



STATEMENT DL-010

## **GEORGE M. LAMSA: Christian Scholar or Cultic Torchbearer?**

**by John P. Juedes**

George M. Lamsa's books and translations of the Bible have become a fixture in Christian bookstores across the nation. Lamsa published 21 books by the time of his death in 1975. Four of these, plus his version of the Bible, were published by A. J. Holman, a well-known Bible and book publisher. Currently, Spring Arbor distributes them to Christian bookstores nationwide.

For nearly 50 years Lamsa was a popular speaker at conferences and churches, published the periodical *Light for All*, and spoke on the radio program "Lessons for Living." He also founded the Aramaic Bible Society and Calvary Missionary Church. Many groups and writers quote Lamsa as a Bible scholar.

There are several reasons for Lamsa's popularity. First, his books are engaging and very readable. Second, his comments on the life and customs of Bible times are engrossing to twentieth century Westerners. Third, people are intrigued and awed by Lamsa's claim that he was reared in the same part of the world Jesus lived, thus participating in biblical customs and language, and is hence uniquely able to reveal the Bible's idioms, translate the Bible accurately, and disclose its true meaning.

Lamsa's Christian readers commonly make the following charitable assumptions about his life and work: They believe Lamsa was an evangelical Christian teacher and that he accepted all the major biblical teachings held by the church. They think Lamsa absorbed a culture like that of Bible times which enabled him to accurately interpret Scripture. They further believe he held the Bible in high esteem and that he accurately translated it.

In this article we will closely examine each of these assumptions with a view to gaining a clearer picture of Lamsa's work. This will enable us to better respond to the man and his claims.

### **LAMSA'S TEACHINGS: BIBLICAL OR CULTIC?**

Anyone who closely reads Lamsa's books will notice that he seldom explicitly enunciates his beliefs. In fact, Lamsa stated that he purposely tried to avoid doctrinal, theological, and controversial matters and passages.<sup>1</sup> When he does deal with a controversial topic, he will typically mention some common views without stating his own. For instance, when he addresses Luke's account of angels at Jesus' ascension, he comments that many faiths hold to a belief in personal angels and demons, but he neglects to say that he himself does not.<sup>2</sup>

Lamsa's motives and message are also made difficult to discern by his inconsistency: some of his writings seem evangelical, while others are far removed from the biblical faith. This may be due to an evolution of his thought away from biblical teaching or to adjusting his wording to his audiences' desires.

We gain insight into Lamsa's true message and his approach to interpreting Scripture by reflecting on his upbringing. George Lamsa was born near the Turkish/Iraqi border about 1892 and lived there until about 1915. This area has been overrun by one warring country after another for centuries. Lamsa remembers thousands of his Armenian people being massacred, starved, or forced from their homeland by Moslems; he narrowly escaped death himself. Rival tribes were in constant conflict, highlighting their political, cultural, and religious differences. The

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history of Lamsa's Eastern church is full of divisions, including such competing groups as the Monophysites, Nestorians, and Jacobians. (This even led to alternate alphabets for their common language.)

These experiences affected Lamsa's message and interpretation of Scripture in several ways. Above all, Lamsa sought a "new world order" in which "the light of the gospel would be shared, racial and class barriers would be eliminated, and national boundaries would be eliminated."<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, Lamsa interprets Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (in his book appropriately titled *The Kingdom on Earth*) as a commandment for world peace, international understanding, and the overthrow of enslaving governments by meekness and love. Lamsa founded the Christian Mohammedan Society in 1921 to pursue unity by emphasizing common ground.

Lamsa's desire to unite nations into a universal state led him to avoid matters of dogma and make many concessions to the beliefs of other faiths, seeking the lowest common denominator among religions.

### **Lamsa on the Trinity**

Lamsa proudly admits to being raised in the Nestorian church, which can be traced back to A.D. 431 when the Council of Ephesus declared that the patriarch Nestorius was teaching a false view of Christ. His followers fled to Persia and developed their own rituals, customs, and theology, which are reflected in Lamsa's writings.

For instance, Lamsa said "the Eastern Christians believe in one God with three attributes, instead of three persons."<sup>4</sup> Other Nestorians also preferred the Aramaic word "attributes" (*kenomey*) to the Greek concept "persons" (*prosopon*), even though these held to the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>5</sup>

Lamsa's teachings on Christ and the Holy Spirit, however, do not match Nestorian Trinitarianism. (In fact, he often implies that he opposes the belief.) He considers "spirit" to be synonymous with "influence," "expansion," "effectiveness," and "hidden power," and suggests that the Comforter of John 14:16 and 16:8 is but the influence Jesus left behind after His dissolution on the cross.<sup>6</sup>

