

The most commonly used Arabic Bible translation is often called the 'Van Dyck', as Dr. Cornelius V.A. Van Dyck played a major role in the translation. In 1885, an article appeared in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* Vol. XI (New Haven, 1885), pp. 276 – 286 by Professor Isaac H. Hall, titled *The Arabic Bible of Drs. Eli Smith and Cornelius V.A. Van Dyck*. The following article summarizes that article about the existent Arabic versions at that time and how these were used for the translation work of the 'Van Dyck'. It also focuses on the proceedings of the actual translation work and the first printings.

Van Dyck himself about earlier Arabic Bible translations:

'The earliest Arabic version of the Scriptures, as far as I know, is that made under John, Bishop of Seville, about 750 AD, from the *Vulgate*. According to the Jesuit Mariana, the whole Bible was translated, but was never printed. A number of manuscript copies of it have been found in Syria, but it was never [generally] known in the East.

Rabbi Saad Ghidgaon, commonly known as Saadias of the *Babylonian School*, translated the whole of the Old Testament from Hebrew into Arabic in the ninth century, for the use of the Arabic-speaking Jews, of whom there were several tribes or families in Arabia. The Pentateuch of this version was published at Constantinople in 1546, in Hebrew characters, then at Paris in 1645, in Arabic characters, and at London in 1657.

An edition of an Arabic translation of the Samaritan Pentateuch was edited by Juynboll, of Leyden, a few years before his death. . . . I had this version, among others, before me while making my translation. I now recall the name: *Abu Said the Samaritan*. The date is unknown—between the tenth and thirteenth centuries. A few copies have been found in Syria.

An unknown Jew of North Africa made an Arabic translation of the Pentateuch in the thirteenth century, which was printed in Europe in 1622.

A translation of the prophetic books from the Septuagint by a Jew of Alexandria, in the tenth century—latter part—was printed at Paris, 1645, and at London, 1567 (has to be 1657, ed.).

There are extant parts of the historical books translated from the Syriac in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Some have been printed in Europe. We find occasional fragments of these in convents.

The version of the Psalms used by the Papal Greeks is a translation from the LXX by Abdallah Ibn el-Fadl, in the twelfth century. It was printed at Aleppo, 1706, and at London, 1725. Another version was printed at Genoa, 1516, and at Rome, 1614. A third, from the Syriac apparently, was printed at Shuweir, Mt. Lebanon, in 1610.

Little is known of Arabic versions of the New Testament. The Gospels seem to have been in Arabic since the seventh century, and the other books since the ninth and tenth. Several versions of parts of the New Testament are in existence; some from the Syriac, some from the Greek, and some from the Coptic. The Four Gospels were first printed at Rome in 1591, and the whole New Testament in Holland, 1616, and at Paris, 1645, and at London, 1657.

In the early part of the seventeenth century, Sarkis er-Rizz, a Maronite bishop of Damascus, got permission from the pope to gather and compare copies of the Arabic Scriptures, and make a new version. He began the work in 1620, reducing all to the *Vulgate*: i.e., taking the version printed at Rome, and comparing with other Arabic versions and the Greek, but giving the preference to the Latin in most cases, as is

evident from the version itself. This version was printed at Rome (about 1671), in three folio volumes, with the Apocrypha. It was (without the Apocrypha) adopted by the *British and Foreign Bible Society*, and printed by them, and circulated in the East by all missionaries, until the new version was made.

It is said that the Sultan Muhammad II ordered a translation of the Old Testament to be made from the Greek into the Arabic, but it is not known whether the work was ever executed. Probably not or some trace of it would have been found.

Between 1840 and 1850, Fares es-Shidiak and Professor Lee, under the auspices of the Church Propagation Society, made a version of the Scriptures in Arabic. In this the mistakes of King James's English version are copied. It seems that Shidiak translated from the English, and Prof. Lee was supposed to reduce it to agreement with the Hebrew. This version never came into use. It was printed between 1851 and 1857 at London.'

