

A Critical Investigation into the Manuscripts of the “So-Called” Van Dyck Bible

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On the afternoon of 24 August 1864, Cornelius Van Dyck set his pen down upon his desk, having just translated Malachi 4:5. Years later, Cornelius’ son, Edward Van Dyck, recalled that moment. Edward was waiting for his father to come home for dinner. He was standing in the courtyard outside of the American Mission House in Beirut. Suddenly, Cornelius appeared on the balcony of the second floor. “Edward, it is finished. Thank God! What a load is off me! I never thought I was going to live to finish this work.”¹ With that, the two walked home together for their meal, before what would have been the normal prayer service that evening. At that moment, this Arabic Bible translation finally came to completion. It would be published by the American Mission Press in the next year, 1865.

The “so-called” Van Dyck Bible has been one of the most important nineteenth-century Bible translations.² While there certainly were and have been other Arabic Bible translations before and since the Van Dyck, this particular translation has attained a unique status, much like that of the King James Version

¹ Isaac H. Hall, “The Arabic Bible of Drs. Eli Smith and Cornelius V. A. Van Dyck,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 11 (1882–1885), 286.

² Here I have adopted Dr. Sara Binay’s terminology with the recognition that C. Van Dyck was not the sole author of the translation. See Sara Binay, “Revision of the Manuscripts of the ‘So-Called Smith-Van Dyck Bible’: Some Remarks on the Making of this Bible Translation,” in *Translating the Bible into Arabic: Historical, Text-Critical and Literary Aspects*, ed. Sara Binay and Stefan Leder (Beirut: Orient-Institut Beirut, 2012), 75–84.

as the Authorized Text of the English-speaking world. In Egypt specifically, the translation has been an important unifying factor for the church, being accepted and utilized by, not only the Evangelical Churches, but the Coptic Catholic and Coptic Orthodox Churches, as well. I remember watching (online) with excitement the enthronement of Patriarch Tadros II at St. Mark’s Cathedral in 2012, when I saw and heard that the deacon was reading from a copy of the “so-called” Van Dyck! This was only possible because of the important work done by the Egyptian Bible Society to bring the different families of Egyptian churches together.

Given the prominence Egyptian pastors and priests have had throughout the Arabic speaking world, especially in the Gulf and North Africa, as well as in the diaspora communities of Australia, Canada, and the United States, it is safe to say that this translation has been utilized in a wide variety of settings among Arab Christians around the world. It is not the only Arabic Bible translation being used by Arab Christians, of course. Among the Arab Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, and others, there are a variety of translations, including the very popular 1878 “Jesuit Bible” that was updated in 1969. Among Arab Evangelicals the 1978 *Today’s Arabic Version New Testament/Good News Arabic Bible* (TAV/GNA) and the 1988 *Living Arabic Bible Version* (LANT/NAB) are widely used.³

The Egyptian and Lebanese Bible Societies, as well as biblical scholars from ETSC and other Arab seminaries, have been engaged in discussions to update or edit the Van Dyck, or to undertake a completely new translation. One of the initial projects from this debate was the publication of the 2006 *New Testament with Study Notes*. While this was not a new translation, it included very important critical notes at the bottom of the text, detailing to its readers that in a variety of places the Greek or Hebrew words could be rendered into Arabic in a variety of different ways. This was done, in my estimation, to educate Arab Chris-

³ Kenneth Bailey’s important article, “Tārīkh al-tarajimāt al-‘arabīyah lil-kitāb al-muqaddas” in *Al-Hudá*, no. 856 (1982), reviews the important Arab Bible translations in history.

tians about the original history of the Bible as a Hebrew and Greek text, to prepare its constituency from charges of “tahrif” (deliberate corruption), and finally to respond to the confusion over rendering the nineteenth-century Arabic into the vernacular.

While the debate over how to bring the nineteenth-century Arabic into the vernacular is a fascinating and important topic, I will leave this for those native Arab speakers who can address this problem much better than this author ever could! There are well-qualified Arab biblical scholars whose intimate knowledge of the language and Bible far exceeds my own. My research, which I hope will be forthcoming in a detailed monograph on the translation, revealed two important issues that will shed some light on the current focus on this translation: the role of each of the translators, and the importance of the *eclectic* Greek New Testament as a source for the translation.⁴ Both of these discoveries have an important bearing upon any further discussions and planning related to a new, revised, or updated translation of the “so-called” Van Dyck.

