

Classical Syriac

Estrangela Script

Chapter 3

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3.1. Nouns¹

Nouns are names that are used to refer to persons, places, things, ideas, living creatures, or activities. Nouns in Classical Syriac are marked (i.e. have differentiated forms) for gender (masculine or feminine), number (singular or plural), and state (absolute, emphatic, construct, and pronominal).

When dealing with languages, gender is a grammatical category that classifies nouns according to (a) how they are formed and (b) how they interact with other parts of speech that are also marked for gender (i.e. adjectives, pronouns, and verbs). Nouns in Syriac can be either masculine or feminine. The terms masculine and feminine are used because words that refer to things that are biologically male tend to be formed and interact with other parts of speech in one way while words that refer to things that are biologically female tend to be formed and interact with other parts of speech in a different way. Nouns that are neither male nor female in terms of their biology (e.g. a tree, a rock, a river, etc.) are classified as masculine or feminine based on whether they follow the pattern that is used for things that are biologically male or the pattern that is used for things that are biologically female. However, the fact that a noun is classified as either masculine or feminine does not mean that the object signified by the noun is either male or female in the real world—it is simply a grammatical category.

Number refers to how many items are being signified by the noun. Nouns in Syriac can be either singular or plural. Nouns in the singular normally refer to one item but can sometimes refer to a group viewed as a whole (e.g. a flock, a crowd). Nouns in the plural normally refer to more than one item but can sometimes refer to a single item (e.g. ܫܡܝܐ, “sky, heaven”).

¹ Cf. Nöldeke §§70–91, 201–202, 205; Muraoka §§17–18, 29; 69-73; Duval §§257–60; Mingana §§318–21, 354, 358–61, 375–79; Brockelmann §§97–99, 200. For Biblical Aramaic see Rosenthal §§41–50.

State refers to the form a noun takes when it is used with certain grammatical functions. Classical Syriac has four states: the absolute state, the emphatic state, the construct state, and the pronominal state.² In order to understand how these states work in Classical Syriac, it is first necessary to understand how these states functioned in an earlier period of Aramaic.

(a) In Imperial Aramaic, the absolute state was the default state for a noun. Since Imperial Aramaic had no indefinite article (i.e. “a” or “an”), the absolute state was used to indicate that the noun was indefinite in meaning. For example, if the word “horse” was in the absolute state, you would need to translate it as “a horse” rather than “the horse”. If the word “horses” was in the absolute state, you would need to translate it as “horses” rather than “the horses.”

(b) The emphatic state (sometimes referred to as the determined state) was normally used in Imperial Aramaic to indicate that a noun was definite in meaning. In English this would be communicated by using the definite article *the* in front of the word. In Imperial Aramaic, the emphatic state for masculine nouns was indicated by adding 𐤀 to the end of the word. The 𐤀 at the end of the word functioned like the definite article *the* in English. For example, if the word “horse” was in the emphatic state, you would need to translate it as “the horse” rather than “a horse.” If it was in the plural, you would need to translate it as “the horses” rather than “horses.”

(c) The construct state was used when two nouns appeared side-by-side with the second word having a genitival (“of”) relationship with the first word. Although Imperial Aramaic did have a separate word for *of*, the construct state could also be used to indicate the same relationship without using a separate word for *of*. This was accomplished by putting the first noun in the construct state while the second noun was put in the emphatic state.³ For example, if the word “son” was put in the construct state and was followed by the word “king” in the emphatic state, you would need to translate it as “the son of the king” even though the word “of” does not appear in the sentence.

(d) The form of the pronominal state was usually identical to the form of the construct state. The difference, however, is that instead of being in a construct relationship with a separate word (i.e. a noun), the noun in the pronominal state would be in a construct relationship with a pronominal suffix. A pronominal suffix is a personal pronoun (e.g. him, her, us, you, them) that is attached directly to the end of a word. Pronominal suffixes will be discussed in chapters 6 and 7.

As was mentioned earlier, Classical Syriac has each of these four states. However, there are three significant differences. First, in Classical Syriac, the distinction between the emphatic state and the absolute state has become blurred to the point of being irrelevant for nouns in the emphatic state. A noun in the emphatic state can be either definite or indefinite in meaning depending on the context. The emphatic state is the default state for nouns in Classical Syriac and is the form that is listed in dictionaries of Classical Syriac. Second, the absolute state is rarely used. The vast majority of nouns are in the emphatic state. Third, apart from a few set phrases, the construct state is not very common in Classical Syriac. The “of” relationship in Classical Syriac is

² Note that grammars of Classical Syriac and Biblical Aramaic typically do not classify the pronominal state as a separate state. In this textbook, however, we will consider it to be a separate state.

