

THE VAN DYCK BIBLE TRANSLATION: THE AMERICAN MISSION BOARD¹ AND THE TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE INTO ARABIC

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Introduction

At the time of their arrival in Palestine in the 1820's, the American Protestant missionaries' main activity was the distribution of Scripture and tracts. Their primary audience was Christian pilgrims who came to Jerusalem for Christmas and Easter.³ Initially, the use of Arabic literature was very limited. On the one hand, outreach among Muslims could, according to Ottoman law, result in the death penalty; on the other hand, Protestant relations with the Arab Christian communities were weak or even hostile.⁴ However, over time the situation shifted and the missions were able to establish schools, hospitals, and churches throughout Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon. In this context, the need for an Arabic Bible translation was reckoned an urgent priority.

Nonetheless, a few questions had to be addressed before action could be taken. First, such a translation would be costly and time consuming, so, why should the mission sacrifice the time and money for it? Second, were any adequate Arabic translations of the Bible already in existence? If so, why did the American Mission want to have a translation undertaken by its own people? Third, if a new translation were required, how would the quality of such a translation be assured?

Bringing the Word of God to the Sinners

The above is the major reason that motivated some of the missionaries to initiate a new translation. In 1847 a committee chaired by Dr. Eli Smith sent an appeal advocating a new translation of the Bible into the Arabic language; this Bible was seen as a means of bringing hope to the whole Middle East:

Can we exaggerate on such a theme? Is it easy to overestimate the importance of that mighty power that shall send the healing leaves of salvation down the Tigris, the Euphrates, the Nile, and the Niger; that shall open living fountains in the plains of Syria, the deserts of Arabia and the sands of Africa; that shall gild with the light of life the craggy summits of goodly Lebanon and sacred Sinai and giant Atlas? We think not. These and kindred thoughts are not the thoughtless and fitful scintillations of imagination, the baseless dreams of a wild enthusiasm. To give the Word of God to forty millions of perishing sinners, to write their commentaries, their concordances, their theology, their sermons, their tracts, their school-books and their religious journals: in short, to give them a Christian literature, or that germinating commencement of one which can perpetuate its life and expand into full grown maturity, are great gigantic verities taking fast hold on the salvation of myriads which no man can number, of the present and all future generations.⁵

Thus, the purpose of the new translation was to bring the word of God to the whole Middle East, and so to permeate every aspect of the lives of the Arabophone peoples in the region. Hall in his article gives the credit to Dr. Smith for persuading the American Board that, "a new Arabic translation of the Bible was indispensable, and that the success of American missions and the spread of the truth demanded the work".⁶

¹ I'm referring here for the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM). It was founded in September 5th 1810, and became the first organized missionary society in the United States. Most of its members were Congregationalist and Presbyterians. They arrived to Palestine in 1821. From there they visited Beirut and decided to make this city their main station in the area.

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³ Aharon Ya'afe 'The activity of the American Protestant mission in Israel from 1821-1845' [Hebrew] *Katedra*, 74 (1994), 36-60 (p. 50).

⁴ Margaret R. Leavy 'Eli Smith and the Arabic Bible' *Yale Divinity School Library: Occasional Publication* (1993) 1-25 (p. 7).

⁵ Henry Harris Jessup *Fifty-Three Years in Syria* 2 vols. (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1910) p.68-69.

⁶ Isaac H. Hall 'The Arabic Bible of Drs. Eli Smith and Cornelius V. A. Van Dyck' *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 11 (1885) p.276-86 (p.283-284).

However, the mission faced a further profound challenge: namely, mass illiteracy. It would scarcely be helpful to put the Bible in the hands of people when most of them could neither read nor write. During the 18th century few books were written or published in Arabic since the level of literacy among the public was very low, especially in the countryside and among the desert tribes. Classical Arabic had retreated relative to the Turkish language, and the divergence between written Arabic (i.e. classical) and spoken Arabic had grown to the point that the latter had almost become a separate language unto itself.⁷ Therefore, the project of translating the Bible to Arabic would only be meaningful as the work of the mission schools, where Arabs could learn to read and write, advanced.⁸ Accordingly, both Dr. Smith himself and Dr. Van Dyck⁹ were involved in establishing and teaching in schools.¹⁰

Why a New Arabic Bible Translation?

