
The Arabic Versions of the Bible, Reflections on Their History and Significance*

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In the Western world the word "Arabic" usually connotes "Islamic." Scholars have always understood otherwise. Prior to the Muslim conquest many Arabic speaking peoples had already become Christian (particularly in the Yemen). At least from the ninth century onwards many formerly Greek, Syriac, and Coptic speaking Christians began to use Arabic as their major language. Arabic Christian scholars kept pace with this development by again and again translating the New Testament into Arabic. This article will briefly review a few high points of the thousand years of Arabic New Testament translations and draw a few conclusions from that long and illustrious translation tradition.

By the fifth century most of the Christian churches had stopped translating the Bible. The Syriac church began with the Old Syriac translation, which is from the second century. Then came the Peshitta of about the fourth century, and finally the Harclean version of 614. The Latin church had many translations, but with the fifth century Vulgate of St. Jerome they came to a stop. The Armenians made only one translation. The Copts had one version for each dialect of Coptic and by the fourth century these were fixed. Thus when Thomas of Harcle went to a village near Alexandria in 614 to make a final revision of the Syriac New Testament, he probably did not know that his efforts were the end of an age—the age of the translations of the ancient churches. From that date, until just before the beginning of the Reformation under Luther with his famous German Bible, the minds and the pens of the translators were stopped throughout the entire Christian world—with one exception.

Unknown to Thomas of Harcle, at the very time he was working on his Syriac translation near Alexandria, the Arabian peninsula was on the move and would soon burst onto the world with the lightning attacks of the Muslim conquests, which brought with it a new language—the Arabic language.

Was there an Arabic version of the New Testament, or even of parts of its gospels, before the rise of Islam? Louis Chekho, the famous Lebanese Jesuit scholar, insists that there was. Other scholars are not so sure. In support of Chekho we must note that seventh century Muslim authors are able to quote full pages in good Arabic. These quotations certainly did not come from Syriac, but from Arabic. We can hope that new manuscript finds may one day settle the question definitively. Leaving this important topic aside, we can observe that Arabic speaking Christians (of Coptic, Syriac, and Greek

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origin) worked tirelessly from the rise of Islam onwards to translate and re-translate the Bible into Arabic. All during the long period, at least the eighth to the sixteenth centuries, when all other Christians were happy to allow their languages to change—but not their versions of the Bible—Arabic speaking Christians were at work untiringly to keep the word of God fresh and meaningful for the community of faith.

This entire eight-hundred year period is worthy of far more study than it has received. We can but hope that in the future more light will be shed on this remarkable effort and that rich treasures of spirituality can be recovered from a study of those translations. Here we can but review only a few high points of the early translations and then turn to note some of the printed versions of the period from 1592 to the present.

Manuscripts of Arabic Versions of the Bible Made in the Ninth to the Thirteenth Centuries

In this section we intend to note and briefly remark on nine different manuscript versions of the New Testament (and in some cases, the entire Bible) in Arabic, translated from the ninth to the thirteenth centuries. This will be noted by number and the enclosed chart can be referred to for an overall view of the entire series and the language of origin of each manuscript.

1. *The Diatessaron of Tatian*

We have listed this as first in our series but it may well be better placed in the eleventh century. Tatian made a single gospel out of the four gospels in about 172 A.D. The result was a book of fifty-five chapters with a single continuous account of the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord. His version was used for many years in the Syriac Church and finally discarded and destroyed. It has survived in Armenian and Arabic. The Armenian is thought to represent the text accurately. The Arabic preserves the selection and arrangement of verses but is thought to be taken from the Syriac Peshitta in regard to the text itself. Our own study of the Arabic Diatessaron would lead us to make some cautious modification of this opinion. We have found Old Syriac influence against the Peshitta in the Arabic translation. Whatever its origin it is a significant work of scholarship and an important early witness to the Arabic New Testament.

2. *Vatican Arabic No. 13*

This important manuscript is probably the earliest copy of the gospels in Arabic. It has five different scribes and the earliest of them uses a modified Kufic script. The script has been dated by experts as from the eighth or ninth century. Naturally, the translation itself may be much earlier. It is especially significant for its unusual use of *eloheem* in some places for *allah*. It would seem that Arabic speaking Christians were debating just how to translate the Greek word *theos*. This version is especially significant, as we have noted, because of its early date.

