



Massimo Pazzini, *Grammatica siriaca* (Analecta 46. Milano: Terra Sancta Edizioni, 2022). Pp. 191. 35 EUR. ISBN 979-12-5471-135-4

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Massimo Pazzini's *Grammatica siriaca* is a short textbook for the Syriac language. It is the fruit of the author's many years of experience teaching ancient languages at the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum in Jerusalem and was the first textbook on Syriac published in Italian. The 2022 publication is the second edition, appearing more than 20 years after the first (Jerusalem 1999), and is unchanged except in that it contains a table of errata. The author acknowledges the need for further revision: "I would have liked to produce a new revised and corrected edition but, due to various difficulties mainly of a technical nature, I have limited myself to including in this anastatic reprint a table of *Errata-corrige* for the reporting and correction of some errors" (p. 4).

The structure of the manual is clear and coherent. The teaching material is preceded by a short bibliography (pp. 7–8) and an introduction (pp. 10–11). The main content is divided into two parts. The first focuses on orthography and phonology (pp. 13–31); the second addresses morphology (pp. 33–83). Thus, the main text comprises only 76 pages (pp. 13–89). An appendix (pp. 84–89) analyzes verbs with suffixed pronouns. This is followed by conjugation tables for various verb groups (pp. 91–109), exercises (pp. 111–24), and reading texts (pp. 125–37). As the author himself states, the conjugation tables and most of the exercises were copied from the grammar of Ludovicus Palacios (1954). Texts for independent reading (unelaborated in this book; some can be found with elaboration in Takamitsu Muraoaka (1987)) include: Gen 1:1–6 (with the parallel text from Targum Onkelos for comparison), Gen 1:1–10, Ps 151, short parables, Gen 39:7–23 with Ephrem's commentary, Matt 5:1–20, Matt 6:5–15, Abgar's letter to Jesus (from the Doctrine of Addai), Our Father, Matt 13:1–9, Luke 10:25–37, Ps 120 (121), and Jas 1:1–11. The exact sources from which these texts are quoted are not given. While this is acceptable in the case of biblical texts, it may cause confusion in the case of other well-known texts, and seems utterly unacceptable in the case of short fables of unknown origin. I was able to locate these last in the aforementioned grammar by Palacios (pp. 228–30), who gives their sources: Henrico Gismondi (1913); and Aemilius Roediger (1868). Pazzini's manual ends with a glossary (pp. 139–84) containing words appearing in the exercises and texts, and a table of errata

(pp. 189–91) giving 38 corrections to the first edition. The corrections mainly concern Syriac spelling.

Pazzini first defines his work as his own, although, further on in the introduction, he also cites the most important source of his publication, “especially as far as phonology is concerned” (p. 5). This is Muraoka’s textbook, *Classical Syriac for Hebraists* (Muraoka 1987), in its first edition. The author explains that his textbook differs from the source as follows: “Syriac is compared with Biblical Aramaic rather than with Biblical Hebrew, and the material is simplified” (p. 5). It should be noted, however, that not only in the section on phonology but also in that on morphology, the layout and content of the material rely heavily on Muraoka’s book. This is explicitly noted in most places where the author relies directly on Muraoka. It is worth mentioning at this point that, while the use of Muraoka’s work is obviously an appeal to high authority in Semitic languages, Muraoka himself later published a more complete textbook on Syriac *Classical Syriac: A Basic Grammar with a Chrestomathy* (Muraoka 1997), released in a second, revised edition in 2005. The use of this item could enrich the book under discussion.

For the absolute beginner student of Syriac, the fairly detailed introductory notes on pronunciation (pp. 16–17) and spelling (pp. 17–18), as well as comparisons with other Semitic languages (pp. 18–22), will be helpful. It is no secret that the most challenging area to master in the study of ancient languages relates to syntax. Unfortunately, this is the biggest shortcoming of the textbook under review. Only a few brief remarks on “complex tenses/modes” (not a precise and commonly used nomenclature) are devoted to this subject, which is covered in literally one page (pp. 62–63). In contrast, Muraoka’s book, on which Pazzini relied, devotes almost 30 pages to syntax (pp. 40–69): about 20% of its entirety.

It is hard to define the target audience of Pazzini’s book. On the one hand, the relatively modest size and cursory treatment of many topics make it clear that this is not a complete grammar for independent scholars. On the other hand, it is not a typical textbook for tutorial use because it lacks division into lesson units. This dilemma is reflected in the exercises given at the end of the book. They are not linked directly to lesson units (these being absent), but deal with particular issues of grammar. That they are merely supplementary here is understandable, but this raises the question of whether an independent student will be able to make adequate use of them. Proper use of the exercises is likely to require the guidance of an appropriate teacher. Also, the texts given for independent reading have not been developed in any way that invites the autonomous student to make use of them. (In the Muraoka source, some of the texts are analyzed.) Pazzini does note in his introduction (p. 5) that this book was written as material for an introductory course in Syriac, which he himself taught. Unfortunately, reflecting on the practical usefulness of the book, the impression received is that the material was not

adequately prepared to serve a wider audience. Even the best syllabus does not become a practical textbook for students automatically.

A side note: The terminology retained by Pazzini (“Nestorian” and “Jacobite”), although used for centuries in the Catholic Church to describe the churches of the Syriac tradition is today considered outdated, inaccurate, and pejorative. Current scholarship avoids its use for the churches of the Syriac tradition and particularly in reference to the script, pronunciation, and other aspects of the language.

In conclusion, this is a re-publication of a solid introduction to the Syriac language that has been successfully used in Italian circles for years. It should be recognized that the text requires a thorough refresher. Additionally, a question remains regarding whether, where there is a need for a modern-language textbook on Syriac, it would not be better to translate in its entirety one of the respected existing textbooks in another language. One such example is *Robinson’s Paradigms and Exercises in Syriac Grammar* (Coakley 2002), the most complete and mature work available, tailored to those who have previously studied biblical languages; also worth consideration, as publications more accessible to the complete newcomer to the world of Semitic languages, are *Leshono Suryoyo: First Studies in Syriac* (Healey 2005), and *New Syriac Primer* (Kiraz 2024).

Having said that, students at the beginning of their adventures with the Syriac language who use this book with an awareness of its various limitations may undoubtedly benefit from it a great deal. Indeed, for students of biblical studies, the constant comparisons in this book between Syriac and Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic provide essential help. Moreover, given the ever-growing interest in Syriac among scholars of diverse backgrounds, Pazzini’s book may be an accessible starting point among Italian students. However, those who want or need to go further will turn quickly to Muraoka, and to Theodor Nöldeke’s work *Compendious Syriac Grammar* (Nöldeke 1904), a manual of Syriac grammar that is not only the most complete, but that, for the most part, has not aged despite the passing of many years.

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