

# Contemporary Issues and Challenges in the Translation of an Arabic Bible

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There are many contemporary challenges and issues in the field of biblical translation that need more than a single article to discuss adequately. Some of these are general challenges that are associated with the translation of the biblical text in any language, for example: choosing the level of vocabulary; deciding on shifting word meanings; negotiating semantics (that is, understanding words in their context), which often causes scholars to swing between consistency and the variant meanings of the words; and deciding on syntactical equivalents in a target language. Also, scholars must choose the type of translation they want, whether a literary or abstract translation, or something else.

In this article, I will focus on three main challenges that are related to the translation of the Bible into Arabic: (1) the challenges of choosing the text; (2) the challenges of choosing the language; and (3) the challenges of choosing the goals and strategies of the translation.

## Choosing the Text

What is meant by choosing the text? Aren't we talking about translating the Bible? Yes, but with regard to the Old Testament, we might choose between the Masoretic text and the Greek translation known as the Septuagint. Scholars, however, are agreed that translating the Masoretic text is really the only option as the Septuagint is an ancient translation.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Though the Old Testament that we have is a translation of the Masoretic Text, the Septuagint still has an important role to play in helping us to understand the Hebrew Text. This is so not only because it was based on older

With regard to the New Testament, we must choose between two main texts. The first is the Textus Receptus, and the second is the Critical Text. Without elaborating on the differences between the two texts or discussing textual criticism, it is clear that the Critical Text should be used for any modern Arabic translation.

Some people think that hiding the Critical Text from laypeople is the best approach because it would be confusing for them to change the language of well-known biblical passages. In addition, they believe that this would raise questions about the authenticity of the Bible among Non-Christians. Today, however, it has become impossible to hide controversial passages and wordings because they are widely available. If the church attempts to deny or hide the problem instead of simply confessing and facing textual difficulties, it will raise more problems than it solves.

Those who would attack Christianity can readily locate well-known Christological verses (Mat. 18:11, 24:36; Luke 23:24; John 6:69; Acts 2:30; Heb. 2:7; 1 John 5:7,8) and compare the versions of these verses they find in the Textus Receptus to those in the Critical Text. When they find differences, they can then fill the internet with non-scholarly attacks that, for the uninitiated or unsophisticated, will seem to undermine the faith. Therefore, we should not hide such differences. Moreover, this is really a minor problem in that the discrepancies between the texts do not affect any core doctrine of the Christian faith. In the case of the Christological verses, they simply reflect early and later expressions of the church's theology of Christ.

The Arabic translation popularly known as the Van Dyck Bible depends on the Textus Receptus while other modern Arabic translations depend on the Critical Text. The latter include the Good News Arabic Bible, the Simplified Arabic Translation, and the Jesuit translation. Where these newer Bible translations differ from the older translations, they may be confusing to the typical

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manuscripts than the Masoretic Text but because it was the source of almost all the Old Testament quotations in the New Testament. In spite of its importance, we have yet to see a real attempt to translate it into Arabic.

Arabic reader. Sometimes, to avoid this problem in the case of well-known verses, translators substitute translations from the *Textus Receptus* or a version of it. For example, there are instances where the Jesuit translation reverts to the Vulgate when the Critical Text might discomfit readers. This of course violates all the translation rules that scholars use to ensure that we have a faithful biblical text.

Because of the felt need among Arabic-speaking Christians for a newer, more colloquial, and more accurate translation of the Bible, the Arabic churches of the Middle East now have an opportunity to produce a Bible translation that is based on the Critical Text. In fact, they might even go beyond the Critical Text to consider other possible texts in the light of how they reflect a later theology. This could positively affect the church, not only in regard to Christology but also in other theological points. (For examples of controversial texts, see the following: Mat. 17:21, 20:16, 22:23; Mark 11:26; John 5:3, 4; Rom. 8:1, 11:6; 1 Cor. 6:20.) As the church enters the new millennium, such research could lead toward a reinvigorated Middle Eastern theology and renewal of the church.

