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# The Long-Term Influence of American Bible Translations in the Middle East

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In October 2015, I was in a meeting with a Syriac Orthodox bishop, discussing the difficult situation of the Christians of Syria. The meeting took place in his reception hall in Beirut, and before the bishop's seat was a table with books, papers, tissues, and a cross. On top of one of the piles was a Bible of the kind used by Evangelical preachers all over the world – black, flexible cover, about 16 by 22 cm – and familiar to many people. Towards the end of the meeting, he praised the work of the nineteenth-century missionaries, and said, "They gave us the Bible." He kissed the book and put it back. He had spoken in Arabic except for the English word *Bible.*

This combination of words, language, and gestures, coming from an Orthodox bishop in the Middle East, brings together all the ambiguities in the context and impact of Bible translations in the Middle East. What was it that the missionaries brought when they started translating the Bible in languages that had not been used in that way before? How did their Evangelical message connect to the wider message of modernization and progress that, as they thought, the Middle East needed so badly? Was all of that in fact as new as the missionaries and their early converts wanted us (and themselves) to believe? What led up to the moment in which an Orthodox bishop could praise the work of the missionaries and underline this by kissing the ultimate symbol of their work, a one-volume Bible, and use the English word *Bible* rather than an Arabic equivalent?

The theme of this talk, looking back at the genesis, context, and subsequent workings of the Van Dyck translation, allows me to delve further into one particular aspect of the ambiguities of the missionary encounter as it enfolded in the middle of the nineteenth century in Egypt, Lebanon, and the rest of the Middle East, that of the role and function of Bible translations in the process of modernization.

My thoughts on this subject began to change when it slowly dawned on me, as it has for other researchers of recent decades, that many of the Bible translations – the Van Dyck for one, the modern Syriac one as another – were not produced out of the blue. The romantic picture of American missionaries who in splendid isolation worked deep into the night, making a translation in a language they had just mastered, which then was presented to the local population as a big surprise, does not hold up any more. I will say more about the translation process in a moment, but suffice it to say for now that all of these translations resulted from complex negotiations and choices made in continuous conversation between American missionaries and local scholars, who were often part of the clergy. In the following talk, I will use the process of making and distributing Bible translations to delve somewhat more into what the modernization and evangelization process of the nineteenth century entailed.[1]

## Creating the Bible

I will use the translation that was made in Urmia (Northwest Iran) as my main example. Although the linguistic and social context of the translation projects in Urmia and Beirut differ somewhat, it is clear that the basic issues that had to be decided upon were

[1] For a concise overview of studies on missions in the Middle East, see Heleen Murre-van den Berg, "The Study of Western Missions in the Middle East (1820–1920): An Annotated Bibliography," in Norbert Friedrich, Uwe Kaminsky, Roland Löffler, *The Social Dimension of Christian Missions in the Middle East: Historical Studies of the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2010), 35–53. A few important recent monographs have provided inspiration for the current essay: Heather Sharkey, *American Evangelicals in Egypt: Missionary Encounters in An Age of Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Ussama Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 2008).

much the same, even if not always exactly the same choices were made. The similarities can be explained by the fact that both translations were made by missionaries from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, a Boston-based organization established in 1810 whose governing committee and general secretary tended to issue clear guidelines for their missionaries worldwide. Since the America Board provided most of the money for translation work, it had much leverage in negotiations despite the distance between Persia and America. In addition, both translations were made against the background of existing oriental and Eastern Orthodox Bible translations and biblical exegesis. To understand how innovative the Protestant Bible was, four aspects are important vis-à-vis what earlier was conceived to be "the Scriptures" by the Orthodox churches: language, text, the printed work and its dissemination, and usage.[2]

### *1. The Language*

The American missionaries in Iran had to make a couple of choices before actually starting to translate, and the first important one was what language they were going to use. Somewhat different from the situation in Lebanon when the Americans started on the Arabic translation, they chose to use the vernacular language, albeit in a form that from its inception was intended to be in conversation with Classical Syriac. This is the language used in the liturgy of the Syriac churches and the earliest full Bible translation in Aramaic, the Peshitta. Remarkably, there is no record of any discussion about the use of the vernacular for this project, neither among the missionaries nor between the missionaries and the Syriac clergy. The most likely explanation for this is that impromptu and even written translations of parts of the Clas-

