

# WHAT DOES THE WORD “AMEN” REALLY MEAN?

*(A Historical-Linguistic, Phonetic, Philological, Cultural, and Theological Study with a Brief Overview of Slavic Languages)*

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## Abstract

This study offers a comprehensive interdisciplinary analysis of the word *amin* (Hebrew: אָמֵן), examining its semantic, phonetic, philological, cultural, and theological dimensions across Semitic languages and their broader linguistic and religious contexts. While traditionally translated as “so be it,” “truly,” or “amen,” the term’s deeper etymological and functional layers reveal a more complex conceptual field rooted in notions of firmness, reliability, trustworthiness, and affirmation.

The research systematically traces the development of the root אָמֵן across Biblical Hebrew, Aramaic, and related Semitic languages, highlighting its grammatical functions and semantic shifts within liturgical and textual traditions. Special attention is given to its phonological stability and transmission through Greek (*ἀμήν*) and Latin (*amen*), as well as its integration into early Christian and Islamic discourse.

In addition, the study provides a brief overview of how the term and its conceptual equivalents have been received, interpreted, and adapted within Slavic linguistic and cultural environments. This includes considerations of translation practices, semantic approximation, and theological interpretation in Slavic religious traditions.

By combining historical linguistics, textual criticism, and comparative philology, this paper aims to recontextualize *amin* not merely as a liturgical formula, but as a linguistically and theologically significant expression with enduring cross-cultural resonance.

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## Keywords

Amen; Amin; Hebrew language; Biblical Hebrew; Semitic linguistics; Etymology; Philology; Phonology; Textual criticism; Dead Sea Scrolls; Aramaic; Greek Bible; Slavic languages; Religious language; Theology

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## INTRODUCTION

The expressions *amin* and *amen* belong to a small group of sacred formulae which, over the course of more than three millennia, have successfully crossed the boundaries of languages, scripts, cultures, and religious systems, while retaining an almost unchanged form, meaning, and function<sup>1</sup>. Their origin leads back to the Semitic linguistic sphere of the ancient Near East, yet their history cannot be understood without examining the processes through which these expressions were transmitted, codified, and integrated into the Hellenistic, Christian, and Slavic cultural domains<sup>2</sup>.

Unlike most religious terminology, which in the process of translation and transmission adapts to the phonetic, morphological, and semantic structures of the receiving language, the expression *amin* demonstrates an exceptional resistance to such changes<sup>3</sup>. In nearly all languages into which it has entered, it is not translated but rather transmitted in a transliterated form, which indicates its distinctive theological and liturgical status<sup>4</sup>.

The aim of this study is, through the methods of historical linguistics, Semitic studies, Slavic studies, and theology, to provide a comprehensive analysis of the etymology of the expression *amin / amen*, as well as to explain the reasons and mechanisms of its successful implementation into the Slavic languages<sup>5</sup>. Particular attention will be devoted to the role of Old Church Slavonic and Church Slavonic, as well as to the graphic and liturgical factors that enabled the stability of this formula within the Slavic cultural sphere<sup>6</sup>.

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## I. THE SEMITIC ORIGIN OF THE EXPRESSION AMIN AND ITS INTERNAL HEBREW STRUCTURE

### 1.1. The Etymological Basis in the Semitic Root אִמֵּן

The expression *amin* derives from the common Semitic root א־מ־נ (ʾ-m-n), which in Hebrew, Aramaic, and other Semitic languages carries the fundamental meaning of firmness, reliability, and stability<sup>7</sup>. This root does not primarily denote abstract truth in a philosophical sense, but rather practical and existential reliability: that which one can rely upon, that which is steadfast and faithful<sup>8</sup>.

In Biblical Hebrew, the root א־מ־נ develops an entire family of words covering the semantic field of faithfulness, security, and affirmation. From the same root derive, among others, the noun אֱמוּנָה (*emunāh*, “faithfulness, steadfastness”) and verbal forms denoting the act of confirming or strengthening something<sup>9</sup>. Such a semantic structure explains why the expression *amin* was never a mere utterance, but rather a formula with strong juridical-religious and theological implications<sup>10</sup>.

