Episode Book

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The Aramaic Spoken Today Isn't the Language of Jesus

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SYNOPSIS

Most of the 575,000 to one million people speaking Neo-Aramaic today speak Eastern varieties like Suret and Turoyo, not the Western branch of antiquity. Only about a thousand people still speak Western Neo-Aramaic in the Syrian villages of Maaloula and Jubb'adin. This deep dive maps the surviving Aramaic family, from its historic homelands across Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria to diaspora hubs in Södertälje, Germany, and Michigan, while examining why speaker counts vary wildly and how endangered dialects like Bohtan and Jewish Neo-Aramaic are faring.

TRANSCRIPT



Herman

The phrase "language of Jesus" gets people very misty-eyed, and almost nobody who says it is pointing at the right village.



Corn

Daniel wants the full accounting. Who still speaks Aramaic as a living tongue, where those communities actually sit, homelands and diaspora, which varieties they speak, how far those have drifted from the Aramaic of antiquity, and whether any of this survives the generation currently holding it. He wants the map, the genealogy, and the prognosis.



Herman

Which is three episodes of material, so we'll do it in one. I'm Herman Poppleberry, for anyone keeping score at home, and this is a good one.



Corn

Let's start with the number, because the number is the whole story.



Herman

The number everyone cites is between 575,000 and a million speakers of modern Neo-Aramaic worldwide. And the fact that it's a range that wide is itself the first finding. Nobody has counted. The Suret language article, the one covering the big Assyrian-Chaldean complex, gives 940,000 native speakers as of 2024.



Corn

"Between 575,000 and a million" is a strange thing to write in an encyclopedia. It's the linguistic equivalent of "the patient weighs somewhere between one and two hundred kilos."



Herman

It tells you the measurement has never been done properly. The real story is that Aramaic isn't a single language that's dying. It's a family of vernaculars, most already extinct or critically endangered, and the majority of the people still speaking any of them now live outside the old heartland entirely. So the "how many speakers" question has become a diaspora census question, which nobody runs either.



Corn

How bad does the estimate problem get?



Herman

Take Turoyo, sometimes called Surayt. Ethnologue's 2009 edition said 84,000. Wikipedia, drawing on sources from 2019 to 2023, says 100,000. The Aramaic-Online Project and the Aramean Institute say 250,000. That's a threefold spread on the same language, from serious institutions, within about fifteen years of each other.



Corn

How does that even happen? Three serious sources, one language, a factor of three between them.



Herman

Because they're counting different things and calling them the same thing. One source counts people who speak it daily at home. Another counts everyone in the ethnic community, including the grandchildren who understand it but answer in Swedish or German. A third counts anyone who self-reports on a survey — and self-report is where heritage languages go to be flattered. If you asked my grandmother whether she still spoke her mother's language, the answer was yes, and the demonstration was twelve words and a song.



Corn

So the spread isn't sloppiness, exactly. It's three different definitions of "speaker" wearing the same coat.



Herman

Right. And with a language that has no state, no standard census category, and a speaker base scattered across a dozen countries, there's no authority to force a single definition. Every count is an argument disguised as a number.



Corn

So any number I hear about Aramaic, I should mentally attach the phrase "on a good day."



Herman

Attach its source, more than its date. Because here's the correction that drives everything else: when people say "the language of Jesus," they mean Western Aramaic. The only surviving Western variety is the one spoken in Maaloula and Jubb'adin, two villages in the Anti-Lebanon mountains, fifty-six kilometers northeast of Damascus. That community is roughly a thousand people, with only a few children still acquiring it as a first language. The 900,000-odd Suret speakers, the overwhelming majority of living Aramaic, speak Eastern varieties. Not the branch Jesus spoke. Not close to it, genealogically.



Corn

That's the part I'd never clocked. The biggest Aramaic communities on earth are the least related to the famous claim, and the ones closest to it fit in a school bus.