[2] For more on the historical and linguistic aspects of the Urmia translation as discussed below, see Murre-van den Berg, *From a Spoken to a Written Language: The Introduction and Development of Literary Urmia Aramaic in the Nineteenth Century* (De Goeje Fund: Leiden, 1999). On the mission in Urmia more generally, especially in its modernizing aspects, see Adam Becker, *American Evangelical Missionaries in Iran and the Origins of Assyrian Nationalism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015).

sical Syriac Bible into the vernacular were already part of the local clerical tradition of commenting on the biblical text.

Prompted by contemporary scholarly debates in America and Germany, there was some discussion among the missionaries about whether to use the Latin or the local Syriac alphabet. This debate was quickly decided in favor of the local Syriac alphabet because the vernacular and Classical were close enough to provide for a fairly easy orthography, especially when starting from earlier traditions in the vernacular. More importantly, the missionaries probably correctly sensed that acceptance by the clergy would be hindered by the introduction of a new alphabet.

The translation itself was made by a team of translators that, in addition to the theologically trained and ordained missionary Justin Perkins, included local deacons and a priest. In the process of translating, the Syriac Christians learned English, Hebrew, and Greek. Justin Perkins, who was then in his thirties but was to become a seminal figure like Van Dyck, presided over the process. Before they actually started translating, a few test translations were commissioned from local priests. They were made in different forms of the vernacular and came from different regions. Their texts (some of which have been preserved) not only offered options for the orthography of the vernacular but also helped the translators to decide which form of the vernacular would be most suitable. They chose the vernacular of Urmia, probably because this urban dialect was at least somewhat familiar to those from rural and mountainous regions, while the reverse was not true.

Using the vernacular to translate parts of the Bible was not an innovation, but using it to translate the entire Bible was. Similarly, while particular dialects had been used in Bible translations before, this was the first time that a dialect had been standardized for literary use, including the standardization of its orthography on the basis of earlier less rigid spelling conventions.

## *2. The Text*

The source text to be used for the translation was the subject of fierce discussions, mostly between the missionaries and the American Board in Boston, but also between the missionaries and their local assistants. The missionaries were asked by the General Secretary of the American Board to translate directly from the Greek *Textus Receptus* for the New Testament, and from the Masoretic Hebrew for the Old Testament. The Americans had little doubt that these source texts as they knew them in the early nineteenth century were far superior to whatever might have been available to Syriac Christians in the Middle East. The East-Syriac clergymen, however, highly valued the Peshitta text and were not at all inclined to accept the superiority of the Greek *Textus Receptus*. Meanwhile, the missionaries began to value the Peshitta in its own right and wanted to add it to the biblical texts they would consult to produce their Syriac version of the Bible.

It is not clear whether the Board in Boston actually agreed to a translation from the Peshitta. Nevertheless, in 1846 when the first Syriac Bible was published, it was translated using the Peshitta and included marginal notes to indicate where it differed from the Greek text. The Syriac Bible had two columns, with the Peshitta on one side and the vernacular translation on the other. This, in fact, made the work a "two in one": a new edition of the Peshitta based on East Syriac manuscripts, and an entirely new translation based largely on the Urmia dialect. In combination with the marginal notes referencing the Greek, the first edition also introduced its readers to textual criticism of the Bible.

In producing a Syriac version of the Old Testament, the missionaries could not get away again with the approach they had taken with the New Testament. The Hebrew and Syriac Old Testaments simply differed more extensively than the Greek and Syriac New Testaments, and the translation policies of the American Board were more strictly enforced when the Old Testament was printed in 1852. The Board in Boston also objected to the inclusion of the Peshitta Classical Syriac text, but this fight was won by the missionaries, who produced another beautiful two-columned volume. Both the Old and New Testament volumes, however, were too voluminous and expensive to be reprinted, and all subsequent editions consisted only of the vernacular translation. Whether or not the Peshitta was used in a literal sense as the source text, the Old and New Testament translations are both deeply influenced by the vocabulary and especially the syntax of the Peshitta, making for a classicized vernacular that may not always have been immediately clear to its readers. In a later revision, the New Testament text more closely followed the Greek, but the influence of the Peshitta returned via the back door. In order to accommodate new readers who used different dialects, the number of typical Urmian words had to be cut back. These were usually replaced by more classical terms, which often happened to be the ones also found in the Peshitta.

