْبًا رَهْرَهْ هَبَّجَبْ مَبَّ
 مَهْوَهْ هَلَا مَهْوَهْ وَأَ مَهْجَلًا مَهْصَلًا جَمْدًا هَجْبًا كَهْ
 حَهْلِيلًا حَهْصَلًا وَهَبَّعْهَسَهْ هَبَّ. هَهْصَلًا وَهَبَّعْهَسَهْ هَبْنَا
 كَسْطَهْ هَبَّعْجَبًا وَمَكَّنَهْ هَامْبًا حَهْهَبْ. مَبَّهْتُمْ
 حَصْبًا وَهَبَّعْهَسَهْ رَهْرَهْ وَهَبَّجَبْ هَبَّهْ. أَمَّا أَيْدِيًا حَهْهَبْ.
 وَهَبْنَا بِأَمْرٍ مَبَّهْ هَلَا مَبَّهْ مَلَا مَلَا جَبَّهْ وَهَبْنَا حَلَّا مَبَّ
 مَهْلًا وَهَبَّجَبْ ❖