

## Translation and its Role in the Plurality of the Gospel Text

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### Abstract

*The great multiplicity of Bible translations reflects a continuous effort to reconstruct a text presumed to be close to the earliest manuscript witnesses. However, this effort has not been isolated from the doctrinal, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds of the institutions and denominations that undertook the translation process. In many cases, translation went beyond its transmissive function to become an interpretive and exegetical practice through which theological perspectives and literary choices were projected onto the text. This led to the production of new formulations that, within the ecclesiastical context, came to be regarded as sacred texts in their own right rather than mere translations of a prior original. A review of the major ancient and modern translations reveals that manuscripts, despite their diversity and chronological and textual variation, represent the central challenge facing textual criticism in its attempt to recover the original biblical text amid historical gaps and the interweaving of textual layers. The factor of time further complicates this endeavor, especially with the discovery of manuscripts classified among apocryphal or pseudepigraphal literature, which raises growing theological and methodological concerns regarding the concept of the textual original and the limits of the possibility of its recovery.*

**Keywords:** Translation, Gospel, Christianity, textual criticism, New Testament, Old Testament.

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### Introduction

The movement of translation opens a path to overcoming barriers of isolation in order to enable communication and the exchange of knowledge across all fields and among different civilizations, and it has thus played a significant role in the study of religions. Consequently, it contributed to in-depth study in the codification of sacred texts. Translation hastened the spread of religions and is considered an inevitable necessity. As for the translation of sacred texts, it represents a form of interpretation, placing the translator before two options: either to refrain entirely from translation and preserve the sanctity of the original language until the language of the Bible becomes widespread throughout the world, or to exert effort to render it into other languages in order to disseminate it as widely and rapidly as possible. Translation was a cause of transformations in the Gospel and played a role in spreading Christianity; yet it later became a source of differences and disputes. There is no doubt that the multiplicity of translations of a single text results in contradiction, opposition, subjectivity, adherence to preconceived ideas, and attempts to impose them according to a framework consistent with the period of composition and to interpret the text in line with the movement and inclination adopted by the translator. Thus, translations became vulnerable to criticism due to the methods of translation and the evidence relied upon during their composition. Hence, we observe the vast number of Bible translations throughout the ages, some of which will be mentioned in the course of this study under the title: Translation and Its Role in the Plurality of the Gospel Text.

By examining the introductions and prefaces of sacred books in each translation, one finds that their authors acknowledge this vast amount of differences, human interventions, and attempts that can only be described as desperate and futile in achieving their intended goal of producing a comprehensive and definitive sacred book to which both the general and the elite among Christians could refer. From here arises the question of the change and proliferation of translations. To answer it, we attempt to present the most important linguistic stages of translation and to review the work of missions and missionaries in various countries in producing sacred books and disseminating them within society.

### Preface:

The movement to translate sacred texts began before the birth of Christ with the translation of the Old Testament into Greek and Aramaic, because many Jews who had dispersed across different cities did not

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know Hebrew and therefore requested a Greek or Aramaic translation. The most famous translation of the Old Testament is the Septuagint, which was used by the Jews and subsequently by Christians. <sup>(1)</sup>

Early Christians endured various forms of persecution at the hands of Jews and Romans for nearly three centuries, during which many of their books and references were destroyed, and true followers of Christianity were eliminated. As a result, Christianity lost its original character and became filled with many myths blended with the pagan cultures that prevailed among the peoples who entered Christianity at that time, such as the beliefs of the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans <sup>(2)</sup>. After this period, early Christian missionaries who carried the text of the Septuagint and parts of the New Testament hastened to preach, starting from the churches located in Jerusalem and Antioch. They traveled among people and used their languages for evangelization and preaching. At first, the translation of texts was oral and was termed by textual criticism scholars as the oral tradition. The Church initially encouraged this step with enthusiasm, assumed responsibility for translation efforts, and hastened to adopt them even after the appearance of the Slavic translation in the mid-ninth century. Both Pope Adrian II (867–872) and Pope John VIII (872–882) approved the project <sup>(3)</sup>. The oral teachings related to the Acts of the Apostles and their sayings were circulated in Aramaic, the language that was prevalent in Palestine and parts of the Near East <sup>(4)</sup>. Subsequently, translations of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, followed one another.