## Choosing the Language

Not all Arabophones are Arabs either in ethnicity or culture. Today there are nearly three hundred million native Arabic speakers spread over twenty-seven nations, from Morocco to Oman. We can divide the countries that use Arabic as their official language into five main dialects:

(1) *The Gulf dialect* is widespread in the Arabian Peninsula and southern Iraq. Though the people of this region are mostly Arabs by ethnicity and culture, the more one travels east the more encounters a Persian influence on language.

(2) *The Syrian dialect* includes western Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine. This dialect and all its variations reflect the influence of the more ancient Semitic languages, such as Syriac, Aramaic, and Nabataean.

(3) *The Egyptian dialect* reflects the influence of the ancient Egyptian language.

(4) *The Maghreb dialect*, which stretches from the western Egyptian Sahara to Morocco, reflects the influence of the Amazigh language with its different dialects.

(5) *The African dialect* is found in Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, Chad, and Somalia. It reflects the influence of Hamitic as well as ancient traditional languages.

Some might think that Modern Standard Arabic could become the *lingua franca* of Arabophones through which Arabic speakers might avoid a diversity of dialects. This is true to an extent. Arabophones call Modern Standard Arabic the “Newspaper language” since it is a correct, modern, and standard form of Arabic. It reflects the standard vocabulary and modern syntax of Arabic speakers with at least a minimum education. Nevertheless, there are still a number of local differences among those who speak this standard language. Hence, in reading a newspaper in Lebanon, Egypt, and Tunisia one can see differences in both vocabulary and syntax. Also there is a tendency in modern Arabic literature to mix Standard Arabic with colloquial versions.

Developments in Arabic literature from the Arabic renaissance in the 1930s until now have helped to produce more changes in the language than occurred from the seventh century until the beginning of the twentieth century. Following the pioneers of the Arabic renaissance, the writers of the postcolonial generation continued this trend as did the writers of the last two decades, whose innovations in literature in the areas of subject, genre, and form (syntax and semantics) may have helped—some have argued—to produce the Arab Spring. These rapid and profound changes have presented a large challenge to the church, for there is now a widespread feeling that the church needs to produce a fresh translation of the Bible that reflects the modern era. Those who would undertake this translation should begin by answering the question, which language do we want? Do we want several colloquial Arabic translations, several standard Arabic translations that reflect local dialects, or one translation that reflects a general Middle Eastern language and theology?

The Van Dyck Bible was an attempt to produce a standard Arabic translation for all Arab speakers, but it followed an old Arabic linguistic structure. Moreover, it seemed to local communities to be too general and at the same time too syntactically and semantically odd. Nevertheless, it became well known to many Middle Eastern Christians and, due to its strangeness, helped to create closed Christian communities. The Good News Bible overcame the problem of the old structure but it couldn't avoid the problem of being too general. And the same can be said for the Simplified Arabic translation.

As an example, let's look at the specific case of the Egyptians, who constitute almost one quarter of the Arabophone population. There is no Arabic translation that reflects a pure Egyptian Arabic, and when Arabic translations included Egyptian scholars, they only dimly reflected standard Egyptian Arabic. The standard Arabic in Egypt is simpler syntactically than that of Lebanon and Syria, but it has a wider range of vocabulary due to the influence of the colloquial Egyptian dialect. This was reflected only in the simplified Arabic translation, but the influence is slight. This might be because of disagreements among the translators or simply a reflection of the difficulty inherent in the translation process.