My interest in this translation began back when I was the Coordinator of Graduate Studies at ETSC. At that time one of the students, Nashat Habib Megalaa, began work on his MATS Thesis, *The Van Dyck Bible Translation After One Hundred Fifty Years*. While I had the honor of starting Nashat on this research, it was Dr. Darren Kennedy and Dr. Atef Mehany who assisted and guided the project in 2008 after I had left Cairo. It was at this time that I began looking at the 2006 New Testament edition and thinking about the issues involved in a new translation of the “so-called” Van Dyck. In 2011 I spent several weeks at the Rare Book Room of the Near East School of Theology (NEST) in Beirut where I was able to continue my research on the “so-called” Van Dyck Bible and review the original manuscripts (MSS). The MSS had just been digitized to preserve their original state. While the MSS themselves were critical to my investigations, so too

⁴ For the *eclectic text*, see Brooke Foss Westcott and Fenton John Anthony Hort, *The New Testament in the Original Greek* (Cambridge: Macmillan and Co., 1881).

were the early prototypes of the printed Bibles with the penciled notes and *tashkil* (vocalization marks) of Cornelius Van Dyck. The last group of documents that I reviewed were the minutes and reports of the American Missionaries during this period. These records are housed at a number of libraries, including the Houghton Library at Harvard University, the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia, and the Eli Smith Papers at the Yale Divinity School Library. Ultimately, it was a careful investigation of the MSS of the translation that proved to be the key to unlocking some of the mysteries of this important Bible translation.

I have not been the only person to view these MSS, of course. Once the Bible translation was published, the MSS were deposited into the American Mission House in Beirut. In 1885 the American missionary James F. Dennis organized and placed the MSS into three tin boxes in the Mission House to preserve them. There is evidence that Dennis reviewed the MSS and made several notations in the documents. Much later, the MSS came into the hands of Dr. Kenneth Bailey, Professor of New Testament at NEST from 1967 to 1984. Dr. Bailey made extensive use of these texts in his teaching. He also arranged to have copies made, one set of which resides at ETSC. Dr. Bailey then had the originals moved to the Rare Book Room of the NEST library in 1975. In 1981 James and Rachel Pollack reviewed the MSS and original Bibles and included them in the Library catalogue.⁵ Sometime before 2008, with the cooperation of Dr. George Sabra, Dr. Sara Binay was granted access to the MSS and did an initial investigation. These findings were later presented at the 2008 Orient-Institut Beirut conference “Linguistic and Cultural Aspects of Translation – The Arabic Bible.” In 2009 Hill Museum and Manuscript Library (HMML)/Saint John’s University (Minnesota, USA) digitized all of the MSS. I arrived at NEST in January 2013 and was assisted by Head Librarian Ms. Martine Charbel-Eid and Dr.

⁵ James W. Pollock and Rachel Pollock, “Catalogue of Manuscripts of the Library of the Near East School of Theology, Beirut, Lebanon,” *Theological Review* 4, no. 1–2 (1981).

Christine Lindner, to whom I am extremely grateful for their aid and support.

It has long been accepted that there were at least five translators involved in this project: the two American missionaries, Eli Smith (1801–1857) and Cornelius Van Dyck (1818–1895); and three Arabs, Butrus al-Bustānī (1819–1883), Nasif al-Yazigi (1800–1871), and Sheikh Yusuf al-Asir (1815–1889). Eli Smith was appointed by the American missionaries to begin the translation project in 1847. He was the one who hired al-Bustani and al-Yazigi to work with him. In his 1854 report to the American Mission board, he wrote that it was al-Bustānī who provided the first translation, “giving the work a native coloring which a foreigner could not so easily accomplish. . . . bringing into it the terms and phrases in common and good use to express the ideas of the original, and especially those current in Christian theology and literature.”⁶ Once al-Bustani was finished, he would pass it on to al-Yazigi, who was a “man of letters” noted for his high standard of Arabic. Once al-Yazigi had gone over al-Bustani’s translation, he would provide his own translation. Smith would then go over those edits until he was satisfied. (This was a standard process that Smith used in other publication projects at the Mission Press.) He would then send out copies of the translation to a wide assortment of missionaries, scholars, and clergy around the world to offer critique and comment. An assortment of letters and papers in the Houghton Library archives demonstrate that Smith received comments on his translation from German Orientalist scholars such as Gustave Flügel, and Emil Rödiger, as well as local Syrian sheikhs, priests, and bishops.