Lamsa also promoted the Nestorian view that Jesus Christ was actually two persons — Jesus and Christ — who, in a manner of speaking, were glued together like two boards. Jesus, Lamsa says, began His existence at birth in Bethlehem, while "Christ existed from the very beginning. He was neither born nor did he die, but he lives forever. This belief is still held by Christians in the East...."<sup>7</sup> In Lamsa's view, Jesus did not claim to be equal to God, nor did He want to be worshipped.<sup>8</sup>

### **On Christ's Resurrection, Ascension, and Second Coming**

Lamsa strays still further from biblical Christianity by denying that Jesus Christ ever physically rose from the dead. While he claims that Christ rose with a "spiritual body," Lamsa compares Jesus' life to a mere glass of water and His death to its evaporation into the air and ocean,<sup>9</sup> depreciating His ongoing personal existence and significance.

Lamsa spiritualizes the Ascension as well as the Resurrection: "The ascension of Jesus was a spiritual transformation. Jesus rose up from death and was taken up into the heavenly realm in a spiritual body, freed from all physical limitation [i.e., nonphysical]. He was seen alive and ascending to heaven only by those whose spiritual vision had been strengthened by faith in him."<sup>10</sup>

Lamsa likewise stresses that the Second Coming is not a physical event, but a "spiritual" coming that will transpire in the world's consciousness: "The second coming of Jesus will be a spiritual coming, that is, he will come in a spiritual body, free from all physical limitations. Moreover, the people's consciousness will be raised to a spiritual level, so that every eye will see nothing but good. In other words, it will be a spiritual life and spiritual kingdom."<sup>11</sup> Lamsa typically focuses on the disciples' *experience* rather than on Christ's personal actions after Calvary.

Scripture, in contrast, repeatedly emphasizes that these were/will be actual, physical events. It is of first importance that Jesus Christ (God in human flesh, not just "the man Jesus") died, was raised, and appeared to over 500 people (1 Cor. 15:38). Jesus taught that it was necessary for *Christ* to suffer (Luke 24:26) and invites His disciples to touch His body, "for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have" (Luke 24:39). Jesus warned that even

ungodly nations (who do not have the "spiritual vision" Lamsa required) will mourn when they see Jesus return in the clouds in the same way He left the earth (Matt. 24:30).

### **On Salvation and Non-Christian Religions**

Lamsa attempts to unite world religions in part by eliminating the uniqueness of Jesus and His atoning sacrifice on the cross. He follows the lead of the metaphysical (or "mind science") cults by redefining sin as mere error or (at worst) evil, not as moral disobedience to the Creator which deserves punishment from Him. Salvation in Lamsa's view is simply knowing Truth and "understanding the good"<sup>12</sup> — a view which reduces Jesus from the essential suffering Savior to the dispensable model man. Christ died, Lamsa says in his notes on John 3:16, to show us meekness and the existence of life hereafter, not to atone for our sins.<sup>13</sup> He thus contradicts the central theme of the whole Bible.

Lamsa focuses on man as his own savior rather than viewing Jesus Christ in that role. Therefore, he extols *any* prominent person, whether Christian or not, as one who has tapped God's power. Lamsa praised "humble prophets" like Isaiah and Jeremiah and "inspired men" like Marconi and Edison all in the same breath because "they relied on the hidden power, the power of God, the power of their indwelling self....one must be able to contact the spiritual forces, which are the only true power. All power belongs to God and comes from Him."<sup>14</sup>

Lamsa's unbiblical views of sin, salvation, and God — and his move to a metaphysical interpretation of Scripture — helped him to reconcile differences between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (as well as other religions). He denounces as "ignorant" those teachers who claim the three religions are incompatible and adds: "The adherents of these three great religions believe in one God, the holy prophets, the Scriptures, resurrection, Judgment Day and the Life hereafter. On the other hand, a greater part of the differences between them are due to the doctrines and the teachings of men, and the traditions of the elders."<sup>15</sup>

### **On the Psychic Realm**

Lamsa's views of healing, Satan, demons, and prophecy are closer to the psychic perspective of metaphysical teaching and occultism than a biblical orientation. Jesus, he infers, had no power to heal, but only spoke "a word of comfort"<sup>16</sup> which most sick people never received: "At times out of hundreds of sick persons who were brought to him only a few were healed, those who had faith in him. Others whose bodies were not cured left the place cursing and shouting insults."<sup>17</sup> Lamsa sometimes removes the supernatural elements from Gospel accounts of healing. For instance, he implies that Simon Peter's mother-in-law was not supernaturally healed, but her rising to work allowed her no time to think about her mild fever until it finally left her (Luke 4:38-39). When he does allow that a healing may have occurred, he attributes it to the faith, understanding, or behavior of the person healed rather than to Jesus Christ's inherent power.