## 1.2. The Grammatical Status of the Form אָמֵן

From the standpoint of Hebrew grammar, the form אָמֵן (ʾāmēn) represents a particular form that does not fit into the standard paradigms of nouns or verbs<sup>11</sup>. Its function is primarily pragmatic and performative: by uttering *amin*, the speaker confirms, accepts, or reinforces the previously articulated statement<sup>12</sup>.

It is important to emphasize that in Hebrew the expression *amin* does not undergo inflection and does not change form depending on the syntactic environment. This morphological “isolation” already in Hebrew anticipates the later resistance of the expression to change in other languages<sup>13</sup>. From the very beginning, *amin* was conceived as a stable formula, rather than as a lexical unit open to derivational and grammatical processes.

## 1.3. Function in the Old Testament Context

In the Hebrew Bible, the expression *amin* appears in various contexts: as a response of the people to blessings and curses, as part of oath formulas, and as the conclusion of prayers<sup>14</sup>. Its use in these contexts indicates that *amin* possesses a juridical-religious character, since the utterance of this formula implies the acceptance of the consequences of the spoken words<sup>15</sup>.

Particularly significant is the fact that in the Old Testament *amin* does not serve to express subjective opinion, but rather to provide an objective confirmation of the truth or binding nature of a given statement. In this way, the expression *amin* is clearly distinguished from ordinary affirmative particles and acquires the status of a sacred formula<sup>16</sup>.

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## II. THE ARAMAIC PHASE AND INTER-SEMITIC TRANSMISSION

### 2.1. Aramaic as an Intermediary Language

The Aramaic language, which during the first millennium BCE became the lingua franca of a large part of the Near East, played a crucial role in the dissemination and stabilization of the

expression *amin*<sup>17</sup>. As a language of administration, everyday communication, and religious life, Aramaic enabled Semitic sacred formulae to move beyond the narrow Hebrew context into a broader regional framework<sup>18</sup>.

In Aramaic, the expression *amen* retains the same basic form and function as in Hebrew. Phonetic differences are minimal and do not affect the recognizability of the expression, indicating a high degree of inter-Semitic compatibility<sup>19</sup>.

## 2.2. Targumic and Liturgical Usage

In the Aramaic Targums, which represent paraphrases and interpretations of the Hebrew biblical text, the expression *amen* is regularly used as the concluding formula of prayers and blessings<sup>20</sup>. The translational practice of the Targums follows the same principle as that of the later Greek Septuagint: the expression is not translated, but transmitted in its original form<sup>21</sup>.

Such a practice further consolidates the status of *amin* as an untranslatable sacred formula and prepares the ground for its later entry into the Greek and Latin linguistic systems<sup>22</sup>. Aramaic thus represents a key link in the chain of transmission between the Hebrew and the Hellenistic-Christian traditions.

## 2.3. Performative Continuity between Hebrew and Aramaic

One of the most important characteristics of the Aramaic phase is the preservation of the performative character of the expression *amin*. In both languages, the utterance of this formula does not represent a description of a state, but an act of affirmation and consent<sup>23</sup>. This continuity of performative function enabled the expression *amin* in later phases to be easily integrated into new religious and linguistic systems without any loss of its fundamental function<sup>24</sup>.

# III. THE GREEK TRANSMISSION OF THE EXPRESSION AMIN

## 3.1. The Entry of the Expression *amin* into the Hellenistic Linguistic Sphere

The entry of the expression *amin* into the Greek language represents one of the earliest and most significant points of contact between Semitic religious terminology and Indo-European linguistic structure<sup>25</sup>. This process begins in the Hellenistic period, particularly following the conquests of Alexander the Great, but attains its normative form within the framework of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible produced between the third and first centuries BCE<sup>26</sup>.

The translators of the Septuagint, who were bilingual or trilingual (Hebrew–Aramaic–Greek), were confronted with a crucial translational question: whether the expression אָמֵן should be translated or transferred<sup>27</sup>. Their decision to opt for transliteration rather than semantic translation clearly demonstrates an awareness of the untranslatability of the theological content of this expression<sup>28</sup>. The result of this process is the standardized Greek form:

ἀμήν

This form, with the long vowel η, faithfully reproduces the Semitic phonetic pattern and confirms the intention to preserve the sacred identity of the expression<sup>29</sup>.