Herman

Two school buses, generously. And it's worth sitting with why the confusion persists, because it's not stupidity — it's marketing. "Aramaic" is one word for what is really a family, the way "Chinese" is one word for languages a northern peasant and a southern one couldn't use to order each other lunch. The word carries the prestige of the ancient lingua franca, and every community in the family has a claim on that prestige. So the Assyrian community in Michigan, the Aramean community in Sweden, and the villagers of Maaloula all say "we speak Aramaic," and they're all telling the truth, and they're describing three different branches of a tree.



Corn

Now, the map. The homelands, first.



Herman

Northeastern Neo-Aramaic, NENA, the big Eastern cluster — about 150 distinct varieties, a genuine dialect continuum — was traditionally spoken across the Urmia plain in northwestern Iran, the Nineveh Plains, Erbil, Kirkuk, Duhok in northern Iraq, the Hasakah governorate in northeastern Syria, and the Tur Abdin, Mardin, Hakkari country of southeastern Turkey. Then Central Neo-Aramaic, which is Turoyo, in Tur Abdin proper and the Syrian northeast. And Western Neo-Aramaic down in those two Anti-Lebanon villages.



Corn

Say "dialect continuum" for the person in the back. What does that actually look like on the ground?



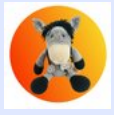
Herman

It means you could walk, historically, from village to village across that whole territory, and each village understood its neighbors perfectly, and each village's speech differed slightly from the last — a word here, a vowel there. Nobody at any point crossed a line where comprehension broke. But if you took the speaker from the first village and the speaker from the last village, the ones five hundred kilometers and forty villages apart, and put them in a room, they'd struggle. The differences accumulated like interest. That's why there are a hundred and fifty varieties and not one language with an accent — the variety is in the geography, not the taxonomy.



Corn

And the old boundary between west and east ran across the desert, not along the mountains.



Herman

Transversely across the Syrian Desert, southeast to northwest. Same line, essentially, that divided Aramaic in antiquity. Which is a strange kind of loyalty — the dialect geography survived every empire that crossed it. Assyrians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Ottomans — the administrations came and went, and the line between the western way of saying things and the eastern way of saying things just sat there, under all of them, like a wire under a carpet.



Corn

On the western side of that line, Western Neo-Aramaic is now the lone survivor of a branch that once included Samaritan Aramaic, Jewish Palestinian Aramaic, Christian Palestinian Aramaic. Every one of those except the Maaloula one is gone.



Herman

Now the diaspora. Where does the family actually live now?



Herman

Mostly abroad. Turoyo speakers are concentrated in Sweden, Germany, and the Netherlands. The Aramaic-Online Project put over 80 percent of Surayt speakers outside the homeland, roughly 250,000 in Europe. A Deutschlandfunk report from 2016 counted about 300,000 Suryoye in Europe, roughly 100,000 in Germany — and only about 2,000 still living in Tur Abdin itself.



Corn

Two thousand. In the place the language is from.



Herman

The mountain keeps the churches. The people are in Södertälje.



Corn

Which is the Stockholm suburb, right? How did a Syrian mountain community end up concentrated in one Swedish town of all places?



Herman

The classic chain-migration pattern. Sweden took in Assyrian and Aramean refugees from the late sixties onward, the first arrivals put down roots in Södertälje because that's where the factory jobs were, and everyone who followed went where the cousins, the church, and the food already were. Fifty years later it's one of the most Aramaic-dense municipalities outside the Middle East. There are Suryoyo football clubs. There are church services in



Herman (continued)

Turoyo-adjacent liturgy. The town has a claim to being, functionally, one of the capitals of the language now — which is a sentence nobody drafting the 1968 immigration policy could have predicted.



Corn

A language's capital moving from Tur Abdin to a Stockholm suburb, and nobody planned it.



Herman

Languages don't read the plans. Then you've got the American communities — the Chaldeans of Michigan, Chicago, and Turlock, in California's Central Valley, which matters later. Armenia and Georgia hold NENA varieties, including Bohtan and Mahmudi, some descended from families who fled in 1915. And Lebanon took in displaced Maaloula families after 2013.