Lamsa implicitly denies the objective existence of a personal Devil and demons. "Demons," he says, is a way of referring to insanity, or wrong thoughts, desires, or practices.<sup>18</sup> "Satan," Lamsa suggests, refers to error or opposition in various forms, and cannot be an objective evil power because God is the only power in the universe.<sup>19</sup> Lamsa's translation usually uses the word "insane" instead of "demon" and "opposition" instead of "Satan."

Lamsa spoke of psychic involvement in a speech at the Association for Research and Enlightenment (A.R.E.), a group which promotes medium Edgar Cayce and the pursuit of psychic phenomena. He encouraged use of the "talents" of Creative (psychic) Power manifesting through men and spotlighted his native Near Eastern people's claim to a "sixth sense": the ability to become aware of God through dreams, visions, intuition, and clairvoyance. He also spoke of their "seventh sense," a state of awareness "higher" than others, with which one can discern between good and evil.<sup>20</sup>

Lamsa's metaphysical theology is man-centered. It is man, he says, who causes his own problems, creates his own healing, creates his world by his own prayer, discloses the unknown by his clairvoyance, and relies on the power of his own indwelling self. In contrast, the Bible emphasizes that relying on self rather than God is foundational to all our problems, and that the way, truth, and life are found only in Jesus Christ.

## LAMSA'S INTERPRETATIONS: FAITHFUL OR UNRELIABLE?

Lamsa claimed that he was the *only* person on earth able to accurately interpret the Bible: "The author, through God's grace, is the only one with the knowledge of Aramaic, the Bible customs and idioms, and the knowledge of the English language who has ever translated the Holy Bible from the original Aramaic texts into English and written commentaries on it...."<sup>21</sup> But are Lamsa's interpretations of the Bible reliable?

The bulk of Lamsa's writings are commentaries on individual Bible passages. They differ from most commentaries in that he chooses a single verse from one chapter, two verses from the next, and so forth, rather than attempting to develop the meaning of a paragraph or section. He writes approximately a page on each verse — commenting on the Aramaic text, idioms, culture, and its meaning.

Although Lamsa's comments have some merit, the reader must weigh them carefully for two reasons: First, Lamsa's culture does not exactly match biblical culture. Second, even if it did match, this would not *assure* that his interpretations are accurate (more on these two points below).

Lamsa also contrasts Peshitta Aramaic wording with that of Greek texts. Every translator takes Syriac texts into account, but Lamsa is unbalanced because he always assumes that the Syriac is preeminent, resulting in numerous inaccurate interpretations.

Idioms and general commentary occupy most of Lamsa's attention. While many idioms are commonly known, he often promotes nonliteral meanings which differ from the intent of the biblical authors.

Lamsa's comments are inordinately slanted by his metaphysical, political, and personal presuppositions. For example, he transforms "angels" to "understanding" (John 1:51)<sup>22</sup> or "pious men" (Heb. 13:2).<sup>23</sup> He interprets "hellfire" as mere mental suffering (Matt. 5:22),<sup>24</sup> and "the only begotten son" (Jesus, John 1:18) as but "the first one who recognized the fatherhood of God,"<sup>25</sup> in effect eliminating Jesus' uniqueness. He puts aside the miracle when the Spirit "caught Philip away" in favor of Philip leaving quickly.<sup>26</sup>

Overall, Lamsa's faulty presuppositions insure that his interpretations are not uniformly reliable, helpful, or faithful to the Bible and its authors at many key points.

## LAMSA'S CULTURE: BIBLICAL OR NESTORIAN?

Lamsa's claim to be the preeminent authority on the meaning and translation of the Bible rests on his claim that he "was born and reared in a region in the near East which had escaped modernization, a region where the customs, manners and idioms of the ancient Aramaic language are still miraculously preserved to the present day."<sup>27</sup>

Even if it was true that the customs and place of Lamsa's birth matched those of biblical days, it would not automatically follow that he could accurately translate and interpret the Bible. Thousands of people shared Jesus' culture and yet misunderstood Him. Jesus' closest disciples repeatedly asked Him to explain His sayings and parables (Matt. 15:10-18), contradicted Him (Mark 8:31-33), and did the opposite of what He wanted (Luke 20:35-38, 49-51). Many others left Jesus because they found Him hard to understand (John 6:60-68). Lamsa and his followers display great naivete and/or egotism when they claim that Lamsa's Assyrian upbringing enabled him to interpret correctly.

Nonetheless, the question remains: Did George Lamsa's early life match the culture of the Bible? This claim is debunked by two key points which Lamsa never understood: First, Semites (including Jews and Lamsa's own ancestors) have varied greatly in culture. Second, his own Assyrian culture changed over the centuries.