³ A different construction would be used if the second noun was indefinite in meaning.

word order. In terms of form, masculine singular nouns in the construct state will be identical to the form of masculine singular nouns in the absolute state. Since the default state for nouns is the emphatic state, these should be quite easy to recognize. In terms of word order, the noun in the construct state comes first and is immediately followed (with rare exceptions) by the genitive (i.e. the noun that stands in an “of” relationship with it). Note the following example:

Example	
Syriac	English
ܢܦܫܐ ܕܡܠܟܐ	The soul of the king.

The uses of the construct state are identical to the genitival use of the particle ܐ (see table 3.7 below).

Some feminine nouns do not have the feminine marker ܠ in the emphatic singular but have typical feminine forms in the plural. Note the following example:

Table 3.3 – Feminine Nouns (Irregular)

	Form	Translation	Function
Sg. Emph.	ܢܦܫܐ	(the) soul	Unmarked (definite or indefinite)
Pl. Emph.	ܢܦܫܐܝܐ	(the) souls	Unmarked (definite or indefinite)
Sg. Abs.	ܢܦܫܐ	a soul	Indefinite
Pl. Abs.	ܢܦܫܐܝܐ	souls	Indefinite
Sg. Constr.	ܢܦܫܐ	the soul of	“of” relationship with following word
Pl. Constr.	ܢܦܫܐܝܐ	the souls of	“of” relationship with following word

At this stage it is only necessary to learn vocabulary items in the forms they take when they are in the emphatic state. The forms that nouns take in the pronominal state will be discussed in chapter 7. Irregular nouns will be discussed as they appear in the vocabulary list of each chapter.

3.2. Genitival ܐ⁶

The particle ܐ has several functions in Classical Syriac: it can be used as a relative pronoun (who, which, that), it can be used to introduce a purpose clause or clause of respect (to, in order to, that, so that, in order that, with respect to), it can be used to introduce direct speech, or it can be used to indicate an “of” relationship between two words (i.e. a genitival relationship). The focus of this section will be on the “of” (i.e. genitival) use of the particle ܐ.

⁶ Cf. Nöldeke §205; Muraoka §§61, 73; Duval §§358–61; Mingana §§42, 63–66, 418, 420; Brockelmann §202.

The first word in a genitival (“of”) relationship using the particle ܐ is referred to as the **head noun** or **head word**. The second word is referred to as the **governed noun** or **governed word** (i.e. the genitive).⁷ The particle ܐ is attached to the beginning of the governed noun (i.e. the second word) and is normally pronounced with a slight *e* sound (shewa) between the particle and the first letter of the word to which it is attached. However, when the first letter of the word has no vowel, the vowel *ptāhā*? (ܐ) is inserted between the particle ܐ and the next letter.⁸ Note the following examples:

Particle	Word	Combination	Translation
ܐ	ܡܠܟܐ	ܐܡܠܟܐ	of the king
ܐ	ܒܝܬܐ	ܐܒܝܬܐ	of the house
ܐ	ܒܢܐ	ܐܒܢܐ	of the son
ܐ	ܡܫܝܚܐ	ܐܡܫܝܚܐ	of the Messiah
ܐ	ܒܥܝܫܐ	ܐܒܥܝܫܐ	of Jesus

In a few cases, the particle ܐ is attached to the beginning of a word with a *ptāhā*? (ܐ) even when the first letter of the word has a vowel. This can happen in the following three cases:⁹

Particle	Word	Combination	Translation
ܐ	ܐܘܪܫܠܝܡ	ܐܐܘܪܫܠܝܡ	of Judea
ܐ	ܐܘܪܝܫܠܝܡ	ܐܐܘܪܝܠܝܡ	of Judas
ܐ	ܐܘܪܝܡܝܐ	ܐܐܘܪܝܡܝܐ	of Rome

Note that in the final example, the ܡ is not pronounced in the second column but is pronounced in the third column.

When the particle ܐ is attached to the beginning of a word that begins with ܐ, the particle ܐ should be pronounced with the vowel that is written with the ܐ and the ܐ should be ignored:

⁷ It should be kept in mind that unlike languages with case endings (e.g. Akkadian, Ugaritic, Arabic, Greek, Latin, etc.), genitives in Syriac do not have a separate ending to indicate that they are genitives. In the situation being discussed here, the genitival relationship is indicated by the use of the particle ܐ.

⁸ Note that the vocalization of the particle ܐ is slightly different in West Syriac when it is added to a word that begins with ܐ. When a word begins with ܐ in West Syriac, the vowel written with the ܐ is simply transferred to the particle ܐ. However, in East Syriac, the ܐ retains its vowel.