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### 3.2. Phonetic-Morphological Analysis of the Greek Form ἀμήν

From the standpoint of historical phonetics, the Greek form ἀμήν exhibits remarkable conservatism<sup>30</sup>. The initial vowel α corresponds to the Hebrew glottal carrier of the vowel, while the final consonant ν functions as a phonetic equivalent of the Semitic ending<sup>31</sup>. The Greek language did not attempt to incorporate the expression *amen* into its own morphological system through declension, but retained it as an invariable formula<sup>32</sup>.

Such a procedure departs from the usual Greek practice of adapting foreign words, yet it is fully consistent with the treatment of sacred and liturgical expressions considered to be dogmatically fixed<sup>33</sup>. In this way, *amen* in Greek acquires the status of a distinct discursive unit, set apart from the lexical system.

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### 3.3. Usage in the New Testament

In the New Testament, the expression ἀμήν acquires an additional theological and stylistic dimension<sup>34</sup>. In addition to its standard use as the conclusion of prayers or blessings, Jesus employs the expression *amen* as an introductory formula: “ἀμήν λέγω ὑμῖν”<sup>35</sup>. This usage has no direct parallel in the Old Testament tradition and indicates the authoritative character of the speech<sup>36</sup>.

In this context, *amen* does not function as a response to a preceding statement, but as a self-affirmation of the truth of what follows<sup>37</sup>. This Christological reinterpretation will have a profound impact on the subsequent theological and liturgical use of the expression within the Christian tradition<sup>38</sup>.

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## IV. THE LATIN PHASE AND EARLY CHRISTIAN TRADITION

### 4.1. The Transition of the Expression *amen* into the Latin Language

From Greek, the expression *amen* passes into Latin almost without any phonetic or graphic changes<sup>39</sup>. The Latin language, particularly in its ecclesiastical variety, demonstrates a high degree of respect for established Greek sacred formulae, which is clearly reflected in the preservation of the original form *amen*<sup>40</sup>.

Unlike many other Greek religious terms, which in Latin received Latinized endings or underwent morphological integration, *amen* remains invariable<sup>41</sup>. This fact confirms its status as a liturgical formula rather than a lexical borrowing in the narrower sense.

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## **4.2. Usage in Latin Biblical and Liturgical Texts**

In Old Latin translations of the Bible, as well as later in the Vulgate, the expression *amen* is consistently used as the concluding formula of prayers, hymns, and doxologies<sup>42</sup>. Saint Jerome, although inclined toward semantically precise translations, does not attempt to translate the expression *amen*, but retains it in its original form<sup>43</sup>.

In Latin liturgical practice, *amen* becomes a key element of the response of the people to the prayers and blessings of the priest<sup>44</sup>. Its frequency and strict normativity further reinforce its position as a universal Christian formula of affirmation.

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## **4.3. Theological Interpretation in Western Patristics**

Latin patristic thought develops a rich theological interpretation of the expression *amen*<sup>45</sup>. Authors such as Augustine emphasize that *amen* does not merely mean “so it is,” but rather represents the conscious participation of the faithful in the uttered prayer<sup>46</sup>. Such an interpretation further underscores the performative character of the expression and its role in communal liturgical practice.

It is important to note that Latin theological reflection does not alter the fundamental meaning of the expression, but deepens it and connects it with the broader Christian doctrine of truth and faithfulness<sup>47</sup>. In this way, *amen* becomes definitively established as one of the foundational elements of the Christian liturgical language.

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# **V. THE ENTRY OF THE EXPRESSION AMIN INTO OLD CHURCH SLAVONIC**

## **5.1. The Byzantine Mission and the Formation of the Slavic Sacred Language**

The entry of the expression *amin* into Old Church Slavonic is inseparably linked with the process of the Christianization of the Slavs and the formation of the first Slavic literary language within the framework of the Byzantine mission of the ninth century<sup>48</sup>. The translational activity of Constantine the Philosopher (Cyril) and Methodius was not a mere linguistic adaptation of Greek texts, but a deliberate attempt to construct a sacred language capable of expressing theological and liturgical content without the loss of semantic and ritual fullness<sup>49</sup>.