The materials used in translation during the time of Christ and throughout the first and second centuries of the Church included the most popular writing materials, namely ink and papyrus made from the reeds of the Nile River, which were cut into strips and glued together. Even in the first century, books were still scrolls composed of long papyrus sheets, with the end of each sheet attached to the next and rolled onto two rotating rods. This practice was known as writing on papyrus. Later, in the first century, another form of books was invented, known as the codex. <sup>(5)</sup>

After the Church compiled the New Testament and added it to the Old Testament, the process of translating the Bible began <sup>(6)</sup>. There are ancient and modern foreign translations as well as Arabic translations that hastened to refer back to the earliest copies dating to the third century. The original copies were written between 60 and 120 CE and then became subject to transcription errors <sup>(7)</sup>. This constitutes an overview of the main developments related to the historical and practical progression of translation. After this introduction, which I deemed appropriate to present before delving into the details of the study, we proceed to our discussion by mentioning the most important translations.

### *Translations into Foreign Languages*

We present below the most important foreign translations of the New Testament:

#### *The Syriac Translation*

-Syriac is one of the languages belonging to the Semitic language family <sup>(8)</sup>, which prevailed in the region of western Mesopotamia, especially since it was used in Palestine during the time of Jesus, peace be upon him. One of the well-known translations, all of which were translated from Greek originals, is therefore of lesser value than the Greek manuscripts. The most widely used translation in the early Church was the Syriac Diatessaron produced by Tatian. Subsequently, Bishop Philoxenus (485–519 CE) succeeded in producing a new Syriac translation, completed in 507 CE. Its importance lies in the fact that it includes the Second Epistle of Peter, the Second and Third Epistles of John, and the Epistle of Jude. <sup>(9)</sup>

Among the most important Syriac translations are the Palestinian <sup>(10)</sup>, the Harklean, and the Peshitta, as follows:

#### *Old Syriac*

There are some Old Syriac translations that rendered parts of the New Testament and were later compiled. They date back to Syriac versions prior to or at the beginning of the third century. They have reached us in two Gospel manuscripts: one manuscript from the fifth century, published by William Cureton in 1858 and

known as the Curetonian Syriac manuscript, symbolized as Syr c; and another manuscript from the fourth century, written over an earlier erased text, discovered at Saint Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai in 1892, known as the Sinaitic Syriac manuscript and symbolized as Syr s. The difference between them is comparable to the normal variation between any two manuscripts of the same text. The Sinaitic Syriac manuscript is likely the older one, while the Curetonian Syriac manuscript represents a revision of it <sup>(11)</sup>.

### *The Peshitta*

At the end of the fourth century, a new translation of the New Testament into Syriac was produced <sup>(12)</sup>, also known as the Simple Translation. This translation did not include the Second Epistle of Peter, the Second and Third Epistles of John, the Epistle of Jude, or the Book of Revelation. This translation is symbolized as Syr p. The Syriac Church and its branches accept this translation, as it was in use before the division of the Syriac Church, that is, before 431 CE. The Peshitta translation is still in use, and the books that were missing were later added, based on the Philoxenian translation. There are more than three hundred manuscripts of it, some of which date back to the fifth and sixth centuries CE. It is believed that this translation was completed in the early fourth century <sup>(13)</sup>, and the individuals who carried it out are not precisely known. Caspar Gregory, at the beginning of the twentieth century, counted more than 300 manuscripts of the Peshitta. Metzger, however, considers the number of these manuscripts to be much larger, since Gregory was unable to collect all of them from Eastern libraries, and additional manuscripts appeared after Gregory <sup>(14)</sup>.

### *The Harklean Translation*

-The circumstances of this translation are not fully known, whether Bishop Thomas of Mabbug, the Harklean, who succeeded Philoxenus, reissued the Philoxenian translation in 616 CE with the addition of marginal notes drawn from certain Greek manuscripts, or whether he carried out a comprehensive revision with the addition of some readings in the margins, which he did not find justification to include in the main text. If this assumption is correct, then the only surviving trace of the Philoxenian translation would be the manuscript previously mentioned. This translation is symbolized as Syr h.