The Bible and other ancient records describe Jews of different cultures. For instance, the *Herodians* were Roman in culture, educated in Greek, tolerant of all religions, and unfaithful to the Mosaic law. The *Sadducees* were politically Roman, but religiously temple Jews. The *Hellenistic Jews* (Acts 6:1) were raised outside Israel, spoke Greek, and were adjusted to life among the heathen. *Aramaic-speaking Pharisees* were lay leaders of Mosaic practice. The *Essenes* maintained a detached, communal, disciplined lifestyle while the *Zealots* sought to kill and overthrow the Romans. The customs and language of these groups differed even though they shared a common heritage, land, and

time period.

Lamsa's Assyrian people, in contrast, are descendants of *none* of these groups and have a different land, racial heritage, religion, customs, time period, language, politics, education, and neighbors.

Assyrians are portrayed in the Bible as a race quite foreign to Jewish religion and customs (e.g., Isa. 28:11). The area of Lamsa's birth is called Armenia, Media, or Persia (Reza Shah changed the name to "Iran" in the 1930s). Armenia is 700 miles from Jerusalem (even though Lamsa calls Jesus his "neighbor"), far removed from Hebrew influence, but affected by Greek culture after Alexander the Great's conquest and 250 years of Greek rule.

While Jesus Christ walked the earth, Lamsa's forefathers were Zoroastrian, a religion which enjoyed royal approval in Persia and honored many ancient Iranian gods, including the popular idol Mithra. They repudiated the Mosaic law and its accompanying moral code and culture. Among the few things Armenia had in common with Israel in Jesus' time were their mutual hatred of Romans and a similar language. They also had a very small number of residents whose ancestors were forced to leave Israel seven centuries earlier in punishment for rejecting God and His prophets. It would therefore be foolish to say that Lamsa's idolatrous Iranian ancestors were a carbon copy of devout Jewish/Israelite culture.

### **The Evolution of Nestorian Culture**

What about Lamsa's *Christian* heritage? He claims to be *both* Assyrian *and* Nestorian. First of all, Nestorian culture did not even bud until the second century when many converts were made in Armenia, and it was not until the fifth century that it flowered as the Nestorian church formed.

Strangely, Lamsa contends that his "biblical" culture survived unchanged from 4000 B.C. to the present.<sup>28</sup> Actually, his and *every* culture changes with time, locale, and especially contact with other cultures. Lamsa admits that in the last 2,300 years alone his people were overcome by the Greeks, Romans, pagans, Mohammedans, Mongols, Kurds, Russians, Turks, and British. Lamsa says that advancements in philosophy, theology, and other fields were "due to the combined labors of the Nestorians and the Arabs,"<sup>29</sup> that millions of Nestorians were forced to become Muslims,<sup>30</sup> and that European culture was "tearing the natural traditions of the [Eastern] people up by the roots"<sup>31</sup> already two generations before his birth. While some Assyrian customs may be ancient or similar to biblical customs (as several Mideastern cultures are), Assyrian culture is in many important respects different and has changed over the centuries.

There are also many dialects of Aramaic. Dwellers in Jerusalem noticed Peter's Galilean dialect (Matt. 26:73), even though he lived only 60 miles away. These dialects — both representatives of western Aramaic — differ even more noticeably from the dialects of eastern Aramaic used at Edessa (home of the Peshitta) and Lamsa's homeland.

Lamsa undoubtedly *was* an ambassador of Nestorian (not biblical) culture, with its unique alphabet, language, writings, customs, and church tradition. One prominent aspect of this culture is a strong anti-Greek bias which Lamsa manifests often. This bias stems from bitterness towards the largely Greek-speaking council which censured Nestorius.

Lamsa damages his credibility by wrongly asserting that "the Greeks occupied the Holy Land for only seven years, and there were not a half-dozen natives of Palestine who learned enough Greek in that time to carry on a conversation."<sup>32</sup> He also claims that converts outside Palestine only spoke Aramaic, and that most references to "Greek" people were mistranslated and should read "Arameans" or "Syrians."<sup>33</sup> Lamsa asserts that Jesus and His disciples never heard Greek spoken<sup>34</sup> and that no portion of the New Testament was originally written in Greek, but was first translated after Constantine's conversion in A.D. 318.<sup>35</sup> He assumes the Greek translators were deceitful and ignorant, intentionally adding and deleting passages and wrongly translating many parts.<sup>36</sup>

The only documentation Lamsa ever offers is a quotation of Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews* xx.12.1). While Lamsa takes him to mean that few Jews learned Greek, Josephus actually said that he himself lacked the precision and pronunciation in Greek which he desired.