To sum up: the vernacular translation that became the standard relied more on the Greek and Hebrew source texts valued by Western Christians than the earliest version of the 1840s. Nonetheless, the text as it stabilized in the 1860s to 1890s was heavily influenced by the traditional Syriac text, which thus continued to influence generations of readers who could not read the Peshitta in its original form.

### *3. The Printed Work and Its Dissemination*

The most visible characteristic that was to distinguish the new Bible from the old Scriptures was the printed form of the one- or two-volume translation. Earlier, the Scriptures were generally transmitted and taught via hand-written manuscript copies of lectionaries that were available for use in churches. Among Syriac Christians, the most important of these was obviously the Gospel lectionary and, secondarily, the Psalter, Epistles of Paul, and Old Testament lectionaries. Few clergy and almost no lay people would possess personal copies of these lectionaries. Even less common was a complete Bible text, which in the early nineteenth century could only be found in the possession of a few scholarly clergymen. Usually, these were bulky books of several separate volumes. Most often the New Testament was published as a single volume that excluded Hebrews and the Apocalypse. The books of the Old Testament were divided into several groups: the Torah, the Book of Sessions (Joshua, Judges, Samuel I and II, Kings I and II, Proverbs, Ecclesiastics, Ruth, Song of Songs, Bar Sirah, and Job), the book of the Prophets (the major and minor Prophets), the book of Maccabees (Chronicles I and II, Maccabees I and II, Ezra, Nehemiah, Wisdom of Salomon, Judith, Esther, Susanna, Letter of Jeremiah, Letter of Baruch), and the Psalter. Only a few of the Old Testament books were available when the missionaries arrived.[3] While Arabic printed Bibles and biblical texts were somewhat easier to come by in Greater Syria where Eli Smith started his work, copies still would have been fairly scarce. Lay people everywhere would be familiar with the biblical texts mostly from hearing the text read aloud during the divine liturgy.

While the earliest copies of the Bible, especially in their two-column editions, were still bulky, heavy, and expensive, later editions became much smaller and cheaper, especially in comparison to handwritten copies. This allowed for many copies to be printed, and the number of people possessing a Bible grew accordingly, thus making the printed text available to practically everyone who was able to read.

It is important to emphasize that printed versions of the Bible did not suddenly make the Bible well known. Biblical stories, vocabulary, and phraseology had already been widely disseminated among the Syriac faithful. However, this took place for the most part orally, via the lectionary readings during the divine liturgy, the stories about the biblical saints, and hymns that were sung during the Mass and festive occasions like weddings and saints' days. What was new is that small printed Bibles made the written text available to all readers, at all times, in all places.

### *4. Reading, Contemplating, Discussing*

Finally, it was the readers that differentiated the new from the old. The number of people who learned to read expanded considerably. Boys learned to read with greater proficiency than in ear-

[3] On the literary culture of the Church of the East, see Heleen Murre-van den Berg, *Scribes and Scriptures: The Church of the East in the Eastern Ottoman Provinces (1500–1850)*, ECS 21 (Peeters: Louvain, 2015). On the Catholic missions and the changes they introduced, see Bernard Heyberger, *Les chrétiens du Proche Orient au temps de la Réforme catholique*, Bibliothèque des Écoles Françaises d'Athenes et de Rome 284 (Rome: École Françaises de Rome, 1994).

lier times when they were trained only to read the liturgy and recite the Scriptures. In addition, for the first time considerable numbers of women and girls were also becoming literate. Though in earlier times some women had learned to read if they had clerical fathers or brothers willing to teach them, now there was an opportunity for almost all girls to receive some basic education. Reading in general went hand in hand with reading the Bible. Many people, young and old, learn to read from the Bible as various versions issued from the press. As Bibles became less expensive, they were often given as presents to those who completed their education in the missionary school or who performed well in reading contests.