Within this framework, the translators were confronted with a fundamental methodological question: which elements of the Greek liturgical language should be translated, and which must be transmitted without translation<sup>50</sup>. The answer was determined by a hierarchy of sacredness, whereby expressions with a performative and dogmatic function, such as *amin*, were systematically transliterated<sup>51</sup>.

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## 5.2. Phonetic-Morphological Adaptation within the Old Church Slavonic System

The phonetic structure of the expression *amin* proved exceptionally suitable for integration into the Old Church Slavonic phonological system<sup>52</sup>. Not a single phoneme of the expression required substitution or adaptation, which enabled the faithful transmission of the form without phonetic simplification<sup>53</sup>. The final jer (ъ or ѣ), present in the forms *аминъ* and *аминь*, has a purely phonotactic function and does not alter the semantic or liturgical status of the expression<sup>54</sup>.

From a morphological perspective, *amin* remains outside all declensional paradigms of Old Church Slavonic<sup>55</sup>. This isolation is not the result of a systemic limitation, but of a conscious decision that sacred formulae should not be subjected to the grammatical processes applicable to lexical units of general usage<sup>56</sup>.

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## 5.3. The Earliest Manuscripts and Textual Testimonies

The earliest Old Church Slavonic manuscripts, both Glagolitic and Cyrillic, consistently attest to the stable and normatively regulated use of the expression *amin*<sup>57</sup>. In these texts, *amin* appears as the conclusion of prayers, blessings, and liturgical sections, in the same positional and functional relationships as in the Greek sources<sup>58</sup>.

It is important to emphasize that in the early Old Church Slavonic corpus there are no attempts to translate or paraphrase the expression *amin*, which clearly confirms its already established sacred status<sup>59</sup>.

# VI. OLD CHURCH SLAVONIC AS A FILTER OF SACRED STABILIZATION

## 6.1. Functional Isolation of the Expression *amin*

In Old Church Slavonic, the expression *amin* occupies a unique position: it does not belong to the active lexical inventory, does not participate in word formation, and does not enter into syntactic relations characteristic of other parts of speech<sup>60</sup>. Its function is strictly bound to the liturgical and ritual context, thereby further reinforcing its performative nature<sup>61</sup>.

This functional isolation had far-reaching consequences for the subsequent development of the expression in Slavic languages, as it prevented its semantic dilution or pragmatic reinterpretation in the early stages of linguistic transmission<sup>62</sup>.

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## 6.2. The Normative Role of Old Church Slavonic

Old Church Slavonic functioned as a normative filter that standardized and stabilized sacred formulae prior to their dissemination into individual Slavic languages<sup>63</sup>. Through this filter, the expression *amin* was not merely transmitted, but codified as an invariable liturgical formula, thereby ensuring its long-term stability<sup>64</sup>.

Owing to this normative role, all later Slavic languages inherit *amin* in an already fully formed and canonized shape<sup>65</sup>. This explains the remarkable uniformity of the expression across the Slavic world, irrespective of phonetic, graphic, or confessional differences<sup>66</sup>.

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## 6.3. The Transition to the Church Slavonic Tradition

The process by which Old Church Slavonic gradually transitions into Church Slavonic represents the final phase of normative stabilization of sacred vocabulary<sup>67</sup>. Within this process, the expression *amin* undergoes no modification, but is reaffirmed as the obligatory final element of liturgical texts<sup>68</sup>.

Such continuity between Old Church Slavonic and Church Slavonic enabled the uninterrupted transmission of the expression *amin* into all subsequent Slavic traditions, which constitutes a key factor in its durability<sup>69</sup>.

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## VII. GRAPHIC ANALYSIS: GLAGOLITIC AND CYRILLIC IN THE TRANSMISSION OF THE EXPRESSION AMIN

### 7.1. Script as a Carrier of Sacred Stability

In the history of sacred formulae, script does not represent a mere technical means of recording, but an active mechanism of preserving meaning and function<sup>70</sup>. In the case of the expression *amin*, the graphic tradition of Slavic literacy played a decisive role in preventing the semantic and functional erosion of this formula<sup>71</sup>. Glagolitic and Cyrillic, although different in their graphic principles, demonstrate an identical approach to the expression *amin*: its preservation in a complete and unaltered form<sup>72</sup>.