Corn

Say more about 2013. That's the jihadist seizure of Maaloula?



Herman

Fighters took the village, emptied it, kidnapped thirteen nuns from the Convent of Saint Thecla and held them three months. And the rebranded successor of the group that did it now governs Syria, after 2024. That's the political weather around the smallest Western Aramaic community on earth. But even before the war, the damage was done differently — drought had killed the agricultural economy, and it was the fields and threshing floors that had kept Aramaic as the working language children learned before Arabic. A Maaloula linguist, Rimon Wehbi, says the shift accelerated after 2013.



Corn

The language survived empires and got done in by the weather.



Herman

Languages survive powers, not economics. It's worth being precise about the mechanism, because it's not mystical. When the fields worked, the whole day's labor happened in Aramaic — the instructions, the arguments, the jokes between people who never went anywhere. A child learned Aramaic because Aramaic was what got work done. When the fields died, the work moved to Damascus, and Damascus worked in Arabic, and the parents quietly made the calculation every parent makes: which language buys my child a future? That calculation has killed more languages than any army.



Corn

Now the small varieties, the ones that barely register in the headline count. Bohtan Neo-Aramaic, sometimes called Sôreth — 760 speakers as of 2020, in Russia and Georgia, classified Severely Endangered by UNESCO. Modern Mandaic, the language of the Mandean community, a few thousand fluent speakers. And the Jewish varieties, which deserve their own minute.



Corn

Go.



Herman

Jewish Neo-Aramaic — Lishana Deni from Zakho, Lishanid Noshan, the Jewish Dohok dialect — these were spoken by the Kurdish Jews, transplanted to Israel mostly in the early 1950s. The Jewish Dohok dialect has about twenty active speakers. Twenty. The Dohok dialect is a phone tree at this point. Ilana Cruger-Zaken wrote a piece in New Lines about going back for Lishana Deni, the Zakho variety — about fifteen hundred Jews spoke it in Zakho before the move to Israel, and it stopped passing to children almost the moment they arrived, because Hebrew absorbed the kids within a generation.



Corn

So among Jews it went the way it goes among everybody — the old country's language dies in the new country's second generation.



Herman

The twentieth century ran the same experiment on every small language in the region. And the Mandaic case is its own sadness — the Mandean community was concentrated in southern Iraq and Iran, on the rivers, and the wars and the displacement scattered them exactly the way everyone else got scattered. A few thousand fluent speakers, most of them older, most of them now spread across countries where nobody else speaks it.



Corn

Give me the Chaldean-Assyrian thing, because the numbers are counted wrong because of it.



Herman

"Chaldean" and "Assyrian" — the distinction is church affiliation. Chaldean Catholic versus Church of the East, essentially. SIL, the organization behind Ethnologue, distinguishes them as varieties of Suret on non-linguistic grounds. Same spoken language, different congregations. So when somebody tells you there are 240,000 Chaldean speakers and 500,000 Assyrian speakers, they're often counting parishes, not dialects.



Corn

That explains the arithmetic. The 940,000 Suret figure and the 575,000-to-a-million figure are counting different denominational slices of the same speech.



Herman

Right, and the slices overlap, so you can't even add them honestly. And it matters beyond the arithmetic, because identity labels carry politics. Whether a family calls themselves Chaldean or Assyrian tells you something about their church, their history, sometimes their politics — and none of it tells you anything about how they talk. Two neighbors in the same Duhok street, one "Chaldean" and one "Assyrian," may speak identically, and a linguist would need a wedding invitation, not a recording, to tell them apart.



Corn

Now the part I've been waiting for, because it's the part everyone gets backwards. How different is modern Aramaic from the old one?



Herman

This is the intellectual center of the whole topic, and I'll state it flat: no written form of Old or Middle Aramaic is the direct ancestor of the modern spoken varieties. None of them. Not Biblical Aramaic, not the Targums, not the Talmud's Aramaic, not Classical Syriac. A 2025 paper in the Journal of Language Relationship puts it in exactly those terms, and quotes Geoffrey Khan, the Cambridge professor who's spent his career recording these dialects — his phrase is that the modern varieties descend from vernacular forms of speech that existed "for centuries side by side with, but concealed by, the literary forms of Aramaic."