-These marginal readings in the Harklean translation are of particular importance in textual criticism, especially in the Book of Acts <sup>(15)</sup>.

### *The Palestinian Translation*

Textual criticism scholars suggest that a Syriac translation with no close connection to the other Syriac translations was produced in the fifth century. It is known as the Palestinian translation and is symbolized as Syr pal. It is distinguished from others by being recorded in the form of lectionary readings. It has reached us in three manuscripts dating to the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and it was likely translated from a Greek lectionary text <sup>(16)</sup>.

### *The Latin Translations*

-The language of early Christians and bishops in Rome, as well as their writings and even their sermons, was Greek <sup>(17)</sup>, due to the rule of the Roman Empire. Over time, Latin began to prevail, especially in the West, prompting Church leaders to call for a reliable and unified Latin translation of the complete Bible. Pope Damasus I (311–384 CE) entrusted a man named Jerome (320–340 CE) with the task of producing a new Latin translation of the Gospel in 382 CE. Jerome completed the Gospels in 383 CE, followed by the Acts of the Apostles and the rest of the New Testament. His work on the Gospels consisted of a comprehensive retranslation based on the Old Latin European version and on an Alexandrian Greek text. His translation was called the Vulgate, meaning the common vernacular. Jerome's work was compiled into a single book by Cassiodorus (died 580 CE) <sup>(18)</sup>.

-The texts of the Vulgate gradually replaced the Old Latin Bible, and it took a thousand years before the Vulgate became the official Roman Catholic Bible at the Council of Trent in 1546 CE<sup>(19)</sup>. Among the Latin translations are the following:

#### *The Old Latin (Itala) Translation*

The need for a Latin translation of the Bible soon emerged, and by the end of the second century the Gospels and the entire New Testament were circulating in Latin in North Africa. This translation spread throughout other regions of the Empire <sup>(20)</sup>. The manuscripts of the Old Latin translation, symbolized as OL or IT from Itala, differ greatly from one another, to the extent that the Latin translation appears not to have been a single translation but rather multiple translations. Anyone who possessed a Greek manuscript and had knowledge of both Greek and Latin attempted to translate the sacred books into Latin. These translations contain colloquial vocabulary and simple expressions, supporting the theory that they originally emerged among the general populace rather than among scholars. Of the approximately fifty known manuscripts of this translation, the manuscript that contains the New Testament follows the Western canon of the second century, as it did not include the Epistle to the Hebrews, the Epistle of Jude, or the Second Epistle of Peter <sup>(21)</sup>.

Evidence dating from between the fourth and the thirteenth centuries indicates that the Old Latin translation (OL) remained in use for a long time after the Vulgate officially replaced it <sup>(22)</sup>.

#### *Jerome's Translation (the Vulgate)*

In 382 CE, Jerome, one of the leading biblical scholars of his time, was commissioned by Pope Damasus to revise the Latin translation so that it would conform to the Greek. Within a period of two years, Jerome completed his revision of the four Gospels, declaring that he had not altered the Latin wording except where he deemed change necessary. He subsequently completed a revision of the remainder of the New Testament, although this revision was relatively rapid. Some scholars doubt that Jerome revised more than the four Gospels. It took a long time before his new Latin translation of the Bible, known as the Vulgate meaning the common or popular version gained general acceptance within religious circles. <sup>(23)</sup>

The revision carried out by Jerome in the Vulgate, or the vernacular translation, was itself revised many times over the centuries and came to be regarded as the official source of the Roman Catholic Church. Approximately eight thousand Latin Vulgate manuscripts have survived, which is about twice the number of Greek manuscripts, making the Vulgate one of the most widely circulated ancient books. <sup>(24)</sup>

#### *The Coptic Translations:*

-Coptic is an Egyptian language that was spoken by the local population living along the banks of the Nile River <sup>(25)</sup>. The earliest translations were the Sahidic translations in Egypt, which will be discussed later, and their completion dates to around 200 CE. They include both the Old and New Testaments together. <sup>(26)</sup>