When we speak about the Arabic Bible translation by the American mission in the 19th century, many assume that this was the first Arabic translation of the whole Bible, particularly since this version is the most popular one and the oldest one commonly in use. This is not accurate, however. According to an account written by Dr. Van Dyck himself, there were various Arabic translations of the spanning the 9th century through to the 19th. At least one of these translations of the entire Bible, namely, the '*Propaganda*,' was well known to the missionaries, and was used by them. (Most of the other translations included only certain portions of the Bible.¹¹) So why did the Mission desire a new one?

When the first evangelical missionaries arrived in the Middle East in the first half of the nineteenth century, they did not find an Arabic translation of the Bible which they felt they could use in preaching or teaching.¹² The edition they circulated was the so-called *Propaganda* version, which was printed by the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) without the Apocrypha. This translation had been done by the Maronite Bishop of Damascus who began the work of translation in 1620; it was first printed at Rome¹³ in 1671, with the Apocrypha.¹⁴ This version, it was reckoned, suffered from many weaknesses and grammatical errors, and was described by the Protestant missionaries as follows:

It is a servile imitation of the Vulgate. The rendering of the historical parts is intelligible, but the meaning of the Epistles is often obscure, and their doctrinal arguments robbed of almost all their force. Much of the prophetic and practical parts of the Old Testament is either unmeaning or in bad taste, and the whole version is neither classical nor grammatical. The missionaries could not put it into the hands of literary natives without an apology for its awkwardness and errors, and some of them never read it in public without previous revision.¹⁵

Furthermore, the *Propaganda* version was printed in three large volumes which made it difficult to transport, and it was very expensive: only monasteries, churches, and wealthy people could afford to buy it. From this we may conclude that the majority of the people did not know the content of the Bible, nor had they ever physically touched one. This was yet another motive for a new Arabic

⁷ Aharon Ya'afe 'Translating the Bible to Arabic by the American Mission' [Hebrew] *Pe'amim* (2000) 57–69 (p. 75).

⁸ Leavy, 'Eli Smith' p.14–15.

⁹ He is one of the American Board missionaries, more information about him will come later.

¹⁰ Jessup, *Fifty-Three Years*, p.54, 69.

¹¹ Hall, p.277–278.

¹² Ghassan Khalaf 'The Role of Evangelicals in Translating the Bible into Arabic' (Beirut, Lebanon, 1998) p.1–8 (p.5) <<http://www.ghassankhalaf.com/works0202.php>>.

¹³ It was printed by the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, and the name *Propaganda* was taken from the Latin name of the congregation, Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide.

¹⁴ Hall, p.278.

¹⁵ Thomas Laurie *Historical Sketch Of The Syria Mission* (Boston: The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1866) p.19.

translation of the Bible for the benefit of the people of the region, who had little knowledge of the written Word of God.¹⁶

Ironically, the Maronite Patriarch was also unhappy with the BFBS edition of the *Propaganda* translation that was being used by the missionaries. Two main reasons are likely. First, the BFBS edition omitted the Apocrypha. Second, he felt that this Bible was being used to convert people to Protestantism. He even called the missionaries (American and British alike) infidels and atheists because of their use of this edition. He instructed the members of his community and the clergy to boycott the BFBS edition and ordered them to send him any copy they got hold of.¹⁷ In any case, it is very clear that the missionaries were dissatisfied with the *Propaganda* version and felt the need for a new translation, a translation which would have the linguistic and theological credibility to meet the needs of the people and the churches.¹⁸

New Translation

The Mission did not only discuss the reason and the need of a translation, they were also careful to assure its quality. In 1847 Smith was formally asked by the Board to take responsibility for the new translation. Smith's life experience had equipped him for this important role of translating the Bible into Arabic: his theological training at Yale and Andover, his work as a missionary for thirty years, his contacts with Bible scholars in the States and Europe, and his ties to printing experts in Germany.¹⁹ In addition, he had a remarkable ability to learn new languages. Leavy writes about him:

Eli Smith's lively interest in languages was, no doubt, one reason the Mission Board was so eager to send him to the Mediterranean. He was already competent in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew from his years at Yale and Andover, and seems also to have had some familiarity with German and French, as well as with Italian, which was the *lingua franca* of Westerners in the Mediterranean world. He was a quick learner, and in the coming years was to acquire a number of other languages, including Turkish and Armenian, and even something of the language of the Syrian Gypsies. Of course, he shortly mastered the Arabic language too.²⁰

Smith was assisted in his task by two of the best intellectuals in the Levant at the time, Boutros al Bustani and Sheik Nasif al Yaziji. Bustani was an educator of Lebanese Maronite Christian origin, who converted to Protestantism and worked as a teacher at the boys' mission school in Abeih.²¹ Like Smith, al Bustani had great linguistic abilities, and "in addition to Aramaic and Syriac, he knew Latin, Greek, Italian and French and quickly sharpened his English," and when he was asked to join the translation team he invested his time in the study of Hebrew as well.²² And so, he acquired knowledge of all three original languages of the Bible. Al Yazigi was a poet and a writer, and, while Arabic was the only language he spoke, he mastered this language very well. Both of these men also became some of the main leaders of the Arab Renaissance²³ later in the 19th century.²⁴

Smith was a perfectionist who devoted attention to the smallest details.²⁵ For example, when it came even to the style of the printing he worked to have the one that "possess a classical beauty acceptable to the most exacting readers of Arabic and worthy of the sacred text itself. Not even the

¹⁶ Khalaf, p.5.

¹⁷ Yaafe, 'Translating the Bible to Arabic by the American Mission' p.58.

¹⁸ Khalaf, p.6.

¹⁹ Yaafe, 'Translating the Bible to Arabic by the American Mission' p.61.

²⁰ Leavy, 'Eli Smith' p. 7.

²¹ Yaafe, 'Translating the Bible to Arabic by the American Mission', p.62.

²² Issa A Saliba 'Bible in Arabic: The 19th-Century Protestant Translation' *Muslim World* (1975) p.254-63 (p.255).

²³ Also known by the Arabic word *Al-Nahda*, a cultural renaissance that began in the second half of the 19th century and continued until early 20th century. This renaissance took place in Egypt, Lebanon and Syria. It is often considered as a period of intellectual, literature and nationalism awakening led by Arab Christian poets, writers and thinkers.

²⁴ Yaafe, 'Translating the Bible to Arabic by the American Mission' p.62.

²⁵ Jessup, Fifty-Three Years, p.56.

Sultan's press in Constantinople could meet that standard.”²⁶ When it came to the translation itself, Smith adopted a strict method: first, Al Bustani translated the text into Arabic from the Hebrew or Greek. Then, Al Yaziji made any changes needed to guarantee the purity of the Arabic. Smith revised Al Yaziji's work and then went over the revision with Al Yaziji, making sure that the meaning was clear.²⁷ After getting comments from other mission members who knew Arabic well, a printed document of the translation was sent to “Arabic scholars in the Middle East, Britain, Germany, and the United States, inviting their comments, criticisms, and suggestions.”²⁸ After receiving comments Smith would make any necessary changes, and only then would he send it to the press.²⁹

Smith died in January of 1857, and his work was far from completion. In fact, only the books of Genesis and Exodus had been printed. The rest of the Old Testament, and very little of the New Testament, had been translated by Al Bustani.³⁰ Before he died, Smith said that he “would be responsible only for what had been printed.”³¹ That meant that the one who would replace Smith must himself review all the translated but unprinted material.