And so the Bible became a book to be read, leafed through, read in private and in groups, reflected upon, discussed, quoted, and used in arguments. In this way, the Bible became more clearly differentiated from other ecclesiastical literature, and its stories were no longer to be merged with those about non-biblical saints. In this process, the book's status became more clearly defined. Soon the expression "the word of God" was restricted to the biblical text, which set it apart from other sacred texts in the Syriac tradition. In addition to this, growing numbers of people joined in conversation about the Bible. Laymen, lay women, and the lesser clergy, who formerly had little to say about theological matters, now had the Bible at hand from which to quote, cite, and comment. The power of the higher clergy was doubly subverted as they both lost their exclusive grip on theological and biblical knowledge and as this knowledge was restricted to a single literary source that they had yet to master by the evolving standards of the day. But again, this was not a sudden and immediate change. Many of the earlier practices of reading and listening have remained in place in Orthodox and Middle Eastern Protestant circles until today. In this tradition, ordained men take the lead in explaining and exhorting, and lay women listen submissively or, if they prefer, contemplate the text among themselves rather than discuss it in public meetings.

## Creating a New Community

It has often has been remarked that Protestant missionaries and the old-new Bible they brought with them contributed greatly to processes of individualization. The Bible as a portable book stimulated personal Bible study and individual pondering of the meaning of faith for this life and the next. Perhaps just as important, however, these changes in individual spirituality are embedded in larger societal changes. Whether those involved are aware of it or not, these personal and individual practices are intricately and reciprocally part of larger societal changes – being informed by the larger community and simultaneously changing that larger community. A case in point is the private readers of the Bible (whether Protestant or not) who formed a new group that introduced important changes in the Syriac community.[4]

Of course, this was not merely the effect of the Bible translations as such. In every place where translations were produced, they were part of a larger movement of translation, of vernacularization (whether of a vernacular or of a classical language) and of the so-called "print culture" of Benedict Anderson. This, in turn, created new communities whose boundaries and structures of authority were not automatically the same as those of the earlier religious community. Whether or not people would choose to become part of the actual Protestant community, the trajectory of vernacularization spread its net more widely, in the end creating both a church and a nation that would be strongly influenced by Protestant ideas that had been introduced by missionaries. At the national level, this resulted in a discourse about modernization, progress, education, and nationalist dreams of unity and autonomy.

[4] See especially Becker, *Revival and Awakening*, which emphasizes the social innovations of the missionaries. For another important analysis of the missionary encounter's deep societal and cultural influences, see Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

## In Conclusion: Back to the Bishop

The Syriac bishop's English reference to the *Bible,* therefore, illustrates how the language of modernization that was introduced by the missionaries was taken up by Middle Easterners all across the board, influencing society, community, and religion all at the same time. This most importantly included new thinking about the importance of the scriptural text, and of the collection of texts we now call the *Bible.* This in turn is closely linked to what has come to be called religion – the *Bible* as differentiated from the wide array of traditional religious texts, and religion as differentiated from other societal practices, beliefs, and organization. And this allowed for a secular space to emerge where the conversation between religions can take place.

The Syriac bishop also makes clear that accepting these premises does not necessarily include a wholesale protestantizing or secularizing: his type of modernity includes rather than rejects the Bible as a venerated object to be kissed and cherished. It also includes rather than rejects other forms of Syriac learning and tradition in addition to a Protestant reading of the biblical text. But it does (and could not have done otherwise) accept the new community of readers and writers as its basis. While bishops, contrary to what the early missionaries expected, continued to hold their place of honor, they hold this special place within a community where lay women and men are taking part in the religious conversation, and where bishops confer with lay leaders over the well-being of the community they form together. This is most acutely so in these difficult times for many of the Middle East's Christians, when the boundaries of communal and national identities are being violently redefined and all are in desperate need of a new common language.

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