Let's return now to the possibility of producing local colloquial translations of the Bible in Arabic. Though we can divide the local dialects of Arabic into five main groups, there are numerous subdivisions among them that in some cases represent major phonetic, semantic, and syntactic differences. These differences exist not only between cities but even between neighboring villages. Consequently, producing a Bible in colloquial Arabic for a large population is highly problematic. The solution to the problem may lie in selecting the most common dialect in a country, which for Egypt would be the Cairo dialect. However, there are still a number of problems to overcome, including the lack of standard written rules for colloquial Arabic. If for example we consult Wikipedia, we will find that Egyptian Arabic is treated as a separate language, but despite the really great effort of many editors, it is soon apparent

that the standard Arabic vocabulary has merely been replaced by a more colloquial one without any attempt to adjust the syntax.<sup>2</sup> This is simply due to the lack of a standardized colloquial grammar. In addition to these problems, there are a number of basic questions that will have to be answered before a colloquial Arabic translation can be responsibly undertaken. What level of colloquial we are aiming at? How we are going to write it since there are no orthographical rules for colloquial Arabic? Should we use the Arabic alphabet or the Latin alphabet that has been adapted for Arabic use and is now widely used in the social media (internet-based sharing of information)?<sup>3</sup>

Due to all the difficulties noted here and others that could be added, we would be hard pressed at the moment to create a really good colloquial translation of the Bible for Egyptians or the other four major dialect groups. On the other hand, Lebanese Arabic is already largely expressed in the Good News Bible, and Maghreb Arabic is generally reflected in the Sharif Arabic Bible, so perhaps it's time for translators to stop dallying, overcome the obstacles, and produce colloquial translations for all five dialects of Arabic. Egyptians scholars could lead the way by producing an Egyptian Standard Arabic Bible.

## Goals and Strategies

Translators of the Bible must take into consideration the cultural context of the people for whom the translation is intended and the appropriate educational level of the intended readers. They must also decide where the translation will fall on the continuum between literalness and dynamic equivalence in translation. Once these goals are set, strategies follow. Translators often begin with creating criteria against which to test the translation as it develops. This will be the work not of one person but a

<sup>2</sup> There is a complete colloquial Maghreb Arabic “darja” translation, but it is inadequate as its considered less a translation than a simplified version.

<sup>3</sup> There have been some attempts in Lebanon to use the Latin alphabet to translate the Bible into Lebanese colloquial Arabic. Also, the Egyptian Bible Society has sidestepped the problems mentioned here by producing an audio version of the Bible in colloquial Egyptian Arabic.

translation team. Unfortunately, in many cases the goals and strategies for achieving them were not always clear in the creation of past Arabic translations.

The Van Dyck translation team had the goal of creating the standard translation for most Middle Eastern Christian communities. In this it largely succeeded. Though other translations appeared at the same time, such as the “Shedyaq” and “Dominican” translations, only the Van Dyck translation was widely used throughout the Middle East and became known as “the King James version of Arabophones.” The translations that came afterwards tried to correct or avoid the apparent problems in the Van Dyck. In other words, it became the standard against which others were measured.

More than this, the Van Dyck became for later translators a Meta-Text, a text that operates as a starting point for new translations, a guide that subtly influences the strategies of translators.<sup>4</sup> The Meta-Text of Cornelius Van Dyck was clearly the King James Version, which operated as a template in his mind that affected every aspect of his translation project, from the selection of its general literary level to the most minute decisions of diction and syntax. This is a general tendency in Bible translation and not one unique to the Van Dyck Bible. It is clear, for example, that the Living Book translation used the New International Version as its Meta-Text, the Simplified Arabic Translation used the Easy to Read version, and the Good News Arabic Bible used the Good News Bible. On the other hand, the Jesuit translation did not have an actual Meta-Text, but we can still see other factors that influenced the translation, such as Catholic tradition and the Vulgate Bible. In effect, these functioned as an indirect Meta-Text. Ideally we should produce an Arabic translation that is Meta-Text free, but this would be

<sup>4</sup> The expression Meta-Text was first used by the linguistic scholar Anton Popovič. See Mark Shuttleworth and Moira Cowie, *Dictionary of Translation Study* (Manchester, United Kingdom: St. Jerome Publishing Limited, 1997), s.v. “Meta Text.”

very difficult to do even if the translators were to adhere very strictly to previously established goals and strategies.

