CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

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I. THE SOURCES

When working on the Aramaeans of Syria and their religion, a distinction must be made between sources referring to the Aramaeans of Syria and those originating from the Aramaeans of Syria.

The former consist of Old-Babylonian texts that mention nomads, in general, and inscriptions of Assyrian kings, beginning in the 12th century B.C., that explicitly mention Aramaeans. Aramaeans appear primarily in opposition to the sedentary population or as nomadic shepherds who were seen as a threatening to cultivated land and the state. The inscriptions include those of the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser I (1114–1076 B.C.) and his successors, King Shalmaneser III (858–824 B.C.) and his successors, Tiglath-Pileser III (745–727 B.C.), Shalmaneser V (726–722 B.C.), Sargon II (721–705 B.C.), Sennacherib (704–681 B.C.), Esarhaddon (681–669 B.C.), and Ashurbanipal (669–627 B.C.). Another important source for the Aramaeans of western and southern Syria is the Old Testament.

As for the Aramaic sources, it can be determined that the Aramaeans adopted their script from the Phoenicians sometime around the late 10th and early 9th century B.C. The oldest inscription from the kingdom of Samʾal was written during the time of King Kulamuwa (ca. 840–810 B.C.) in the Phoenician language and script (KAI 24). A Luwian influence is visible in the relief-like letters. Also from the reign of King Kulamuwa is a dedicatory inscription in Aramaic but still using the Phoenician script (KAI 25). Outside of Samʾal the transition from Phoenician to Aramaic

7 Cf. Borger 1996.
script is visible, in, for example, the oldest known Aramaic inscription on the so-called “little altar” from Tell Halaf (KAI 231; late 10th or early 9th century B.C.), and the votive inscription to the god Melqart from Breğ near Aleppo (KAI 201; second half of the 9th century B.C.).

Further epigraphic changes occur in the inscriptions from Tell Fekheriye (KAI 309). They exhibit several epigraphic innovations compared with the older Aramaic inscriptions. These concern the shape of several letters and the usage of *matres lectionis* as vowels.

From this time onward, the existence of an independent Aramaic script can be assumed. In an 8th-century B.C. Hieroglyphic Luwian inscription from Carchemish the prince regent Yariri boasts of his knowledge of twelve languages and four scripts. The scripts are Hieroglyphic Luwian, Phoenician, Assyrian, and Taymanite, i.e., the Aramaic script of Syria.

Because of the westward expansion of the Assyrian Empire and its associated deportations, the Aramaeans as well as their language and culture were able to spread to Assyria and Babylonia. Here, the coexistence of Aramaic with the Assyrian and Babylonian language as well as the coexistence of the Aramaic script with cuneiform writing is documented. In 8th-century Assyria, scribes copying old texts even spoke Aramaic as their everyday language. Thus, a tablet of the Gilgamesh epic with an unusual way of writing vowels exhibits an Aramaean scribal tradition. It was written in the 7th century B.C. and found in Sultantepe.

There is one known case of an Aramaic inscription written in cuneiform: this is the so-called Uruk Incantation from the 3rd century B.C. Even though none of the textual corpus of Aramaean literature of Syria,