Corn

Say that again slowly, because it's the best sentence in the episode.



Herman

The written language hid the spoken one. For three thousand years — the earliest inscriptions are ninth century BCE — Aramaic existed in two layers. The literary layer is what survived, on parchment and stone, because that's what writing does. The spoken layer, what people actually said in markets and kitchens, left almost no trace until linguists started recording it in the nineteenth century. The modern vernaculars are descendants of that hidden layer. Classical Syriac isn't their parent. It's their sibling — a written sibling that heavily influenced them, the way written Arabic influenced spoken Arabic dialects, but a sibling.



Corn

Give me the analogy that makes that land, because I think people hear "sibling" and still picture a parent.



Herman

Think of it like Latin and Italian. Nobody in a Roman marketplace spoke Cicero's Latin — they spoke something rowdier, which we mostly can't hear, because what got written down was the polished register. The Romance languages descend from the rowdy thing, not from Cicero. Same structure here: Classical Syriac is the Cicero, and Suret and Turoyo and Maaloula Aramaic descend from the marketplace. Except there's a twist the Latin case doesn't have — the "Cicero" never died. Syriac is still a living liturgical language, still chanted in churches every Sunday. So you have the strange spectacle of a written sibling attending the family reunions of its own descendants, and everyone mistaking it for the grandfather.



Corn

So when someone in Michigan tells a reporter they speak "the language of Jesus," the linguistically accurate reply is that nobody speaks the language of Jesus, but their language and Jesus's language shared an unwritten mother.



Herman

Family history rather than lineage. "Three thousand years of continuous Aramaic" is true as a family tree and misleading as a relay race. Suret descends from the Old Aramaic that was the lingua franca of the late Assyrian Empire, itself shaped by Akkadian contact. We did an episode on the Hebrew and Aramaic script, the letters themselves — that covered the visual history, and the letters are indeed the family's oldest continuous artifact. The speech is a different story, messier and mostly invisible.



Corn

Who's closest, then? Somebody must be.



Herman

Maaloula, by a distance. Western Neo-Aramaic developed from the Late Western dialects — the Damascene subgroup — and it keeps features matching Galilean Aramaic, which is about as close as you get to the first-century Galilee speech. It preserves the old diphthongs aw and ay, which the Eastern varieties collapsed. It forms the third-masculine imperfect with y-, like Old Aramaic, where the Eastern varieties use l- or n-. And the lexicon lines up with the Christian and Jewish Palestinian dialects — Maaloula imi for "to see," where Syriac has zā. Imi for "today," against Syriac yawmān.



Corn

And can they actually read the old texts?



Herman

Wehbi was asked that directly — can a Maaloula speaker understand biblical and talmudic Aramaic. "Yes, he can." He lists the correspondences — head, after, he, I, he says, evil, my lord — close enough that you can watch the words drift. And he says the closest dialect to Maaloula's in the whole ancient corpus is the Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Jerusalem Talmud. Local linguists who translated the Old Testament and the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom into the Maaloula dialect concluded that, apart from some grammatical



Herman (continued)

changes and loanwords from Greek and Arabic, it remains fundamentally the language of the first and second centuries.



Corn

The Jerusalem Talmud connection is remarkable. The closest living relative of a village in the Syrian mountains is a text studied in yeshivas.



Herman

Two branches of the same western trunk, one fossilized in the academies, one still alive on a hillside. And now it's time for Dorothy's History of Toast.

D

Dorothy

Hello dear, it's your mother, with Dorothy's History of Toast.

D

Dorothy

The first electric toasters only browned one side of the bread at a time, so someone had to stand there and turn every slice over by hand.

D

Dorothy

I suppose that is the way of things, nothing does the whole job for you, you always end up standing about turning something over.

D

Dorothy

Anyway. Have you had your breakfast, sweetheart? Eat something before you start. Right, I'll let you get on.