This fact indicates a high degree of awareness among early Slavic scribes of the special status of liturgical formulae, which were not regarded as part of the freely modifiable linguistic inventory, but as elements of ritual structure<sup>73</sup>.

## 7.2. Glagolitic Attestations of the Expression *amin*

In the earliest Glagolitic manuscripts, the expression *amin* consistently appears in the form ⱮⱿⱮⱿⱮ, without graphic variants or abbreviations<sup>74</sup>. Each grapheme corresponds precisely to the phonetic structure of the expression, confirming the intention to preserve the full transparency and integrity of the formula<sup>75</sup>.

It is particularly significant that in the Glagolitic tradition there is no use of ligatures or symbolic abbreviations for the expression *amin*, although such solutions were employed for other sacred terms<sup>76</sup>. This consistency further confirms that *amin* was understood as a graphically and functionally indivisible unit.

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## 7.3. The Symbolic Dimension of Glagolitic Script

From its inception, Glagolitic possessed a pronounced sacred character, and its graphic symbolism was oriented toward the transmission of theological content<sup>77</sup>. In this context, the writing of the expression *amin* in its full graphic form may be interpreted as a deliberate act of preserving its theological fullness<sup>78</sup>.

In Glagolitic texts, the expression *amin* does not function merely as a concluding word, but as a graphic marker signaling the completion and validity of the spoken liturgical act<sup>79</sup>.

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## 7.4. Cyrillic Practice and Standardization

With the development of Cyrillic and its gradual adoption in Slavic ecclesiastical contexts, the expression *amin* appears in the forms амин, аминь, and аминь<sup>80</sup>. These variants reflect phonological and graphic features of the language, yet do not alter the fundamental function of the expression<sup>81</sup>.

The Cyrillic tradition demonstrates greater flexibility with regard to final jers, yet the expression *amin* remains strictly excluded from declensional and derivational systems<sup>82</sup>. This confirms the continuity of its sacred status and its resistance to grammatical integration.

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# VIII. THE CHURCH SLAVONIC CODIFICATION OF THE EXPRESSION AMIN

## 8.1. Church Slavonic as a Normative Sacred Standard

Church Slavonic represents the final normative phase in the stabilization of the expression *amin* within the Slavic world<sup>83</sup>. Unlike Old Church Slavonic, which primarily fulfilled a translational

function, Church Slavonic operates as a canonized liturgical language characterized by a high degree of conservatism<sup>84</sup>.

Within such a system, the expression *amin* becomes an obligatory and indispensable final element of liturgical texts, thereby further institutionalizing its function<sup>85</sup>.

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## 8.2. Graphic-Phonetic Standardization

In Church Slavonic manuscripts and printed books, the expression *amin* appears in established forms *амин*, *аминъ*, or *аминь*, without any attempts at phonetic or morphological reinterpretation<sup>86</sup>. The phonetic structure remains identical to that of Old Church Slavonic, while graphic variations reflect regional recensions and chronological layers<sup>87</sup>.

What is crucial is that none of these variants alters the liturgical function of the expression, indicating successful normativization and stabilization<sup>88</sup>.

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## 8.3. Functional and Theological Normativity

In Church Slavonic liturgical practice, *amin* assumes a strictly defined functional position as a response of the people or the clergy, but also as a marker of acceptance of the spoken words<sup>89</sup>. Its usage is not a matter of personal choice, but part of a regulated liturgical order<sup>90</sup>.

From a theological perspective, the Church Slavonic tradition confirms *amin* as a performative act of faith, thereby continuing the continuity established in the Hebrew and Greek traditions<sup>91</sup>.

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# IX. THE DIFFUSION OF THE EXPRESSION AMIN / AMEN IN THE SLAVIC LANGUAGES

## 9.1. General Patterns of Diffusion in the Slavic World

Following Church Slavonic codification, the expression *amin* enters a phase of secondary diffusion within individual Slavic languages<sup>92</sup>. This process does not involve renewed borrowing from Greek or Latin, but rather intra-Slavic dissemination of an already normativized sacred formula<sup>93</sup>. It is precisely this fact that explains the remarkable uniformity of form and function of the expression *amin* / *amen* across the entire Slavic area<sup>94</sup>.