Continuing the work - Dr Van Dyck

Dr Cornelius Van Dyck was chosen as the successor to Smith. Van Dyck was also an outstanding linguist with an excellent grasp of Arabic. He had been involved in the project as a member of the translating committee, as well as being one of the “review scholars.”³² It seemed obvious that he was the right person to finish the work of translation. And so, in the same year he was moved from Sidon to Beirut in order to complete the work of translation.³³

Van Dyck decided to prioritize finishing at least one of the testaments, and so began with the (shorter) New Testament first. As to his Arabic language assistant, Van Dyck decided to secure the services of a Muslim Scholar by the name Sheikh Yusuf el-Asir, a graduate of El Azhar University in Cairo. He “preferred a Muslim to a Christian, as [one] coming to the work with no preconceived ideas of what a passage ought to mean, and as being more extensively read in Arabic.”³⁴ Some suggested that the Arabic style of the translation should be similar to that of the Quran, but those who were involved in the translation (Smith, Bustani, Van Dyck, and other Arab scholars) preferred a simple and pure Arabic language, different from the Quran style but also free from any foreign expressions.³⁵ Yet it is important to note that we do in fact find different levels of the Arabic language in the translation. The language that is found in the historical books and the Pentateuch is translated simply and in a straightforward manner, while more ornate and complex vocabulary and language appear in the wisdom and prophetic books.³⁶

On the 28th of March 1860, a complete copy of the New Testament was placed before the annual meeting of the Mission Board. At that meeting Van Dyck was urged to complete the full task by translating the Old Testament, and he was able to finish that task on the 25th of August, 1864. On March 10th, 1865 they celebrated the printing of the Old Testament and the completion of the new Arabic translation of the entire Bible.³⁷

²⁶ Leavy, ‘Eli Smith’, p.12-13.

²⁷ Jessup, *Fifty-Three Years*, p.70.

²⁸ Saliba, p.258-259.

²⁹ Saliba, p.259.

³⁰ Leavy, ‘Eli Smith’, p.19.

³¹ Hall, p.279.

³² Saliba, p.260.

³³ Leavy, ‘Eli Smith’, p.20.

³⁴ Hall, p.280.

³⁵ Saliba, p.262.

³⁶ Jessup, *Fifty-Three Years*, p.75.

³⁷ Yaafe, ‘Translating the Bible to Arabic by the American Mission’, p.67-68.

Conclusion

In 17 years the American Mission was able to provide a new Arabic translation of the Bible for religious and educational life in the Middle East. The success of this project was beyond the expectations of the missionaries. In a short time this translation was embraced by the evangelical churches in Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Iraq, Egypt and Sudan. They used it for evangelism, preaching, teaching, school education, and worship. So too did the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt and Sudan, as to this day. The so-called Smith and Van Dyck version is also the Bible of the Antiochene Orthodox Church, as well as the Greek Orthodox Church. In other words, this translation became the *de facto* accepted version (with the exception of the Catholic Church) for all the Churches in the Arabic world.³⁸

Since the completion of the Van Dyck translation, another four Arabic translations have appeared.³⁹ Yet the Van Dyck translation is still considered the best among all of these translations. The main challenge of this translation is that it has not been revised for more than 140 years. A revision of this valuable version would help to correct translation mistakes, simplify the Arabic language used in it, and make it easier for new generations to read and understand it.

The translation of the Bible into Arabic by these American missionaries and their colleagues played a major part in the renewal of the Arabic language. The translation has been defined as one of the most important contributions of American missionaries to the renewal of spiritual life in the East, and the revival of the Arabic language in the nineteenth century after a period of neglect during Ottoman rule. Furthermore, the translation also contributed to the establishment of the mission in the Middle East, and helped to confirm the place of living and active Arab Protestant denominations, alongside the ancient Orthodox and Catholic Churches of the East.⁴⁰

³⁸ Khalaf, p.6.

³⁹ The Jesuit Bible translation 1878; the Paulinian translation 1953; the Lebanese Bible Society translation 1979; and the *Gospel Book of Life* (Living Bible) 1982. There are other translations, yet they are not accepted by most of the churches, or at least they are not in use.

⁴⁰ Yaafe, 'Translating the Bible to Arabic by the American Mission', p.68.