-In the early Christian period, the alphabet of the ancient Egyptian language developed through the use of Greek letters along with some characters taken from the earlier script. The process of translating the New Testament into Coptic in the Sahidic dialect then began, and the translation of the New Testament took a full century <sup>(27)</sup>. Both it and the hieratic script were derived from the older hieroglyphic writing, and six dialects spread from the Nile Delta to the southern regions of the country <sup>(28)</sup>. The most important of these dialects for the study of the New Testament are:

#### *Sahidic*

The movement to translate parts of the New Testament into the Sahidic dialect, which was used in the region of Thebes and beyond, began in the early third century. Within less than a century, the entire New

Testament had been translated into the Sahidic dialect. The surviving manuscripts, dating to the fourth and sixth centuries, preserve almost the entire New Testament translated into this dialect. <sup>(29)</sup>

#### *Bohairic:*

This dialect was used in Alexandria, and the New Testament was translated into Bohairic at a later period than its translation into Sahidic. <sup>(30)</sup>

This may perhaps be attributed to the fact that Alexandria was the cultural capital, which did not necessitate translation until a later period. More than one hundred manuscripts of the New Testament in the Bohairic dialect have survived; however, the oldest of them dates back to the twelfth century. This led some scholars to assume a very late date for the original translation into the Bohairic dialect. Nevertheless, the discovery of a manuscript of the Gospel of John written on papyrus in the Bohairic dialect, dating to the fourth century and preserved in the Bodmer Library collection, indicates that the translation into the Bohairic dialect originally dates back to the fourth century or earlier. <sup>(31)</sup>

#### *Middle Egyptian Dialects:*

In the Middle Egyptian dialects, parts of the New Testament were translated into other Coptic dialects. Manuscripts of the Gospel of John in the Fayyumic dialect and the Akhmimic dialects have survived. There are also Akhmimic manuscripts containing parts of the Gospels and the Catholic Epistles, dating back to the fourth or fifth century. <sup>(32)</sup>

#### *The Gothic Translation:*

-This translation was in the language of ancient Eastern Germany. The earliest translation into the Germanic language was the translation by Ulfilas (311–383 CE), who is considered one of the most renowned missionaries of the early Church. He translated the entire Bible except for the Books of Kings, which he excluded because he felt that they might have an adverse influence on the Goths, who were particularly fond of warfare. <sup>(33)</sup>

-The New Testament was translated into the Gothic language in the mid-fourth century CE by Ulfilas, who is credited with adapting the Gothic language into a written form. This translation has survived in about six manuscripts dating to the fifth and sixth centuries, all of which are in fragmentary form. One manuscript is still preserved in the library of Uppsala University in Sweden and is known as the Codex Argenteus, or the Silver Codex, because it is written in silver ink on purple parchment and contains portions of the Gospels. The remaining Gothic manuscripts are written on reused parchment from which the earlier writing had been erased. This translation is the earliest surviving literary monument in any Germanic language. <sup>(34)</sup>

#### *The Armenian Translation:*

- After Syrian Christians transmitted their doctrines to the Armenians at the beginning of the third century CE, and with the conversion of Tiridates III to Christianity, Armenia became a Christian kingdom. In the fifth century, an Armenian alphabet was devised in order to translate the Bible into the language of these new believers. The Armenian translation is considered one of the most accurate ancient versions of the Greek text. According to ancient tradition, the New Testament was the work of Mesrop, Bishop of Armenia (390–439 CE), to whom the invention of both the Armenian and Georgian alphabets is attributed. <sup>(35)</sup>

-The New Testament was translated directly from Greek into Armenian in the first half of the fifth century by Mesrop, who also devised the Armenian alphabet, with the assistance of Isaac. Some hold that the translation was carried out by Saint Isaac from Syriac. This translation was later revised and, by the eighth century, became the version known among them, thus forming the basis of the Bible in the Armenian language, which is still in use to this day. This translation does not attain a high level of precision or elegance. The total number of its manuscripts exceeds 1,500, a very large number surpassing that of any other New

Testament translation. Most of these manuscripts date to the ninth century and later, and they represent the revised form of the original translation. (36)