Van Dyck about the start of the New Version - Dr. Smith – The Translation method

'As far back as 1837, the mission of the A.B.C.F.M. in Syria was considering the idea of making a new Arabic version of the Scriptures. The means for printing it when made were defective; and Dr. Eli Smith began his labors on Arabic type mostly with the printing of the Bible in view. His punches and matrices and fonts of type were ready by 1843, but ill-health and domestic affliction prevented his actually beginning the work till 1848, when he commenced, with the help of *Muallim* Butrus el-Bistani, a good Syriac scholar, who first studied Hebrew with Dr. Smith. He made the first draft, and Dr. Smith carefully reviewed and compared it with the original. As soon as a form was ready, it was put into type, and a copy sent to each missionary in the entire Arabic field, and also to any other Arabic scholars near enough at hand. These proofs, with any suggestions, emendations, corrections, or objections, were sent back to Dr. Smith, who carefully reviewed each, and adopted what he thought proper.

Having begun on the Old Testament, and proceeded but a little way, Dr. Smith thought best to leave the Old Testament and proceed with the New Testament. He left a basis of the entire New Testament, but nothing was put in type. Dr. Smith adopted no known text of the Greek, but selected from Tischendorf, Lachmann, Tregelles, and Alford, as he thought fit. He had gone on far with the New Testament when Alford was published; and he stopped until he could go back and compare what he had done with Alford. On his death-bed, he said he 'would be responsible only for what had been printed:' viz., Genesis, and Exodus with the exception of the last chapter. I edited the last chapter of Exodus after he died.'

The work is taken over by Van Dyck and the New Testament is translated anew

'Dr. Smith died in 1857, January; but for the last year or more of his life he was able to do nothing at the translation. In the fall of the same year, I removed to Beirut [from Sidon] and assumed the care of the Press, and continued the translation of the Scriptures. It was then found out that Dr. Smith had followed no [one] Greek text of the New Testament, and this the Bible Society could not allow; wherefore the whole New Testament had to be done over. I was directed to begin on it, and to finish it before turning to the Old Testament. I followed the Received Text, with permission from the Bible Society to put in as many various readings in the foot-notes as seemed desirable, especially where the text differed from the Syriac or any known version in

Arabic; and I availed myself largely on this permission.

Van Dyck about the cooperation of Eastern and Western scholars, and of missionaries in the field

'I followed the same plan as Dr. Smith, in sending out proofs, and re-reading and comparing all that were returned to me. Some of the more difficult parts of the Old and New Testaments were kept in type for several months, till I could get the criticisms of Rödiger and Fleischer, from Halle and Leipzig. I have still their criticisms on the Song of Deborah and other difficult passages. The translation was finished August 23, 1864; and the printing of the first edition, 29 March, 1865. The New Testament had been finished and printed in 1860. Thirty copies of every form were struck off and distributed as above mentioned, and thus the work became the result of the labor of a large number of scholars. As Arabic scholars, Dr. Smith associated with him Sheikh Nasiif el-Yazigi and M[uallim] B[utrus el-] Bistani, both Christians.'

The comments of a Muslim sheikh

'I had with me Sheikh Yusuf el-Asiir, a Muslim, and a graduate of the college of the great Mosque of El-Azhar in Cairo. I preferred a Muslim to a Christian, as coming to the work with no preconceived ideas of what a passage ought to mean, and as being more extensively read in Arabic.'

The competitive Jesuit version

'The Jesuits have issued a translation, made by them with the assistance of Ibrahim el-Yazigi, son of Dr. Smith's former assistant, and printed in three large octavo volumes. It is a fair translation generally, and only differs in very slight particulars from mine (so far as I have traced it)—and that only for the sake of differing from the Protestant Version.'

Printing, voveling, proof-reading, correcting, etc.

'The first printed of the New Version was the New Testament, 12mo, reference. That was followed by the entire Bible, 8vo, reference; then 12mo voweled New Testament, and 16mo New Testament without vowels. I then went to New York, and in the Bible House got out electrotype plates of a plain Bible, 8vo. These plates are still in use, and show very little wear. I am now at work reviewing them for correcting such little breakages as may have taken place in printing so many editions from them.

After two years, I returned to Beirut with Mr. S. Hallock, and we made here electrotype plates of four sizes of the entire Bible, one voweled entire; three sizes of the New Testament, one voweled; and one set of voweled Psalms, 12mo: in all, between 10,000 and 11,000 plates. Some of these were made after I left the Press, and by oversight of proof-reader were not compared with the standard copy which I had left, there for that purpose. By this means some slight discrepancies between the editions have crept in; and I am now re-reading proofs of all the plates, to reduce all to the same reading, and to correct any errors of broken letters or vowel-points which may have occurred. The British and Foreign Bible Society have also electrotyped two editions of the New Version (entire Bible), and several parts of the Scriptures."