## Wide Use of Greek in Israel

Languages gain wide use through conquest and contact, which accounts for the prevalence of Spanish and English in the world today. Greek was used throughout the Mediterranean area and Persia from 335 B.C. to A.D. 200 because of Alexander the Great's conquests. The Seleucid dynasty imposed Greek rule and ways over the Mideast from 280-63 B.C. and, with Herod, founded over 30 Greek cities in Israel. Some Greek rulers, especially Antiochus Epiphanes, aggressively attempted to Hellenize the Jews (i.e., force acceptance of Greek speech and ways on them), killing thousands who tried to maintain their Hebrew culture and religion. Greeks occupied Palestine for 270 years, not seven years as Lamsa ignorantly maintained. Thus Greek was used almost universally in the New Testament world, dominating government, commerce, and instruction.<sup>37</sup> Even slaves and farmers of less-Hellenized areas knew Greek as a second language.

Archaeology attests to the widespread use of Greek. Virtually every coin issued by the Greek rulers (363-35 B.C.), Jewish Herodian Kings (37 B.C.-A.D. 70), and Romans was struck in Greek.<sup>38</sup> One study of inscriptions in Palestine listed 168, of which 114 are in Greek only. Greek appeared in Jewish ossuaries (stone chests which held the bones of the dead) and on the Ophel synagogue, indicating that ordinary Jews used Greek.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, key trade routes passed through Israel, requiring knowledge of Greek to service them. Letters that Jewish rebel leader Bar Cochba wrote to his lieutenants (A.D. 132-135) show that these insurgents used Greek as easily as Aramaic and Hebrew.<sup>40</sup>

The oldest biblical manuscript known today is not the Peshitta (as Lamsa holds), but a Hebrew copy of Isaiah written about 100 B.C. We now have scores of Greek portions of the New Testament written before Lamsa's Peshitta. (More will be said about this later.) The Estrangeli alphabet Lamsa used was not even created until at least the second century A.D.

Jews outside of Israel could not read Hebrew, so they translated it into a Greek version called the Septuagint (referred to as the "LXX" today) which became the "Authorized Version" of the Bible for Greek-speaking Jews and Christians. More than half of the Old Testament passages found in the New Testament are quoted from the Greek LXX, not from an Aramaic Targum or Hebrew text. Even Matthew, written by a Jew for Jews, quotes primarily from the LXX and uses 76 words found nowhere but the LXX.<sup>41</sup> The vocabulary and style of the LXX dominates the NT, even though it was archaic at the time. Common "Jewish" words, including "Synagogue," "Sanhedrin," and "hypocrite" (meaning "actor," for which Hebrew has no equivalent due to a Talmudic prohibition against theater) are actually Greek words. The Babylonian Talmud mentions the rabbis' use of Greek proverbs and their families who learned Greek (Sota 49b). The 1,500 Greek loan words in Talmudic literature indicate that rabbis knew Greek.<sup>42</sup>

Gospel history also suggests common use of Greek. Jesus and 11 of His disciples came from "Galilee of the Gentiles" and Jesus used the Greek city Capernaum as His headquarters. The tax collector, Matthew, and fishermen like Peter and John needed Greek to do business. On Pentecost, Persians, Mesopotamians, and Medes were surprised to hear the disciples speak in their own tongues (by the Spirit's power), indicating that their languages were very different from Galilean Aramaic. Yet, Peter was able to address them about this phenomenon in a *common* language: most certainly Greek. A special name, the "Hellenists" (NIV: "Grecian Jews," Acts 6:1) was used for Jews who spoke Greek, and each of the seven deacons who served them had Greek names.

The evidence against the Lamsa position is overwhelming. Greek was commonly used by all types of people in Israel and the Mediterranean world in Jesus' day. The apostles knew Greek and wanted all nations to believe. They had no reason to write in a politically and racially-colored dialect (Aramaic) when the universally known Greek existed. They wrote as bilingual men, intimately acquainted with the Greek version of the Scriptures; they thought in Aramaic (and/or Hebrew) and wrote in the Greek style of the LXX.

### LAMSA'S TRANSLATION: ACCURATE OR FAULTY?

Lamsa's distrust of anything Greek and his personal presuppositions also produced bias and error in his translation.

On the surface Lamsa appeared to regard all of the Bible highly. However, he distinguishes between the authoritative teachings of Jesus and what he considered to be the inferior doctrine of His disciples. The apostles, he claims, were unduly influenced by Jewish religion, traditions, laws, and practices, and so reveal human weaknesses in what they wrote.

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Lamsa says some Scriptures were lost and others were destroyed (e.g., burned) or rejected because they were "contrary to the new doctrines and dogmas" adopted at the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325.<sup>43</sup> He says certain passages were "deliberately forged" and added to the books of the Bible.<sup>44</sup> The Greek texts as well as subsequent Bible versions, he adds, are corrupted by mistranslations and contradictions due to ignorant translators and the texts' transition from Aramaic to Greek, Greek to Latin, and Latin to English.<sup>45</sup> Lamsa also asserts that the two oldest biblical manuscripts known today are Peshitta Aramaic texts from the fifth and seventh centuries, making Greek texts appear to be later and corrupt.<sup>46</sup> Thus, despite Lamsa's superficial respect for the Bible, he distrusts, condemns, and changes portions of it.