Eli Smith passed away in 1857 without completing the translation, and his work was then assigned to Cornelius Van Dyck.

⁶ Eli Smith and C.V.A. Van Dyck, *Brief Documentary History of the Translation of the Scriptures into the Arabic Language*, ed. Henry H. Jessup (Beirut, Syria: American Presbyterian Mission Press, 1900), 8. This important document of reports by Smith and Van Dyck was later compiled and edited by Henry H. Jessup in 1900. The Mission Board was the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, the first ecumenical American missionary association.

Van Dyck was a medical missionary who was held in high regard for his knowledge and ability in Arabic. Thus, Van Dyck was given responsibility for completing the translation. Van Dyck took over the project and began his revision. In a curious decision, instead of continuing to work with al-Bustani and al-Yazigi, he dismissed the two from their responsibilities and hired the Egyptian Muslim Sheikh Yusuf al-Asir. Al-Asir was known for his open-mindedness as a Reformist Scholar. He not only worked for the American Mission Press but also taught Arabic at the Syrian Protestant College and contributed several hymns to the Protestant Hymnal of Lebanon and Syria.⁷ He was involved in a number of literary and religious associations in Beirut as part of the nineteenth-century *al-Nahda* (Renaissance). Van Dyck had known al-Asir because he too was active in the literary revival in Beirut, but more importantly he hired al-Asir because he wanted a native Arab-speaking Muslim who did not have any preconceptions regarding Arab Christian terminology.⁸

While much of this information is known, what has been debated is the extent to which each translator significantly contributed to the work. Ultimately, the Bible was named after Cornelius Van Dyck because he completed the project. In addition, based upon the history of the American Syrian Mission by Henry Jessup, a tradition developed in which Van Dyck completely “revised every verse” of the Bible after Smith’s death.⁹ In at least one version of this story, Smith’s manuscripts were burned and Van Dyck started the translation “anew.”¹⁰

However, on examination of the MSS firsthand, one is able to see the distinctive handwriting of each of the contributors as well as the autographs of Smith and Van Dyck. In matching up Smith and Van Dyck’s reports of their work, the minutes from the Mis-

⁷ *Kitāb al-tarānīm al-rūhīyah* (Beirut: American Mission Press, 1949). I am grateful to Rev. Salam Hanna for pointing these hymns out to me.

⁸ Smith and Van Dyck, *Brief Documentary History*, 29.

⁹ Henry H. Jessup, *Fifty-Three Years in Syria*, vol. 1 (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1910), 74.

¹⁰ Hall, “The Arabic Bible of Drs. Eli Smith and Cornelius V. A. Van Dyck,” 282.

sion that records the progress of the translation, and the original MSS themselves, it is clear that most of the translation was undertaken and completed by Butrus al-Bustani. His work was reviewed and edited by Eli Smith. Nasif al-Yazigi made only minor changes. This was the case for the translation of the whole New Testament. The MSS clearly show that Cornelius Van Dyck made very few changes to the New Testament work of al-Bustani. For the Old Testament, al-Bustani was the sole translator for Joshua through Esther, Jeremiah, and Lamentations. His work was only later reviewed and edited by Van Dyck. Van Dyck was only the sole translator of Ezekiel, Daniel, Zechariah, Zephaniah, Haggai, and Malachi. In the case of the Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon, Van Dyck was assisted by Yusuf al-Asir. Van Dyck, however, did complete much of the editorial work in providing cross reference notes and *taskil* for the final printing of the text. Even in this, however, I wonder if he was not assisted by Yusuf al-Asir.