3. *Sinai Arabic No. 151 (867 A.D.)*

Sinai Arabic No. 151 is the oldest known dated translation into Arabic of the Letters of Paul, the Acts, and the Catholic epistles. This manuscript, now at Mt. Sinai, is also important because it has quite a full commentary on the text written by Bishir ibn al-Siri.

The second of the present writers has recently completed the transcription and translation of this entire manuscript (soon to be published by the *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* in Belgium). The script is often without the diacritical marks and has taken decades to transcribe. We are convinced that when this rich treasure is printed it will make a significant contribution to biblical scholarship world-wide.

4. *Vatican Arabic No. 95* (Eighth-ninth century)

This version is preserved in one manuscript in Rome and one in Berlin. Matthew and Mark have been carefully transcribed and published. Luke and John have been examined by the first of the present writers but not transcribed. The translator surfaces as a very careful scholar who offers a perceptive interpretation of the text as he translates. The manuscript is water damaged and parts of each page are destroyed. The letters seem to have a Syriac slant to them. All efforts at reading this text have proven worthwhile.

5. *Vatican Arabic No. 71* (Tenth century?)

The great treasures of the Vatican Library hold many rich jewels for the student of the Arabic versions of the New Testament. This manuscript is one of them. It is also most likely from the ninth century, but perhaps somewhat later. The text is in good condition and is easy to read. It, like Vatican Arabic No. 13, is most likely translated from the Greek.

6. *Vatican Arabic No. 18* (993 A.D.)

The Arabic language offers the translator a wide variety of literary forms. One of these is called *saja'*. This style is a type of rhymed prose in which the last word of each of a series of sentences rhymes with no attention to the length of the sentence itself. Much of the Qur'an uses this half-way house between prose and poetry. In the medieval period translators cast the gospels into this rhymed prose. Five such translations are extant.

Vatican Arabic No. 18 is outstanding not only for its style but also for the appearance in it of many Arabic terms now thought to be distinctively Muslim in character. Thus, either Arab Christians and Arab Muslims were linguistically closer together during that period than they are today, or this particular literary effort was directed towards a Muslim audience. Both possibilities are intriguing. Whichever alternative is closer to the facts, these versions reflect an amazing freedom in translation that does not re-surface in any translation tradition until the twentieth century. Vatican No. 18 also is in process of transcription here in Beirut with a view to publication.

7. *Ibn al-Tayyib* (died 1045)

Abd-Allah ibn al-Tayyib (al-Mishriqi) was one of the most famous Arabic Christian scholars of the history of the church. This illustrious figure was monk, pastor, scientist, physician, author, and translator all in one. As a medical doctor he treated the Kalif of Baghdad. As a biblical scholar he produced a full commentary on the four gospels and with it his own translation of the text. Although full of the allegorizing of the period, his commentary is a serious study of the text. His translation is one of the great versions of the history of the Arabic Bible.

8. *The Coptic Vulgate* (1203)

This translation comes to us in Vatican Coptic No. 9, transcribed in 1203. The manuscript is in Coptic and Arabic. Marginal notes record that it was copied for the

monks of the monastery of St. Anthony in the desert between Beni Sweyf and the Red Sea. We read that the monks may not take the manuscript into their rooms but only read it in the monastery library. A few centuries later it appears for sale in Cairo and, after a long and colored history, finally, in the eighteenth century, is purchased by the Vatican Library where it now remains. We are not sure when this version was made, but it appears so often and for so long that it is called "The Coptic Vulgate."