Scholars universally agree that the New Testament was written in Greek and that we now possess scores of manuscripts which were written before the Peshitta. Most pastors have copies of the Greek New Testament (the UBS or Nestle-Aland text) which compiles readings of several hundred old manuscripts in Greek, Aramaic, and other languages. The reader can refer to this to find the names, content, dates of production, and current location of these texts. Their dates are determined by many factors, so a claim made by Lamsa<sup>47</sup> that deceitful translators cut the dates out of texts to make them appear older is false. Most contemporary versions (NIV, NAS, etc.) translate the UBS text *directly* into English (or another language), so Lamsa's assertion that the Bible was corrupted by being translated from Greek to Latin to English is inaccurate.

This Nestle-Aland Greek text does cite Syriac manuscripts where the readings are valuable for reference. Lamsa, on the other hand, follows *only* the Peshitta, ignoring the many earlier Greek and Old Syriac texts. However, since the Peshitta does not include the books of 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation, Lamsa had to use later Syriac texts, risking corruption due to age. Even if the Peshitta had all the books, it would still be flawed because it is not an original or even a new translation of the Greek into Aramaic, but is a late fourth century revision of superior Old Syriac versions.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, one of several weaknesses in Lamsa's translation is the blemished Peshitta on which it is based.

### **Mistranslations**

At the time Lamsa began to translate, popular contemporary versions such as the New International Version and Today's English Version (Good News Bible) had not yet been published. Hence, part of the popularity of Lamsa's version was due to its clear style and clarification of some of the obscurities in the King James Version.

Lamsa's version does offer some insight into Aramaic words and idioms in the Bible. However, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin idioms are also common in the Bible, so the reader benefits most by acquaintance with *all four* of these cultures and languages. Lamsa's understanding of Scripture is warped by his insistence on using Aramaic alone and his assumption that his twentieth century Iranian Syriac exactly matches fifth century Peshitta Aramaic.

The most disturbing feature of the Lamsa Bible is that he often allows his theology and opinions to dictate his renderings. For example, he does not believe that people personally live after death, so he inserts the word "death" in places the writer used "sleep" (1 Cor. 15:6,18,20). Most passages which refer to the Trinity and Christ's deity are left intact, but Lamsa changes the wording of John 1:18, Acts 20:28, Micah 5:2, and Hebrews 7:3 because they contradict his Nestorian presuppositions. His anti-Greek bias shows as he repeatedly replaces references to "Greeks" with "Arameans."

### **LAMSA: EVANGELICAL SCHOLAR OR CULTIC FIGURE?**

Lamsa considered himself to be the man God set aside and inspired for our times, and his followers still view him as such. One even senses in Lamsa's writings an implicit claim that he stands in the line of apostles with Moses, Jesus, Paul, and Mohammed. Lamsa explains his unique calling through editor Tom Alyea: "God had revealed to Lamsa his purpose and how it was to be done. It was a one-man job. In the Bible testimony is given that God spoke to man; however, it is not recorded where he spoke to a committee... Yes, only one man could translate the Bible from Aramaic. God knew it, and Lamsa knew it, and so it was."<sup>49</sup>

Lamsa also attempts to establish scholarly credentials as a means of gaining acceptance. He claims to have been

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born about 1892, and to have acquired an A.B. degree equivalent in 1907 and a Ph.D. equivalent in theology in 1908 from Archbishop of Canterbury's College, Turkey.<sup>50</sup> He also claims to have graduated from Episcopal Theology Seminary in Virginia<sup>51</sup> and to have studied at the University of Pennsylvania and Dropsie College.

Lamsa, however, appears to have exaggerated his academic credentials. First, he claims to have attained a Ph.D. at age 16, *only one year after his A.B.*<sup>52</sup> Second, there are no records of his graduation from a seminary, and his own writings suggest that he was never at *any* school long enough to attain any *valid* degree.

Lamsa's writing style reflects his exalted view of his own mission and character. He usually writes embellished narratives or discourses, not documenting either blanket assertions or detailed comments. For example, he dismisses his lack of supporting evidence for his theory that the New Testament was originally authored in Aramaic by saying, "What is a fact needs no defense."<sup>53</sup> He assumes that his peculiar habits, culture, superstitions, idioms, and musings all match and illuminate Scripture, resulting in often incorrect or simplistic interpretations. By contrast, scholars in the fields of New Testament studies and Aramaic offer detailed evidence, accept criticisms, and yield much more cautious and informed conclusions.