#### *The Ethiopic Translation:*

-The New Testament was translated into the Ethiopic language later than the Old Testament, and it contains a collection of writings mentioned by Clement of Alexandria (37). There are about one hundred known manuscripts of the Ethiopic translation; however, none of them dates earlier than the thirteenth century, which makes it difficult to determine its origin. Two views exist: one dates the translation to the second century, while the other dates it to the fourteenth century. It was translated from Syriac and may also have been translated from Greek. The chronological gap between the translation of the New Testament and that of the Old Testament accounts for this discrepancy and has resulted in a degree of ambiguity.

#### *The Slavic Translation:*

-A complete translation of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, exists in a manuscript known as the Gennadius Bible, which is preserved in Moscow and dates to 1499 CE. (38)

#### *Other Translations:*

-There are several manuscripts translated into Persian and Georgian, and Anglo-Saxon and Persian translations also appeared<sup>(39)</sup>, among many others. Although some New Testament translations have been the subject of scholarly study involving considerable effort, many attempts remain necessary with regard to these various translations so that they may make a clear contribution to the study of New Testament texts<sup>(40)</sup>.

#### *Arabic Translations:*

-The New Testament was translated into Arabic after the seventh century CE, following the spread of the Arabic language in the Middle East. With the spread of Islam and its expansion across different parts of the world, Arabic became a global language, which led to the beginning of the translation of the New Testament into Arabic. It is said that John, the Jacobite Patriarch of Antioch (631–648 CE), translated the Gospel from Syriac into Arabic, and it is also said that another John, the Bishop of Seville in Spain, translated the Gospel from the Vulgate around 764 CE. However, Arabic texts did not receive significant importance in textual studies due to their relatively late documentation. (41)

-This translation was also carried out from other languages, such as Syriac, rather than directly from the Greek original. Arab Christians used the Syriac translation that had existed since the second century CE due to their presence in the Levant. Although some believe that there was an Arabic translation used by certain Arabs, it disappeared and left no trace. Among the most important Arabic translations given their large number only some will be mentioned, as follows:

#### *The American Translation (Bustani–Smith–Van Dyck)*

-This translation is considered one of the most important Arabic translations. It appeared in the nineteenth century and was welcomed by churches<sup>(42)</sup>, and it had a significant impact on Christian life in the Middle East. It was produced by the American Mission. In January 1847, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in Beirut decided to translate the entire Bible from Hebrew and Greek. The task was entrusted to Dr. Eli Smith, an American missionary, who began the work with the assistance of Butrus al-Bustani and Nasif al-Yaziji of Lebanon. Butrus al-Bustani was proficient in Arabic and Hebrew, while Nasif al-Yaziji was a grammarian. On 11 January 1857, Smith died, having completed the translation of the Pentateuch, the New Testament, and various parts of the prophetic books. The work was continued by

Cornelius Van Dyck, a physician and linguist who mastered ten languages five ancient and five modern and who was then twenty-nine years old. He carefully revised all that had been translated by Dr. Smith and Butrus al-Bustani, assisted in refining the translation by Yusuf al-Asir al-Azhari. The translation of the New Testament was completed on 28 March 1860, and the translation of the Old Testament on 22 August 1864. The entire Bible was printed on 29 March 1865<sup>(43)</sup>. The New Testament was translated from the received text edited by Erasmus and his colleagues, which is considered one of the most accurate texts, while the Old Testament was translated from the Masoretic Hebrew text, regarded as the most accurate Hebrew text. Dar al-Kitab al-Muqaddas in Cairo later issued a revised edition of this translation, with the first three Gospels published separately in 1986<sup>(44)</sup>. The manuscripts relied upon for this translation are weak, dating from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries.