9. *Hibat Allah Ibn al-Assāl* (1252)

This famous name appears in the records of the Coptic church for over two hundred years. Hibat Allah himself was one of three brothers: Abu Ishāk Ibn al-Assāl was a systematic theologian, al-Sāfi Ibn al-Assāl, an expert in canon law, and Hibat Allah, an interpreter and translator of the New Testament. Around the middle of the thirteenth century Hibat Allah collected twelve manuscripts of the Arabic New Testament from the Greek Orthodox, the Coptic Orthodox, and the Syriac Orthodox churches. Discovering their differences, he then invented 28 symbols by which he could refer to these various traditions. The Arabic letter "S" meant "the Syriac." The letter "Q" meant "the Coptic" and "R" (*Rūmī*) meant "the Greek." With the adding of other letters he could say "some of the Coptic" or "the Coptic only," and these could be used in combinations. "La" is a negative in Arabic, so "SQLAR" would mean "Syriac and Coptic but not Greek." With the use of these symbols this amazing scholar created the world's first critical edition of the gospels. The notes are precise and copious. The original is lost, but a monk named Ghabriel made a copy from the original in about 1260, and this is preserved in the British Museum (No. 3382). The Arabic text is fully vowelized and has been transcribed by Dr. Jibrāil Jabbūr of the Arabic Department of the American University of Beirut. Dr. Jabbūr reports that the vowelizing is almost without error. Ghabriel, the scribe, was himself a man of gifts who later became the Patriarch of his church. This work must be considered one of the greatest unknown works of scholarship on the New Testament in any language.

These nine translations are merely a small sample of the many translations that the early Arabic fathers made of the Bible. Other versions were no doubt made in the centuries between Hibat Allah and the date of the first printed Arabic gospels. These remain to be discovered. Our brief review now skips from the manuscripts to the printed versions.

The Printed Arabic Bibles From The Sixteenth To The Twentieth Centuries

10. *Rome 1591*

The first printed version of the Arabic gospels was done in Rome in 1591. The text was brought from Lebanon and was printed with some beautiful wood block prints of the various scenes of the New Testament. After it was printed it was discovered that some parts of it did not correspond exactly with the Latin Vulgate and so a second edition was quickly made, adjusting the text and translation.

11. *Holland 1616*

Of great interest to the RCA is that after the Catholic version of 1591 the first full New Testament ever printed in Arabic was produced in Holland in 1616. The editor was a famous Dutch orientalist of the seventeenth century named Van Erpe, who went by the

Latin name Erpenius. It is by this latter name that this version is known. This work was superseded by the famous polyglots but remains a witness to a Dutch concern for Christians far from their borders. It is important only as the first full New Testament in Arabic.

12. *The London-Paris polyglots (1629-1657)*

In the seventeenth century there was a great interest in polyglots. Two languages in one book were common. Four were not unknown. Then came the mammoth effort of printing eight versions of the text on facing pages. This was done first in Paris (1629-1645) and then in London (1654-1657). These two versions included Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Syriac, Persian, Ethiopic, Aramaic, and Arabic. These two editions were the first occurrence of Arabic in any of these multi-language editions. Amazingly, each of these languages was also translated fully into Latin. The result was an enormous set of leather-bound volumes standing 45 centimeters high and in six thick volumes. Scholars of the period, quoting the Latin translations, could easily refer to any or all of these versions with ease. Not since Origen's Hexapla in the third century had anything quite like it ever been attempted. Now for the first time, the *entire* Arabic Bible was in print.

13. *Rome 1671*

The Catholic Society for the Propagation of the Faith, in the same century, felt the need for a printed Arabic New Testament for the work of Catholic fathers in the Middle East. They produced a three volume Latin-Arabic version that filled that need. It was handsomely bound in leather and attractively printed with the Latin and Arabic in parallel columns down the page.

14. *Suliman Ibn Ya'qub*

From this point on, the story of the printed Arabic versions turns to the Middle East itself. The first Arabic version printed in the Middle East was made in Aleppo in 1727. This version was not widely circulated and, indeed, was quickly superseded by the fathers in Schwaïr.

15. *The Schwaïr Lectionary 1818*

The first Arabic printing press in the Middle East was assembled in the mountains of Lebanon in the monastery of St. John the Divine near the village of Schwaïr. The monastery still proudly displays the remains of the press. The monks of the monastery had the vision to see the need for a Christian printing press and, as early as 1776, produced a lectionary of the New Testament in two volumes divided according to the weekly readings for the church year. The text came from Aleppo, but the translator and the time of translation do not seem to be known. This press continued in operation and continued printing New Testaments clear up to the end of the nineteenth century.

