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ARAMAIC, JESUS' LANGUAGE, IS STILL SPOKEN IN SYRIA

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MALULA, Syria— There is no indication that Jesus ever set foot in this village whose houses are carved out of the salmon-colored stone of Mount Qalamun. But here in this Christian enclave in the mountains of Socialist, predominantly Sunni Moslem Syria, the ancient language that He and His disciples spoke can still be heard.

Malula, population 4,000, is the largest of three villages near Mount Qalamun where Aramaic is the spoken language. Aramaic mingled with Arabic is also heard in masses at the Syrian Orthodox Church in the old part of Damascus.

But religious leaders and scholars of the language say the ancient tongue is rapidly dying and little can be done to prevent its extinction.

"The language will die in 40 years," said Msgr. Francois Abou Mokh, the Archbishop of Damascus, who was born in Malula. "The new generation has never learned Aramaic. They only speak Arabic." **The Causes of Decline**

Aramaic has fallen victim, as have dozens of other languages, to economic progress and social mobility in Syria. Only 30 years ago, there were no schools here. Now children of the villages learn Arabic, Syria's national language, in state-run schools.

In addition, more than a third of the village residents are in Damascus, either for advanced education or for work. Many people commute daily to the Syrian capital to sell sheep and goat products, the mainstay of the village.

Aramaic as spoken here is a lovely language to hear: more flowing and, in the view of some, less guttural than modern Arabic. But Bishop Abou Mokh said the two languages, as well as Hebrew, are similar and are derived from the same lost language.

"Consider our Arabic greeting - salaam, that is, hello, or peace," the Bishop said. "In Hebrew it's shalom. In Aramaic it's schlomo." Aramaic has had a distinguished and long history in this region. Scholars here say Aramaic emerged at least 900 years before the birth of Christ.

Jews learned Aramaic in Babylon before the birth of Christ during their exile from Palestine. When they returned, Hebrew had been relegated to a religious language, like Latin for Catholics today, and Aramaic was the spoken tongue, the Bishop said.

All of what is now Syria had become Christian and spoke Aramaic by the second century, Bishop Mokh said.

The Arab invasion of the region in the seventh century brought not only Islam but also a new language, both of which were imposed on the region. Too Poor to Matter

But Malula and two other nearby villages - Jabaadin and Bakhaa - were extremely poor and of too little consequence to spend much time and effort capturing. So they remained isolated.

Bishop Abou Mokh says it was the isolation that allowed Aramaic to survive. There were no roads to Malula 40 years ago. Bakhaa remained almost inaccessible by highway until the 1960's, when a paved road was finally built.

Of the three, only Malula remains Christian. About 300 years ago the two other villages converted to Islam, an act of rebellion against severe fasting requirements imposed by the Byzantine Oriental Church, Bishop Abou Mokh said. Malula did not convert because it had traditionally been a Christian sanctuary.

Near the top of Mount Qalamun, some 5,000 feet above sea level, is the tomb of St. Takla, a pupil of St. Paul's, who came here to escape her pagan father. Cut off by the steep mountain, she prayed for help. The mountain reportedly split into two, creating a narrow passage through which she escaped. A convent marking the spot, which contains her crypt, is among the oldest in the world, residents of Malula say.

Syrians from villages that refused to convert to Islam moved here, making Malula a fervently Christian place.

map of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Israel