The fundamental characteristic of this diffusion is that the expression does not undergo phonetic or morphological adaptation in vernacular languages, but is adopted as a ready-made liturgical unit<sup>95</sup>. Such a pattern has few parallels in the history of Slavic religious terminology.

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## 9.2. East Slavic Languages

In East Slavic languages—Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian—the form *амин* represents a direct continuation of the Church Slavonic tradition<sup>96</sup>. In Russian linguistic practice, the expression is used both in liturgical contexts and in broader discursive usage, where it often acquires a pragmatic or stylistic function of closure<sup>97</sup>.

Despite this secular usage, *amin* in East Slavic languages retains a clearly recognizable sacred resonance, which confirms its long-term cultural embeddedness<sup>98</sup>.

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## 9.3. West Slavic Languages

In West Slavic languages, particularly Czech, Slovak, and Polish, the form *amen* predominates, reflecting a stronger influence of the Latin liturgical tradition<sup>99</sup>. The difference between the forms *amin* and *amen* in this context is not semantic, but confessional-historical<sup>100</sup>.

In all West Slavic languages, *amen* functions both as the concluding formula of prayer and as a pragmatic marker of finality in everyday speech<sup>101</sup>. This dual function attests to the complete integration of the expression into the linguistic system, despite its foreign origin<sup>102</sup>.

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## 9.4. South Slavic Languages

The South Slavic area represents a unique case in which the expression *amin* is used within multiple religious traditions<sup>103</sup>. In Serbian, *amin* is present both in Orthodox liturgy and in everyday speech, where it functions as an expression of strong agreement or conclusion<sup>104</sup>.

In Bulgarian and Macedonian, the situation is analogous, whereas Croatian and Slovene more frequently use the form *amen*, under the influence of the Western ecclesiastical tradition<sup>105</sup>. Despite these differences, the fundamental function of the expression remains identical across all South Slavic languages<sup>106</sup>.

# X. THE THEOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF THE EXPRESSION AMIN / AMEN

## 10.1. *Amin* as a Performative Theological Act

In theology, the expression *amin* does not constitute a lexical designation, but a performative act of confirmation and acceptance<sup>107</sup>. Its function is not to describe truth, but to liturgically affirm it and render it binding<sup>108</sup>.

This performative nature enables the expression to achieve universal applicability across diverse religious and linguistic contexts, without the need for semantic adaptation<sup>109</sup>.

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## 10.2. The Christological Dimension of the Expression

In the New Testament tradition, *amen* acquires an additional Christological dimension through Jesus' introductory use of the formula "amen, I say to you"<sup>110</sup>. This usage emphasizes the authority of the speaker and introduces a new theological interpretation of the expression as a bearer of truth<sup>111</sup>.

Subsequent patristic tradition associates *amen* with the very identity of Christ as "the Truth," thereby further deepening its theological significance<sup>112</sup>.

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## 10.3. The Interreligious Dimension

The use of the expression *amin* in Islamic prayer practice demonstrates its transconfessional character<sup>113</sup>. Despite differing theological frameworks, the function of the expression remains identical: the confirmation and acceptance of the word of God<sup>114</sup>.

This shared usage further attests to the deep Semitic rootedness of the expression and its universal sacred function<sup>115</sup>.

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## XI. CONCLUSION

The analysis of the etymology, historical transmission, and theological function of the expression *amin / amen* demonstrates that it constitutes a sacred formula of exceptional stability, one that has successfully endured multiple linguistic, cultural, and religious transformations<sup>116</sup>. Its Semitic origin, the early decision in favor of transliteration, and the normative role of Old Church Slavonic and Church Slavonic represent the key factors underlying this durability<sup>117</sup>.

Within the Slavic languages, *amin* has not been perceived as a foreign word, but rather as an integral component of religious and cultural heritage<sup>118</sup>. Its resistance to phonetic and semantic change testifies to the strength of sacred formulae when they are rooted in ritual practice<sup>119</sup>.

In conclusion, the expression *amin / amen* represents a paradigmatic example of the successful integration of a Semitic sacred formula into the Slavic linguistic and cultural sphere, confirming that certain elements of religious language are capable of transcending historical epochs and linguistic change without any loss of their fundamental function<sup>120</sup>.

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