#### *The Dominican Translation*

- This translation was published in Iraq in 1875 under the supervision of the Dominican mission in Mosul and was carried out by Yusuf Dawud Zbuni, one of the most prominent bishops of the Syriac Catholics, along with Marmarji. Some state that the New Testament edition bears the note “according to the Eastern translation” printed in Rome in 1703, and that it was corrected against the Greek original and the translations accepted by the Church by Father Yusuf Dawud. The aim of this translation was to benefit Syriac Arab Christians in Iraq. Editions of this translation continued to be published up to the present century, and the remaining copies today are rare. However, the four Gospels from this translation are still in circulation through the “Evangelical Synopsis” prepared by the Dominican Marmarji and published by the Lebanese Missionary Press in 1948, and distributed by the Paulist Press. <sup>(45)</sup>

#### *The Arabic Translation of the Bible*

- It is said that the first Arabic translation of the Bible was carried out by Bishop John of Seville in Spain in 750 CE, translated from the Latin version. Sarkis al-Razi, the Archbishop of Damascus, together with a group of scholars, translated the entire Bible into Arabic. This translation took forty-six years to complete and was printed in Rome in 1671 CE. Reverend Henry Martyn translated the New Testament into Arabic in India, and it was published by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge in 1816. <sup>(46)</sup>

#### *The Catholic Translation*

- The Dominicans in Mosul issued a translation printed in 1878. The motivation for producing it was the success and wide dissemination of the Bustani–Van Dyck translation. This translation was supervised by Roudet, with the assistance of Ja‘ja‘ and the writer Ibrahim ibn Nasif al-Yaziji. It is not clear whether Ibrahim al-Yaziji composed the wording of both the New and Old Testaments; it is more likely that he discontinued his work after completing the Old Testament, and that Rashid al-Shartuni completed the formulation of the New Testament. This translation was published with both Testaments and the Apocryphal books in 1880. It became well known for its eloquence and the elegance and ornamentation of its printing; however, it did not strictly follow the Hebrew and Greek texts. The translators referred to the Latin Vulgate in matters related to Church doctrines and precepts. This translation, like the Bustani–Van Dyck translation, required revision and critical review, particularly from the perspective of textual criticism. Its publishers undertook this in the “New Catholic Translation,” though not on a comprehensive scale <sup>(47)</sup>.

-This translation, together with the Bustani–Van Dyck translation, laid the foundation and represented a turning point between earlier and later translations in the pursuit of improvement. It is noteworthy that the background of this translation does not rely solely on the traditional text, but also on the Vatican Manuscript in addition to other manuscripts. The Vatican Manuscript remains the primary basis, representing the Alexandrian critical text, which is considered a minority text according to the statements of theologians.

#### *The New Catholic Translation*

-This translation was published in 1969. It stated that the Catholic Press, having published its Arabic translation of the Bible a hundred years earlier, decided to review it in light of advances in biblical studies, accurate translation, developments in the Arabic language, and the arts of typesetting and printing. The work began with the books of the New Testament, which were translated from the Greek original by Fathers Subhi Hamoui and Yusuf Qushakji. Its wording was refined by Professor Butrus al-Bustani. Hamoui and Qushakji were from the city of Aleppo. This translation aimed at achieving the highest levels of eloquence and rhetorical excellence, in response to the challenge posed by the Egyptian writer Taha Hussein, which Father Yusuf Qushakji, one of the translators, placed at the beginning of the introduction to his book *The Arabization of the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles*. It succeeded in this endeavor by providing Arab intellectuals with a well-crafted Arabic translation, as acknowledged by writers and authors. This translation preserved the Catholic theological line with regard to Church doctrines and precepts, following the pattern of previous Catholic translations, though it was more open. However, in the middle of last year, the eighth edition of this New Catholic Translation appeared, with revisions introduced <sup>(48)</sup>.

#### *The Jesuit Translation*

-In 1881, the Jesuit Augustine Roudt translated the entire text of the Bible, with the participation of Jesuit Fathers Philippe Kosh, Joseph Rose, and Joseph van Ham. Ibrahim al-Yaziji also contributed to the formulation of the books of the Old Testament, giving the translation a scholarly style combined with linguistic eloquence. In 1949, the Jesuit Order began to review the text in light of developments in biblical studies and translation methods. In 1969, a translation of the New Testament was published, carried out by the Jesuit Subhi Hamoui and Yusuf Qushakji in cooperation with Butrus al-Suryani, who contributed to the literary formulation. In 1980, work shifted to the Old Testament, which was entrusted to Jesuit Fathers Antoine Audou, René Lavan, and Subhi Hamoui, who sought to preserve the style of Ibrahim al-Yaziji and traditional Arabic composition. In 1989, introductions to the biblical books and footnotes were added at the bottom of the pages based on modern critical scholarship of the twentieth century, and the work was printed <sup>(49)</sup>.