Herman

Mum, always a pleasure.



Corn

Loanwords, Herman. You promised me loanwords.



Herman

The layering is the fun part. Suret carries an extensive set of Iranian loanwords, plus Arabic and Turkified Turkish, and it's one of the few languages where most of its foreign vocabulary comes from a different language family entirely — Indo-European, layered onto a Semitic core. And the diaspora is doing it again in real time. Swedish Turoyo is absorbing Swedish. Michigan Suret is absorbing English. The loanwords mark exactly where the speakers' lives have moved.



Corn

So the language carries its own itinerary. You could reconstruct the last century of an Assyrian family from the strata in their kitchen vocabulary.



Herman

Persian for the grandparents' trade, Arabic for the neighbors, Turkish for the officials, English for the grandchildren's phones. And it's not random — the loanwords cluster by domain, the way they always do. You borrow from the language that controls the thing you're borrowing the word for. The taxes are in Turkish because the tax collector was. The technology is in English because the phone is. Nobody sat down and decided this; the vocabulary is a sediment record of who had power over what, and when.



Corn

And Maaloula's situation on that front?



Herman

Maaloula is still essentially a spoken language — 28 consonants, 6 vowels, plus three consonants that exist only in loanwords, and no agreed-upon writing system. Native speakers have tried at least five scripts in twenty years — modified Old Aramaic, square script, Estrangela, Serto, Arabic. No consensus.



Corn

A community that kept the speech alive for two thousand years and can't agree how to write it down.



Herman

A living spoken tradition never needed the agreement, and now that it does, the momentum isn't there. And each script choice drags an identity question behind it — the Old Aramaic letters say "we are the ancients," the Syriac scripts say "we belong to the church," the Arabic script says "we are Syrians." A spelling reform is never about spelling. They're arguing about the community's face, twenty-six letters at a time.



Corn

Which takes us to survival. Two opposite trends are running at the same time. In the homelands: collapse. Four teachers at Maaloula's one Aramaic school, and the National Geographic reporting calls it woefully understaffed and only sporadically operational. The town itself hasn't recovered. And the new pressure isn't war — it's the phone. A Maaloula mother, Michline Zarour, said her biggest obstacle is social media, "which has entered our lives without permission." Her son's entire media diet is Arabic and English.



Herman

The language lost the threshing floor to the algorithm.



Corn

The mother's own framing — she's teaching her son the way her family taught her, and the surroundings have changed under her.



Herman

And the phone is a tougher adversary than the drought, in one specific way. The drought drove the adults out of the fields; the phone follows the child into the house. Every previous language shift needed the outside world to reach the village. This one arrives in the child's pocket, in the child's own hand, in the child's chosen language. The village walls don't apply.



Corn

And the opposite trend?



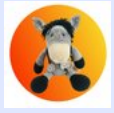
Herman

Diaspora institutionalization, and it's real and accelerating. Assyrian enters the World Languages program at Pitman High School in Turlock, California, from fall 2027 — a US public high school teaching it as a credit-bearing language. Oakland University in Michigan has a Chaldean Language Workshop with 181 students as of October. In Syria this month, an Assyrian foundation in Tirbê Spîyê publicly called for Assyrian as an official language and mother-tongue education. In the Kurdish region of Iraq, there are curriculum negotiations over Assyrian schools. Berlin researchers were in Tur Abdin this month recording Turoyo on the verge of extinction. And Cambridge's NENA Database Project holds recordings and grammars for well over a hundred dialects — with the note that most are now highly endangered and some recently extinct.



Corn

So the same decade produces both a high school curriculum and a burial record.



Herman

And the 2025 paper ends on exactly that note — most NENA varieties extinct or critically endangered, urgent need to document while the speakers are still accessible. The hard question is whether the diaspora institutions can substitute for home transmission. Because the heritage-language literature is fairly consistent: what keeps a language alive is community immersion, daily use, a sense that the language does something. Classroom hours alone don't.