### Lamsa's Supporters

Lamsa's strongest supporters and colleagues have (apparently) always been cultists and aberrant Christian religions, not evangelicals. He never forgot that one of his first friends in the Americas was a Christian Science lady, Mrs. Mitchell.<sup>54</sup> The A.R.E. (Association for Research and Enlightenment) engaged him as a speaker, quoted him, and offered his books for sale. The Unity School of Christianity, a non-Christian mind science group, published three of Lamsa's books in 1966 and 1968 and offered other books for sale. Lamsa was such a popular speaker for Unity groups and worked so closely with them that he kept his office on the Unity campus in Lee's Summit, Missouri, late in his life. One of Lamsa's closest coworkers and students was Rocco Errico, who heads the metaphysical Noohra Foundation and has written books for Science of Mind publications — books which illuminate the *true* (heretical) nature of his teacher's theology. Moreover, The Way International, a pseudo-Christian group, received Lamsa as a teacher, promotes his books, and published Aramaic texts and a concordance modeled after Lamsa's work. (In recent years, however, The Way has rejected several of Lamsa's assertions about Aramaic after comparing them to valid research.)

The widespread support Lamsa enjoyed from non-Christian groups is a strong indication that he promoted metaphysical, heretical, and unscholarly teachings — not evangelical and scholarly.

Lamsa developed his own cultlike following over the years. He founded the Aramaic Bible Society in 1943 to propagate his work. Four years later he founded the Calvary Missionary Church and gained a larger following through print and radio. Today the Aramaic Bible Distribution Society desires to carry on the "Lamsa work" and place a Lamsa Bible "on every pulpit and in every home." It considers Lamsa's life miraculous and singularly qualified to bring "Truth" to the world. Society brochures state, "We believe that long ago, God formulated a Plan — and when the time was right, He brought Lamsa into the world to begin the fulfillment of that Plan."

While Christian scholarship has disregarded or criticized Lamsa's work, cults and new religions often quote him in print and debate when it serves their purposes. In addition to the five groups mentioned above, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Holy Order of MANS, Christadelphianism, Iglesia ni Cristo, and Astara have all tapped Lamsa's material. These groups have consistently quoted Lamsa in *opposition* to evangelical Christian beliefs, further suggesting Lamsa's distance from the biblical faith.

### The Evangelical Christian Response to Lamsa

On the surface, Lamsa appears to be a revealer of biblical truth and culture and a friend of evangelical Christianity. Closer study, however, has revealed that Lamsa promotes *metaphysical*, not *evangelical* teachings which have led him to inaccurate interpretations and translations of portions of the Bible. As an ambassador of *Nestorian*, not *biblical* culture, Lamsa became a cultic figure in his own right.

Although Lamsa appears to offer truth to his readers, he preaches many and severe errors instead. The biblical

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author Jude warned against false teachers like Lamsa who are like "clouds without water" and "autumn trees without fruit, doubly dead" which deliver the *opposite* of what they promise. Therefore, Christians should not receive, promote, or refer to Lamsa's work, nor stock his books in their libraries (unless it is for the purpose of discernment ministry) or bookstores. When questions about the biblical text, culture, or Jesus' teachings arise, one should instead refer to scholarly and evangelical books on these subjects. When cults and new religions cite Lamsa in opposition to evangelical teaching, one must "contend earnestly for the faith" (Jude 3), exposing the lifelessness of Lamsa's teaching and leading them to the fruit of the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> George M. Lamsa, *Old Testament Light* (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman, 1964), 12 (hereafter, *Old*); and *New Testament Commentary* (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman, 1945), xii (hereafter, *New*).
- <sup>2</sup> *New*, 8-9.
- <sup>3</sup> George M. Lamsa, *The Kingdom on Earth* (Lee's Summit, MO: Unity School of Christianity, 1966), 106-107 (hereafter, *Kingdom*). Lamsa credits Islam with achieving this goal. (*The Secret of the Near East* [New York: Orientalia, 1923], 101 [hereafter, *Secret*]).
- <sup>4</sup> *Old*, 39; also George M. Lamsa, ed., *The Short Koran* (New York: Ziff-Davis, 1949), 15 (hereafter, *Koran*).
- <sup>5</sup> For more on the influence of Nestorianism on Lamsa, see Douglas V. Morton, "The Lamsa Connection: The Origin of Wierwille's False Christ," *Quarterly Journal*, Jan.-Mar. 1989, 1,7,9.
- <sup>6</sup> George M. Lamsa, *Gospel Light* (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman, 1936, 1939), 367-68, 372-73 (hereafter, *Gospel*).
- <sup>7</sup> *New*, 150; see also 177.
- <sup>8</sup> *Gospel*, 353, 369.
- <sup>9</sup> George M. Lamsa, *My Neighbor Jesus: In the Light of His Own Language, People, and Time* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1932), 139 (hereafter, *Neighbor*).
- <sup>10</sup> *New*, 7.
- <sup>11</sup> George M. Lamsa, *More Light on the Gospel* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 151 (hereafter, *More*).
- <sup>12</sup> *Kingdom*, 173.
- <sup>13</sup> *More*, 117-20.
- <sup>14</sup> *Kingdom*, 181.
- <sup>15</sup> *Koran*, 90.
- <sup>16</sup> *Neighbor*, 24.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-27.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.
- <sup>19</sup> *Kingdom*, 171-72.
- <sup>20</sup> Robert W. Krajenke, *Stand Like Stars* (Virginia Beach, VA: A.R.E., 1970).
- <sup>21</sup> *More*, xxix.
- <sup>22</sup> George M. Lamsa, *Idioms in the Bible Explained* (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman, 1971), 73.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.
- <sup>28</sup> George M. Lamsa with Tom Alyea, *The Life of George M. Lamsa Translator* (St. Petersburg, FL: Aramaic Bible Society, n.d.), 3 (hereafter, *Life*).
- <sup>29</sup> William Emhardt and George Lamsa, *The Oldest Christian People* (New York: Macmillan, 1926), 77.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.
- <sup>32</sup> *Life*, 17; see also 19.
- <sup>33</sup> *New*, 110,123.
- <sup>34</sup> *Holy Bible: From the Ancient Eastern Text*, George M. Lamsa, trans. (Philadelphia: A. J. Holman, 1957), ix (hereafter *Bible*).
- <sup>35</sup> George M. Lamsa (from the Foreword), *New Testament Origin* (St. Petersburg, FL: Aramaic Bible Society, 1947), 22 (hereafter, *Origin*).
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.
- <sup>37</sup> Bo Reicke and David Green, trans., *The New Testament Era* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 40.
- <sup>38</sup> "Money," *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 3 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 427-35.