The background of this translation does not rely on the traditional text but rather on the Sinaitic manuscript in addition to the Vatican manuscript and other manuscripts dating between the fourth and the fifteenth centuries. However, the primary basis is the Sinaitic manuscript, which is full of errors. As previously mentioned, the Jesuit Fathers in Lebanon were concerned with issuing a modern translation that aimed at achieving the highest levels of eloquence and rhetorical excellence and relied on the most accurate texts in light of modern discoveries. They produced this translation, which was followed by several editions, and in each new edition the Jesuit Fathers attempted to introduce certain improvements, such as simplifying the wording and imparting an ecumenical spirit to the translation <sup>(50)</sup>.

#### *The Paulist Translation*

This translation was published in 1953 and became the fourth Arabic translation among those in circulation and the first after seventy-five years following the third. It was prepared by Georges Fakhoury al-Boulsi, who benefited from textual criticism, Greek grammar, elegant structuring, and reading aids or punctuation. His translation was pioneering among contemporary translations in adopting these features. Fakhoury translated from Greek, yet he maintained the Catholic translation policy of referring to the Latin Vulgate with regard to Church doctrines and precepts, as can be observed through a comparison of the two translations. Its footnotes contain a wealth of historical, geographical, and exegetical information. It represented the first serious attempt in the twentieth century to translate the New Testament in light of modern manuscript discoveries <sup>(51)</sup>.

#### *The Common Arabic Bible Society Translation*

This translation was first published in 1979 and followed the approach of Bible Society translations in the West and other parts of the world in terms of simplifying expressions and using an easy language understandable to the general public. This translation was produced by a team from multiple denominations

and prepared by a committee composed of theologians belonging to various Christian churches, including Catholic, Orthodox, and others; hence it was called a common or joint translation. It was supervised by Dr. William Ryburn, the special translation consultant for the Bible Societies in the Middle East. The working team consisted of Yusuf al-Khal, who prepared the first draft of the translation and formulated its wording; Antonios Najib, a Catholic, who was responsible for ensuring the correctness of the translation in terms of meaning and its conformity with the Greek text; and Dr. Fahim Aziz, an Evangelical, and Dr. Maurice Tadros, a Coptic Orthodox, who worked on reviewing the translation. The first edition of this translation was published containing theological errors that provoked strong criticism. These errors were due to the lack of careful review of the translation with respect to the Greek language and theology, as well as limited communication among the contributors because of the Lebanon war and the haste that led to its printing. However, the Bible Society later corrected this translation in its second edition published in 1980, and the Society is currently working on making the necessary arrangements to revise this translation in a precise and comprehensive manner <sup>(52)</sup>.

### *The Life Book Translation*

In March 1982, an interpretive Arabic translation of the New Testament was published in Cairo under the title *The Life Book* by the International Life Book Organization. This translation of the New Testament was issued in 1982 in Cairo and was carried out by Mr. Saeed Baz with a number of specialists under the supervision of Mr. George Hosni, both of whom were from Lebanon and likely Protestants. This translation is not a translation in the traditional sense of the word but rather a free translation. Its compilers appropriately described it as an interpretive translation. The motivation behind producing such a translation into Arabic was the great success achieved by the English Bible translation, of which tens of millions of copies were sold within a few years. The compilers also state that their translation is eloquent and of high quality to a considerable extent <sup>(53)</sup>. Although it does not reach the level of accuracy and fidelity achieved by the American translation, some have classified it among the worst translations. In 1986, a revised edition of it was published for the Pentateuch, the Psalms, the four Gospels, and the Acts of the Apostles.