Some think that a New Revised Van Dyck would be a good solution that would be accepted by most churches. In its day, the Van Dyck Bible represented a triumph of the ecumenical spirit in that it was accepted by most of the Christians in the Middle East. Today, however, producing a revision of the Van Dyck would raise many questions. What is the new translation's translation strategy? Who will accomplish the task? How can we guarantee the integrity of the translation to prevent its being influenced by a Meta-Text or sectarian considerations? Should the Textus Receptus or the Critical Text be used? And even if all these questions could be successfully answered, does the church really need in this twenty-first century a revised Van Dyck Bible?

As old things die, new things are born. We saw the first fruits of a new era begin to appear in the Arab Spring, and we see it still in the shifting balance of power between East and West. We see it also in the current information era, engendered largely by the social media. In this new age facts are relative, and people do not value the news they glean as much for its truthfulness as for its trendiness. People are now able to write what they want and when they want, and above all they want to put their own spin on things—whatever they are. These trends in our post-modern age raise fundamental questions about well-known, well-established translation rules. Is an accurate translation possible? What should the target age of a new translation be? How do we find syntactic and semantic equivalents—and whose equivalents are they? What is the right communication load? What are we to do about Realia—the appearance of the local language of the source in the translation?<sup>5</sup> How do we avoid so mixing the language of the source text with the target text (the translation) that we create a hybrid, what translators call the Third Code?<sup>6</sup> To what extent can a modern translation use contemporary language and syntax without distorting the message? For example, The Message Bible

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., s.v. "Realia."

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., s.v. "Third Code."

prefers “yes, yes, yes” to “Amen.”<sup>7</sup> At the surface level it is Realia and Third Code free, but at a deeper level these things are still there. Like the shadows on the wall of Plato’s cave, they point to a different reality. After all, “Yes, yes, yes” is inevitably a very thin disguise for “Amen.”

In our time the need for a so-called “Thick Translation” has appeared. This is a translation that depends on explanatory introductions, footnotes, and glosses to explain the translated text.<sup>8</sup> These kinds of translations are intended to avoid any misunderstandings that might result from the text coming to us from a different culture, time, and space. This is actually one of the solutions that could be used in Bible translations. The thickness of the translation would remove much of the obscurity and mystery of the various cultural and literary genres of the Bible, and at the same time it would provide a literal translation.

## Conclusion

This article has moved very quickly through a number of critical issues that confront those who would undertake a new modern Arabic translation. It should also be said that it has not touched on the huge cultural and social challenges that must also be faced. That’s for another day. For now, let’s sum up.

The church in the Middle East, first of all, should be frank with itself and with others about the Textus Receptus and the Critical Text. If we are to have a new Arabic translation, it should be based on the Critical Text. This translation should be accurate according to the best translation standards, but it should also present the Bible to readers in a living language that they can easily understand and to which they can readily respond. A pure colloquial Egyptian translation might not be possible at the moment, but let’s not shelve the idea. It’s a worthy goal. And

<sup>7</sup> It is an English translation that is very free in its use of modern syntax and semantics and includes much youthful language.

<sup>8</sup> Shuttleworth and Cowie, *Dictionary of Translation Study*, s.v. “Thick Translation.”

who knows what the future may hold? For the present, however, a modern standard Arabic translation that reflects a pure Egyptian dialect and the literary developments of the past few decades in Egypt is a goal well within reach. Such a translation should avoid, so far as humanly possible, Meta-Texts, and, instead, offer a translation that is fresh enough to portray the past in vivid colors while at the same time serving as a starting point for a contemporary Middle Eastern theology. And this Arabic Bible could certainly be a thick translation, for who could deny that the typical Middle Eastern Christian would greatly benefit from a Bible that explains the meaning of the text while not straying from a literal translation. Finally, this translation should be the subject of much discussion before, during, and after its completion so that the full impact of God's word can be felt in our society.

Let's not let politics, culture, or ecclesial pusillanimity get in the way of giving God's people in the Middle East the precious gift of his word in their own heart language. We owe it to ourselves and our children. No excuses. No delay. Let's get it done.

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