Corn

My guess is the classroom keeps the literacy and loses the fluency — you end up with adults who can read a script their grandparents never wrote and can't order coffee in it.



Herman

That's roughly the Hebrew situation in the diaspora before the revival, actually — a population that could read fluently and speak not at all. And it's worth remembering what the revival required: a country, a school system, an army, a labor market. Nobody's building an Assyrian army.



Corn

No, though Turlock's a start.



Herman

Before we leave the drift question — the 2025 study's real finding. Four Christian NENA varieties, a 226-item basic vocabulary list, and the result is that Mahmudi and Verin Dvin Urmi, two varieties spoken side by side in the same Armenian village for 67 years, have converged with each other more than either has with its own genealogical relatives.



Corn

Hold on. The village made them siblings.



Herman

Shared daily life overrode shared ancestry. Modern Aramaic is still actively diverging — new contact-driven varieties forming even as the family dies. The tree is losing branches and growing them at the same time.



Corn

Which is the part I want to push on, because it sounds almost too neat. Two dialects from different lineages end up in one Armenian village, and sixty-seven years of shared schoolyards and shared shops pull them together — is that convergence, or is it just both



Corn (continued)

of them borrowing the same Armenian and Russian words from the outside?



Herman

The study controlled for that, and it's the interesting bit — the convergence shows up in the basic vocabulary, the two hundred and twenty-six most stable items, not just in the fashionable outer layer of borrowables. When two speech communities share a life, they don't just trade loanwords; their grammar and their core vocabulary start meeting in the middle. It's the difference between two families living on the same street and two families merging into one household.



Corn

So "saving Aramaic" is already ambiguous. Which Aramaic — the one in the Cambridge archive, or the new hybrid forming in an Armenian village right now? If the answer is "whichever the speakers actually speak," then preservation and change are the same project, and the obituary framing was never quite right.



Herman

You can't freeze a living language. The frozen ones are the dead ones.



Hilbert

I agree with that entirely.



Hilbert

My grandmother used a word her whole life. My mother always said it was Arabic. It isn't. It's in a nineteenth-century Syriac dictionary, page two hundred and forty, with a slightly different vowel, and the direction of borrowing is the other way round — Aramaic into Arabic, not the reverse. I have the photocopy.



Herman

Where's the photocopy?



Hilbert

In my wallet. It's been in there since 2004. Corn will appreciate that I've pronounced it with the reconstructed vowel the whole time — at family dinners, at the pharmacy counter in Rehavia, to men delivering appliances. Nobody has understood me once. I say it anyway. The way I see it, Herman, they got the word, we kept the vowel.



Corn

You've been unintelligible on principle for two decades.



Hilbert

On accuracy. There's a difference. The pharmacist manages. I point as well.



Corn

The gap between the written record and the mouth that carries it, alive in one wallet in Jerusalem.



Herman

One thing the paper trail can't dispute, though — his grandmother's word is out there in an Arabic dictionary and a Syriac one, and the vowel only lives because one man refused to update.



Hilbert

The vowel also doesn't fit in a standard wallet, before you ask. It's the long one, with the dot under it. That's all I came to say.



Corn

The open question, for me, is the one the lexicostatistics left us with. If new varieties are still forming in diaspora villages while the old ones die, then "saving Aramaic" might not mean freezing anything — it might mean letting a three-thousand-year-old family keep changing shape in public, in a California classroom or an Armenian village, and trusting that the shape it takes is still the family.



Herman

And whether classroom hours can stand in for kitchen transmission is the question the next decade answers. There are a hundred and eighty-one students in Michigan betting one way, and four teachers on a Syrian mountain betting the other. Our producer is Hilbert Flumingtop, who carries the whole archive in his wallet.



Corn

If you want more of this, try episode ten thirty-one, The Clothes of Language; and episode fourteen oh eight, Israel Wartime Readiness Field Guide. This has been My Weird Prompts. If the episode earned its twenty-five minutes, leave us a review wherever you get your podcasts — it's how the show finds its next weird question.



Herman

We'll be back soon. See you tomorrow.

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