<sup>39</sup> See Morton Smith, "Aramaic Studies and the Study of the New Testament," *Journal of Bible and Religion* 26 (1958), 308-12.

<sup>40</sup> For a thorough study, see J. N. Sevenster, *Do You Know Greek? How Much Greek Could the First Jewish Christians Have Known?* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968).

<sup>41</sup> The same is true of Mark. See Robert M. Grant, *Historical Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 127.

<sup>42</sup> John Weldon, "New Thought/The Aramaic Connection" (unpublished paper), 54.

<sup>43</sup> *New*, xiii-xv.

<sup>44</sup> *Origin*, 97.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-98.

<sup>46</sup> *Bible*, v.

<sup>47</sup> *Origin*, 89.

<sup>48</sup> See Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1968), 68-70.

<sup>49</sup> *Life*, 23.

<sup>50</sup> "Lamsa, G. M.," *Contemporary Authors*, Vols. 23-24 (Detroit: Gale, 1970), 246.

<sup>51</sup> *Life*, 16.

<sup>52</sup> *Gospel*, ix.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Life*, 15.

### A GLOSSARY OF TERMS

- **Estrangelo (-a).** One of many writing scripts which were applied to the Aramaic (Syriac) language. It was developed by Christian missionaries and was in almost exclusive use until the fifth century.
- **Nestorianism.** The teaching that there are two persons in Jesus Christ, one of which is the divine Christ and the other the man Jesus. (This is in contrast to the orthodox belief in a *union* of Jesus' human and divine natures in *one person*.) This unorthodox theory was taught by Nestorius and condemned by the third Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431. His followers — the Nestorians — formed a church, developed their own rituals and doctrine, and still exist today in small numbers in Persia and India.
- **Peshitta.** A fourth century Syriac (late eastern Aramaic) version of the Old and New Testaments. "Peshitta" means literally "the simple (version)," as opposed to the older Syriac texts which had alternate readings noted in the margins. The Peshitta distilled these older Syriac texts into one uniform version and was adopted by the Jacobite and Nestorian branches of the Syrian church. Since the Syrian church did not accept as canonical 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation, the Peshitta did not include these books.
- **Septuagint (LXX).** "Septuagint" means "the seventy," and so is commonly called the "LXX." This Greek translation of the Old Testament (including the Apocrypha) was composed in Egypt from the third to the second centuries B.C. This provided the many Greek-speaking Jews (and later, Christians) a Bible they could understand, and gives modern Christians a better understanding of the vocabulary used in the New Testament.
- **Talmud.** A large, authoritative compilation of Jewish laws, bylaws, ritual, liturgy, ethics, counsel, and interpretation of Scripture, covering almost one thousand years through the sixth century A.D.
- **Targum.** An Aramaic translation or paraphrase of a portion of the Old Testament composed during the time of the second temple (late sixth century to late first century B.C.).