This conclusion is contrary to the initial research by Dr. Binay. She did not believe that the MSS showed direct evidence of translation work by al-Bustani or that the MSS were original.¹¹ However, in a conversation I had with Dr. Kenneth Bailey, he indicated that, based upon his work with these New Testament MSS, he too believed al-Bustani to be the primary translator. It is for this reason that Dr. Bailey prefers the title “Busani-Van Dyck Bible.” Based upon this research, it is my view that Butrus al-Bustani originally translated all of the New Testament and that Eli Smith and Naṣif al-Yazigi recopied and edited this original translation. Cornelius Van Dyck then “reviewed” the New Testament, leaving most of the text intact.

The second important discovery in this research has been the undervalued importance of this translation as part of the nineteenth-century study of biblical manuscripts and the search for an original New Testament text. When Eli Smith began, he collected a wide assortment of the latest studies on the New Testament.

¹¹ Binay, “Revision of the Manuscripts of the ‘So-Called Smith-Van Dyck Bible’,” 78–80.

One of his closest friends was Edward Robinson, a famous New Testament scholar from Union Seminary and the “originator” of Biblical Geography in Palestine.¹² Robinson assisted Smith in acquiring the latest publications on New Testament manuscripts, particularly those of Karl Lachmann (1793–1851), Samuel Prideaux Tregelles (1813–75), Constantin von Tischendorf (1815–1874), and the Anglican Dean of Canterbury, Henry Alford (1810–1870). These scholars were noted for their inclusion of the oldest New Testament manuscripts then known to come up with what has become known as the *eclectic text*.¹³ These older versions included variant readings, such as the exclusion of Mark 16:9 and following. However, the American Bible Society, which was paying for the cost of publication of this translation, would at that time only accept the *Textus Receptus*, that is, the New Testament text of Theodore Beza (1519–1605) of Geneva, whose work became the basis for the English translation of the King James Version.

Smith’s original translation followed that of the *eclectic text* in many places. One can see this when it comes to the “Johannine Comma” of 1 John 5:7. In the *eclectic text*, the phrase “Father, Word and Holy Spirit, these three are one” is omitted, under the argument that it was not included in the older New Testament manuscripts. However, the American Bible Society at that time insisted that the *Textus Receptus* be used as the only biblical source for the translation. Therefore, Van Dyck inserted 1 John 5:7. One can clearly see Van Dyck’s addition to the MSS here in order to bring it in line with the text of the *Textus Receptus*. It is for this reason that the tradition developed that Smith’s original MSS were burned and that Van Dyck rescued the translation by “revising every verse.” However, this was not true and Van Dyck himself was conflicted about having to conform to the *Textus Receptus*. In 1863 he reported that Eli Smith

¹² Robinson is famous for his “discovery” of Robinson’s Arch on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

¹³ These published New Testament *eclectic texts* were used by Westcott and Hort, and ultimately by Nestle and Aland, which became the basis of the Revised Standard Version and the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

knew that the so called “Textus Receptus” and [Augustus] Hahn’s text were not the best and most authentic reading, and he was anxious that the true reading should be given as far as it could be. He therefore made use of Tischendorf, Tregelles, and Alford in the New Testament text, and he used his own judgment, in which all the Mission had the utmost confidence, so that the matter was left entirely in his hands.¹⁴

Nevertheless, Van Dyck made the necessary corrections to the translation to conform to the American Bible Society, and the Bible was published in 1865.

While history and tradition has come to call this the “Van Dyck Bible” for his “rescue” of the text, we have noted that others, especially Butrus al-Bustani and Eli Smith, had a greater hand in the actual translation than did Van Dyck. In addition, we have noted the participation of a wide variety of Arab Christian, European and American biblical scholars who all provided suggestions as to the rendering of certain words from Greek and Hebrew into Arabic. Thus, rather than the “Van Dyck Bible,” the “so-called Van Dyck Bible” as has been suggested by Binay and others, or even the “Bustani-Van Dyck” Bible as suggested by Bailey, my research would suggests the best alternative title for this translation would be “ABT1865”—the *1865 Arabic Bible Translation*. It is my suspicion that Cornelius Van Dyck would have approved of this title as well.

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¹⁴ Smith and Van Dyck, *Brief Documentary History*, 27.