⁹ Cf. Mingana §66.

Table 3.6 – The Pronunciation of the Particle ܐ Before ܕ

Combination	Transliteration	Pronunciation
ܕܐܠܗܐ	<i>d-ʿalāhāʿ</i>	<i>dalāhāʿ</i>
ܕܐܪܥܐ	<i>d-ʿarʿāʿ</i>	<i>darʿāʿ</i>

In terms of meaning, the governed noun (i.e. the genitive) *specifies* or *narrows down* the meaning of the head noun in several possible ways. Note the following examples:¹⁰

Table 3.7– Types of Genitival Relationships

Example	Translation	Category	Explanation
ܩܕܫܐ ܕܒܢܝ ܩܝܦܐ	the tables of the money changers	Genitive of Possession	These are not simply any tables. These are tables that belong to the money changers. The governed noun narrows down the meaning of the word <i>tables</i> .
ܡܠܟܐ ܕܝܫܘܒܐ	the king of the Jews	Genitive of Reference, Respect, or Relationship	This is not simply any king. This is the king of the Jews. The governed noun narrows down the meaning of the word <i>king</i> .
ܩܪܢܐ ܕܫܘܠܝܝܐ	a crown of thorns	Genitive of Material	This is not simply any crown. This is a crown that is made of thorns. The governed noun narrows down the meaning of the word <i>crown</i> .
ܕܦܢܐ ܕܡܝܐ	a cup of water	Genitive of Content	This is not simply any cup. This is a cup that is filled with water. The governed noun narrows down the meaning of the word <i>cup</i> .
ܥܝܢܐ ܕܩܝܘܫܐ	deeds of righteousness (i.e. righteous deeds)	Genitive of Quality or Attributive Genitive	These are not simply any deeds. These deeds are righteous.

¹⁰ The list given here is not exhaustive. Other uses will be discussed in an appendix.

Preposition	Word	Combination	Translation
ܘ	ܘܡܝܢܬܐ	ܘܡܝܢܬܐ	in the city
ܘ	ܘܒܪܐ	ܘܒܪܐ	for the son
ܘ	ܘܪܘܡܐ	ܘܪܘܡܐ	in Rome

When the word begins with ܘ, the preposition should be pronounced with the vowel that is written with the ܘ and the ܘ should be ignored:

Combination	Transliteration	Pronunciation
ܘܠܐܗܐ	<i>l-²alāhā²</i>	<i>lalāhā²</i>
ܘܒܪܐ	<i>b-²ar²ā²</i>	<i>bar²ā²</i>

Note that the preposition ܘ can also be used before an infinitive (e.g. “to run”) and can be used to indicate the direct object of a verb when the direct object is definite in meaning. These uses will be covered in future chapters.

3.4. The Conjunction ܘ¹²

The conjunction ܘ is attached directly to the beginning of the word that follows it and normally means “and”. However, the conjunction ܘ can also mean “also”, “but”, “both...and” (ܘ...ܘ), or “then”. When the conjunction ܘ is attached to a word that begins with a letter that has no vowel (e.g. ܘܡܝܢܬܐ), a *ptāhā²* (ܘ) is inserted between the ܘ and the next letter and the ܘ is pronounced as a *w*. When the first letter of the word has a vowel, the ܘ is simply attached to the beginning of the word but the ܘ is pronounced *oo* as in *moo*. Note the following examples:

Word	Combination	Translation	Transliteration	Pronunciation
ܘܡܠܟܐ	ܘܘܡܠܟܐ	and the king	<i>w-malkā²</i>	<i>ûmalkā²</i>
ܘܒܝܬܐ	ܘܘܒܝܬܐ	and the house	<i>w-baytā²</i>	<i>ûbaytā²</i>
ܘܡܝܢܬܐ	ܘܘܡܝܢܬܐ	and the city	<i>wa-mdî(n)tā²</i>	<i>wamdî(n)tā²</i>
ܘܒܪܐ	ܘܘܒܪܐ	and the son	<i>wa-brā²</i>	<i>wabrā²</i>

¹² Cf. Nöldeke §§40, 338–40; Muraoka §61; Duval §296; Mingana §§42, 566; Brockelmann §175.