16. *Henry Martin—Calcutta (1819)*

The nineteenth century was the most productive century so far as Arabic versions of the Bible are concerned. The Schwaïr version was quickly followed by a very respectable Arabic New Testament printed in Calcutta, translated by Thaniel Sabat and assisted by the famous linguist, Henry Martin. *Yahya* is used for John the Baptist, but the traditional name for Jesus (*Yasū'*) is retained. As one expects from Martin, one of the greatest linguists of all time, the translation is thoughtful and penetrating.

17. *Shidyak* (1857)

Western missionaries distributing the Scriptures in the Middle East were using reprints of the Catholic Propagandist version of 1671. The Arabic was judged as poor in style and difficult to read. The Bible Society sensed the need for a new version and Faris al-Shidyak, a famous Arabist, was solicited to labor with scholars from England to produce a full Bible. The volume was printed in 1857 but was quickly overshadowed by the Bustani-VanDyck that was then in process.

18. *Bustani-Smith-VanDyck* (1865)

The American Presbyterian Mission assigned Eli Smith the task of producing a new version of the entire Arabic Bible. A team was formed of Smith, Butros al-Bustani, and Naseef al-Yaziji. This team of three produced all of the New Testament and most of the Old Testament. Eli Smith died of cancer and Cornelius VanDyck, a member of the Kinderhook Reformed Church, Kinderhook, New York, was asked to replace him. VanDyck picked Yusif al-Husayni as his stylist. The result of the efforts of all of them was the most widely circulated Arabic version in the entire history of Arabic Bibles.

19. *Dominican-Mosul* (1875)

The Dominicans in Mosul, for the use of Syriac-Arabic Christians, followed soon after with their own full Bible. This complete Bible was finished and printed in 1875. The New Testament was reprinted again and again even into this century. Sadly now, the entire Bible has almost disappeared.

20. *The Jesuit Bible*

The Jesuits responded to the challenge of the Bustani-VanDyck Bible by making a fresh translation of their own. It also was of the entire Bible. It was well done and also enjoyed wide circulation. Thus, amazingly, in twenty-five years the nineteenth century saw the publication of *four full Bibles in Arabic*. The amount of time, effort and money that was spent was astounding. Earlier printed Bibles merely took manuscripts from the Middle East and, with some slight editing, printed them. But here were full translation teams starting afresh and producing not only New Testaments but full Bibles, and not one team but four. To our knowledge this feat was not surpassed any time in the one thousand years of Arabic speaking Christianity.

21. *Būlūsiya* (Beirut, 1956)

After the great efforts and astounding results of the nineteenth century, seventy-five years were to pass before any one took up the task again. The twentieth century saw its first serious attempt at new translations in the appearance of the new Paulist version of the New Testament, translated by Father Fakhouri. Many improvements in the purity of the Greek text have been made in the last one hundred years and Father Fakhouri incorporated some of these into his thoughtful and useful translation. His work has been reprinted a number of times, which indicates the interest that it has had, and is a tribute to the scholarship of its author.

22. *The New Jesuit* (Beirut, 1969)

Fathers Hamawe and Qushaqji, working with the late Mr. Bustani of Beirut, produced a fine new version of the entire New Testament, published in 1969. For the first

time the critical text of the Greek New Testament was used. Many improvements in spacing and paragraphing were introduced for the first time. This translation was deeply influenced by the famous Jerusalem Bibles in French and English and will, no doubt, remain as a witness to the careful scholarship of its authors.

23. *Thompson—Abd-al-Melik (1972)*

As early as the late 1950s a revision committee was set up to make a full revision of the VanDyck-Bustani Arabic Bible. Dr. John Thompson and Dr. Butros Abd-al-Melik were the translators, assisted by a distinguished team of reviewers. The New Testament was completed and printed with a very attractive set of pictures as a single New Testament in 1973. Their revision of the VanDyck was cautious but worthy of note.

