MARANATHA

∗

μαρὰν ἀθά

מָרַן אֲתָא

ܡܳܪܰܢ ܐܰܬܳܐ

∗

μαράνα θά

מָרַנָא תָא

ܡܳܪܰܢܳܐ ܬܳܐ

∗

Gareth Hughes

11 December 2009

Advent is well come nigh! A truth calendrical and etymological. So, I thought I might delve into one obscure word in this season's vocabulary.

The word 'Maranatha' appears in 1 Corinthians 16·22 and Didache 10·6. Respectively:

> εἴ τις οὐ φιλεῖ τὸν κύριον, ἤτω ἀνάθεμα. μαράνα θά.
> If anyone does not love the Lord, let them be *anathema. Marana tha.*

> ἐλθέτω χάρις καὶ παρελθέτω ὁ κόσμος οὗτος. Ὡσαννὰ τῷ θεῷ Δαυείδ. εἴ τις
>   ἅγιός ἐστιν, ἐρχέσθω· εἴ τις οὐκ ἔστι, μετανοείτω· μαρὰν ἀθά· ἀμήν.
> May grace come and this world pass away. *Hosanna* to the God of David. If anyone
>   is holy, let them come; if anyone is not, let them repent; *maran atha; amen.*

It is an Aramaic phrase (although Luther tried to twist it into a totally different Hebrew phrase — מָחֳרַם מוּתָה *māḥăram mothâ*, 'devoted to death'). It was once thought to be a curse word, associated to its preceding *anathema* in the 1 Corinthians verse, but is clear that the ancient authors who promoted this interpretation had a rather hazy understanding of the phrase. However, that verse is part of Paul's concluding prayer for the Corinthians, and forms a rather disjointed collection of prayed aphorisms:

All the brethren send greetings.
Greet one another with a holy kiss.
I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand.
If anyone does not love the Lord, let them be *anathema*.
Maranatha.
The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you.
My love be with all of you in Christ Jesus.

In the Didache, 'Maranatha' appears as part of the doxology of the eucharistic prayer. The short phrases here have been considered by some to be meant to be recited in versicle and response form:

Celebrant:	May grace come and this world pass away.
Congregation:	**Hosanna to the God of David!**
Celebrant:	If anyone is holy, let them come;
	if anyone is not, let them repent.
Congregation:	**Maranatha! Amen!**

The odd use of this Aramaic phrase in Greek texts seems to be a liturgical formula handed on by the first Aramaic-speaking Christians. Just as today's Syriac Orthodox liturgy has the regular prayer cadence ܒܰܪܶܟ ܡܳܪܝ ܐܰܡܝܢ *barrekh Mor amin* ('Bless, my Lord, amen'), 'Maranatha' is a doxological 'Come, our Lord' or 'Our Lord is come'. Its exact meaning depends on how the phrase should be broken down into two words:

1. either ***māran ăthā***

2. or ***māranā thā***.

The earliest manuscripts don't help as they have no word break or accents. Whether it is *māran* or *māranā*, the first word means 'our Lord', from *mārē*, 'Lord', and the possessive suffix *-an* or *-anā*, meaning 'our'. The other word, as *ăthā*, is the perfect tense of the verb 'to come' — 'he has come' — as *thā* it is the apocopated imperative of the same verb — 'come!'.

Patristic scholarship favoured the division *māran ăthā*, but, if this can only be read as 'our Lord has come', it lacks the apocalyptic character we might expect (although this fits with the spirit of the alternative opening to the modern eucharistic prayers: 'The Lord is here./His Spirit is with us.'). Modern scholarship has tended to favour the division *māranā thā* to get us the meaning 'our Lord, come!'. The encouragement for this interpretation is usually gleaned from placing the phrase parallel to Revelation 22·20:

Ἀμήν, ἔρχου κύριε Ἰησοῦ
Amen, come Lord Jesus

And it is related to the eucharistic context of 1 Corinthians 11·26:

> ὁσάκις γὰρ ἐὰν ἐσθίητε τὸν ἄρτον τοῦτον καὶ τὸ ποτήριον πίνητε, τὸν θάνατον
> τοῦ κυρίου καταγγέλλετε ἄχρι οὗ ἔλθῃ
> So, everytime you eat this bread and drink the drink, you proclaim the Lord's death
> until he comes

The first-person plural pronominal suffix is *-anā* in Biblical Aramaic, Qumran Aramaic, Judaean Aramaic and the standard Targums, whereas *-an* is found in the Midrashim, both Talmuds, Samaritan Aramaic, Christian Palestinian Aramaic and Syriac. So which Aramaic does the word come from? Most assume Judaean Aramaic, but I have a suspicion that the source might have been the dialect of Antioch (*-an*?). Either way, by the time the Church Fathers got involved in the debate, the Aramaic speakers they knew used *-an*.

The verb *ăthā* 'to come' is far more problematic: is it an imperative or an indicative? If it's indicative, it's tense is perfective, 'he has come', although it is possible in Aramaic that this has what we would translate as a present-tense sense 'he has come, and is now here'. The Syriac Peshitta supports this word division with its ܐܬܐ ܡܪܢ *māran ethā*.

If it's imperative, 'come!', there are problems with the spelling. The apocopated form *thā*, that is often favoured today doesn't exist in any variety that has the ending *-anā*. Then *ăthā* is the usual form for the imperative. The word 'maranatha' could then be achieved by the ellision of the reduced vowel into the preceding, strong *ā*: *māranā-[ă]tha*.

It seems 'Maranatha' is a fossilised phrase from the earliest prayers at the church's eucharistic gathering, a prayer that Christ might come and be round the table where his disciples gather to feast his memory. What better phrase for Paul to write to the Corinthians, after teaching them of the eucharist, to share with them this symbol of Christ-fellowship? Come, our Lord, be among your people.

Pronunciation: [mɑˈrɑnɑˌθɑ], maa-RA-naa-THAA, where capitals are stressed syllables, and 'aa' is like the first vowel in 'father', 'a' is as in 'fat'.