ⲛⲓⲥⲓⲃⲉⲛⲥⲁⲓ	ⲛⲓⲥⲓⲃⲉⲛⲥⲁⲓⲟ	and the bishop	<i>w-²eppîsqôpā²</i>	<i>weppîsqôpā²</i>
ⲛⲓⲥⲁ	ⲛⲓⲥⲁⲟ	and the brother	<i>w-²ahā²</i>	<i>wahā²</i>
ⲛⲓⲥⲁⲓⲃⲉ	ⲛⲓⲥⲁⲓⲃⲉⲟ	and Judah	<i>wa-yhūdā²</i>	<i>wayhūdā²</i>

The conjunction ⲟ can also be added to a word that already has an inseparable preposition at the beginning. When this happens, the same rules apply. If the inseparable preposition is written with a vowel, the conjunction ⲟ is attached directly to the preposition. If the inseparable preposition does not have its own vowel, a p̄tāḥā² is inserted between the ⲟ and the preposition. Note the following examples:

Table 3.12 – The Conjunction ⲟ in Front of an Inseparable Preposition

Original Combination	New Combination	Translation
ⲁⲓⲃⲉⲛⲥⲁⲓ	ⲟⲁⲓⲃⲉⲛⲥⲁⲓ	and to the king
ⲛⲓⲥⲁ	ⲟⲛⲓⲥⲁ	and in the house
ⲛⲓⲥⲁⲓⲃⲉ	ⲟⲛⲓⲥⲁⲓⲃⲉ	and in the city
ⲁⲓⲃⲉ	ⲟⲁⲓⲃⲉ	and to the son

3.5. Vocabulary

Nouns		
Singular	Plural	Meaning
ⲛⲓⲥⲁ	ⲛⲓⲥⲁⲓⲃⲉ	(m) father
ⲛⲓⲥⲁ	ⲛⲓⲥⲁⲓⲃⲉ	(m) brother
ⲛⲓⲥⲁⲓⲃⲉ	ⲛⲓⲥⲁⲓⲃⲉ	(m) God
ⲛⲓⲥⲁ	ⲛⲓⲥⲁⲓⲃⲉ	(f) mother
ⲛⲓⲥⲁ	ⲛⲓⲥⲁ	(m) house
ⲛⲓⲥⲁ	ⲛⲓⲥⲁ	(m) son
ⲛⲓⲥⲁ	ⲛⲓⲥⲁ	(f) daughter
ⲛⲓⲥⲁ ¹³	—————	(m) gold
ⲛⲓⲥⲁ	—————	(m) silver
ⲛⲓⲥⲁⲓⲃⲉ	ⲛⲓⲥⲁⲓⲃⲉ, ⲛⲓⲥⲁⲓⲃⲉ	(f) city, town, province, region

¹³ For an explanation of why ⲁ has the soft pronunciation, see §2.3.

ܡܠܟܐ	ܡܠܟܝܗ	(m) king
ܡܠܟܝܗ	ܡܠܟܝܗܐ	(f) queen
ܡܠܟܐ	_____	(m) Lord (i.e. God, often for the name YHWH ¹⁴)
ܡܫܝܚܐ	ܡܫܝܚܝܗ	(m) Messiah, Christ
ܢܦܫܐ	ܢܦܫܝܗܐ	(f) soul, person, life, self
ܦܘܠܐ	ܦܘܠܝܗܐ	(m) slave, servant
-----	ܡܫܝܚܐ ¹⁵	(m) sky, skies, heaven

Prepositions	
ܟ	in, with, by
ܠ	to, for

Particles	
ܐ	of (genitival), which (relative pronoun), in order to

Conjunctions	
ܘ	and

Proper Nouns	
ܐܢܕܪܝܘܫܐ	Andrew
ܦܘܠܐܘܫܐ	Judah, Judas
ܡܬܬܝܘܫܐ	Matthew
ܫܝܡܘܢܐ	Simon
ܬܘܡܐܫܐ	Thomas

3.6. Homework

a) Using practice sheet 3.1, memorize the paradigms given for nouns in Table 3.1 and Table 3.2.

¹⁴ Note that YHWH is the personal name for God in the Hebrew Bible. In scholarly literature it is often spelled without vowels since the original vowels of YHWH were not passed down on in the tradition.

¹⁵ Note that ܡܫܝܚܐ only occurs in the plural. However, the fact that ܡܫܝܚܐ occurs in the plural should not affect how it is translated. The difference between sky, skies, and heaven can only be determined by context.

b) Memorize the vocabulary in 3.5 above. Make sure you can translate the words from Syriac to English as well as English to Syriac. The following link on Quizlet can be used to help you learn the vocabulary: <https://quizlet.com/ca/584311197/classical-syriac-chapter-3-flash-cards/>.

c) Using Practice Sheet 3.2, add the indicated elements (prepositions, the conjunction **ܐ**, and/or the particle **ܐ**) to the word given in the chart.