### *The Coptic Orthodox Translation*

The Egyptian Coptic Orthodox Church was in urgent need of publishing a translation of the Bible into Arabic produced under its own authority. Accordingly, Pope Cyril VI formed a committee headed by Anba Gregorios, together with Mr. Zaki Shenouda Kamel, Bahour Labib, and Helmy Morad, under the supervision of Cyril VI, Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of the See of Saint Mark. The committee issued the four Gospels beginning in 1975. This translation paid particular attention to the use of ancient Coptic texts and is considered an almost exact copy of the Van Dyck version, while some maintain that it was translated from Coptic<sup>(54)</sup>.

There are many other translations, including the translation of al-Shidyaq by Fares al-Shidyaq, published in 1848; the Simplified Arabic Translation produced by the World Bible Translation Center in Texas, whose first edition appeared in 2004; the Honorable Gospel translated by Subhi al-Malik, published as a complete book in 2000; and the Interlinear Translation (Arabic–Greek New Testament / Arabic–Hebrew Old Testament) by Paul al-Faghali, Antoine and Na‘matallah al-Khoury, and Youssef Fakhri, published in 2003.

These are the most important translations, which we have attempted to present and clarify in terms of how they were produced and brought to light and the stages they went through. It has also become clear that the Gospels, at the time of their compilation, passed through many obstacles and were subject to considerable pressures. It is a mistake to believe that the Gospels, once edited, immediately constituted sacred books <sup>(55)</sup>. The ongoing conflict between denominations is fundamentally based on the credibility and reliability of the Gospels among the churches.

## **Conclusion**

Those responsible for translation work were specialists from the Church and theologians. As has become evident, the diversity of translations does not trace back to an original text but rather to branches of branches, such that the original no longer exists and reaching it is impossible. By the “original,” we mean that first book or manuscript, regardless of the revealed Gospel. What we conclude is the loss of the original translations and the impossibility of finding them; thus, translation remains merely a derivative and not equivalent to the original. No matter how creative or precise it may be, it loses the value of the original, for imitation does not rise to the level of the original.

The enormous number of translations demonstrates the rapid competition among various parties to leave an imprint whose inner substance is difficult to grasp—either as an attempt to insert their artistic and literary works into the sacred text, or in order to contain the Christian public by adopting a new formulation of the Bible for devotional use. When the Gospel is translated into a given language, that translation itself becomes the Gospel, not merely its translation.

Despite their differences, manuscripts remain the sole burden troubling textual criticism scholars in their attempt to recover the original Bible text. The factor of time further complicates the effort to reach the first manuscript to which one would need to return. What theologians fear is that the manuscripts currently available and those recently discovered may be apocryphal or pseudepigraphal.

The Bible, in both Testaments in general and the Gospels in particular, has authors who are unknown and whose identities are not established. Their compilation occurred centuries after the revelation, as acknowledged by most theologians, past and present. They are no longer able to conceal this truth from the public after it had previously been confined to them and forbidden to disclose to others. The conflict among denominations is rooted in the credibility and reliability of the Gospels adopted by each group, based on ecclesiastical tradition. Each attempts to address criticism through a new translation, yet the successive shortcomings that follow each attempt have placed them in a cycle from which they cannot escape. The differences among translations, manuscripts, and versions are the result of Christians’ failure to agree on a single sacred text that unites them in belief and ritual.

In studying this topic, I relied as much as possible on Christian sources in order to ensure objectivity by grounding the research in Christian testimonies, in accordance with the verse: (وَشَهِدَ شَاهِدٌ مِّنْ أَهْلِهَا) (Surat Yusuf, verse 26). Were we to delve into the issue of how the Gospel was written, collected, and canonized in its current form, the research would require many chapters. Textual criticism has been instrumental in uncovering what was concealed, grasping the content of the Bible, examining manuscripts, and clarifying the ambiguities arising from the numerous differences that cannot be fully enumerated. Ultimately, the Bible in both Testaments remains a purely human work.

Finally, I propose that, in the field of comparative religion, greater attention be given to the study of textual criticism and the teaching of various languages in order to gain comprehensive knowledge across disciplines and to enrich researchers through engagement with the scriptures of other religions. It would also be desirable to allocate courses on the languages in which sacred books were composed within our university faculties.

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