24. *The New Coptic Orthodox (1972-1975)*

Scholars of the Coptic Orthodox church published a new Arabic translation of St. Mark in 1972, St. Matthew in 1975 and St. Luke in 1978. These are attractively printed with some beautiful icons and commentaries of various fathers. We can but sincerely hope that this work will continue and that we will soon see the rest of the New Testament.

25. *Yusif Aoun (1978)*

In February of 1978 the Maronite Father Yusif Aoun produced a new translation of the four gospels. He appears to have translated from French. In the introduction and conclusion he lists a number of sharp criticisms of the new Jesuit version of 1969. The polemical tone set in the introduction can be traced in the translation and notes.

26. *The New Bible Society Translation (1979)*

This new version is the work of an interconfessional team working with Dr. William Reyburn as the United Bible Society translations consultant for the Middle East. The team consisted of Mr. Yusif al-Khal of Lebanon as the main drafter and stylist; Bishop Antoine Nageeb of the Coptic Catholic Church in Egypt as the exegetical controller; and Dr. Fahim Aziz of the Coptic Evangelical Church and Dr. Maurice Tawadros of the Coptic Orthodox Church as the two main reviewers. This new version attempts to use a more modern Arabic style and thus to make the text more understandable for the modern reader.

Conclusions

What conclusions then can we draw from looking back over a thousand years of Arabic versions of the Bible? A number of observations come to mind:

1. One cannot help but be amazed at the variety and extent of this translation tradition. It stands unparalleled in any other translation tradition.
2. We note that the very centuries in which the church in the Arab world was alive and vigorous were the very centuries in which there was a flowering of new translations of the Bible into Arabic.
3. The Quran specifically tells its readers to study the gospels. The traditional excuse offered for failing to do so is that "the gospels in the hands of the Christians are corrupted." Fearful of intensifying this criticism, modern Arab Christians are often fearful of any new translation. With this understandable fear in mind, one is amazed at the rich

variety of Arabic translations in the Muslim world at the very time of its glory—the Umayyid and Abbassid periods (eighth to thirteenth centuries).

4. The Arabic versions of the Bible are a great treasure of spirituality that must be recaptured for the entire church. To translate is to interpret. Middle Eastern Christianity, to a large extent, shares a culture closer to that of Jesus of Nazareth than any other community of Christians. Their perceptions of the Scriptures are preserved in their translations to a significant degree. These are a valuable heritage for all Christians everywhere.

5. All translations can be faulted. Surely all translators sincerely seek the guidance of God's spirit for their work. Yet, with the one exception of the Alexandrian fathers and the Septuagint, serious Christian theology has never affirmed inspiration for the translators. As human beings their knowledge and perceptions are finite. This fact is reflected in any and all versions, including the Arabic versions.

6. The church usually opposes any new version. Pious people read a version and come to love it. Emotionally they identify it with the original and forget that it is a translation. Thus, when a new version comes, they are emotionally disturbed. The point is not a rational argument but rather an emotional disturbance. When the RSV first appeared it was burned in the streets. In the Middle East the United Bible Society has just published a long-awaited new version of the New Testament. It is experiencing similar birth pangs.

7. God blesses the versions he chooses to bless. One Arabic version is read for hundreds of years. The next evaporates soon after publication. In the modern period this phenomenon can be traced in the English translation tradition. Arabic versions have experienced the same patterns for hundreds of years. Careful scholarship, ecclesiastical blessing, proper promotion—all of these and other factors are no doubt involved. When it is all said and done, one can only affirm that God's spirit blesses one and withholds his blessings from another. We can but hope that Arab church leaders, in regard to the New Arabic Version now available in the Middle East, will be willing to heed the advice of Gamaliel.

8. More recent studies of the early Arabic texts indicate that many of them are translated from significantly early texts. Thus they may yet prove themselves of greater value for textual purposes than they have yet been given.

Thus, in summary we can but marvel at the extent and variety of the Arabic versions of the Bible. In an unbroken stream they stretch for over a thousand years across the history of the church. We can only pray and labor that the rich treasures of spirituality in this translation tradition can be taken more seriously for the benefit of scholars and non-specialists world-wide, and that the interpretive insights of these Middle Eastern Christians can be brought to light for the enrichment of all.

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