Eli Smith and the Arabic Bible

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ELI SMITH AND THE ARABIC BIBLE

by
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Introduction

This essay by Margaret R. Leavy was commissioned to mark the opening of two exhibits at the Yale Divinity School Library: "Missionary Translators" and "The Yale Missionary Bible Collection." These exhibits, prepared to coincide with a symposium entitled LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND TRANSLATION: FURTHER STUDIES IN THE MISSIONARY MOVEMENT, described the lives and work of various missionary translators and displayed products of their labors.

Recent scholarship has drawn attention to the impact of Bible translation on the social and cultural development of societies. Lamin Sanneh, for example, has pointed to the "connections between Bible translating and related issues such as cultural self-understanding, vernacular pride, social awakening, religious renewal, cross-cultural dialogue, transmission and recipiency, reciprocity in mission,..." In his work Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture, Sanneh further notes that:

The distinguishing mark of scriptural translation has been the effort to come as close as possible to the speech of the common people. Translators have consequently first devoted much time, effort, and resources to building the basis, with investigations into the culture, history, language, religion, economy, anthropology, and physical environment of the people concerned, before tackling their concrete task. This background work was often indispensable to the task of authentic translation...

The activities of Eli Smith described in this essay by Margaret R. Leavy provide concrete illustration of Sanneh's analysis, demonstrating the tremendous investment of time and effort required of the missionary translator. Smith recognized the need for extensive preparation in order to produce a worthy translation; he was willing to invest the necessary labor, even when his efforts were not thoroughly appreciated by his own mission board. Leavy documents the wide variety of sources utilized by Smith in preparing his Arabic translation of the Bible - from standard Bible commentaries and grammars of the Arabic language to books on precious stones. The painstaking efforts of Smith and his colleagues resulted in a successful translation of the Bible and


2Ibid., p. 192.
contributed to a renewal of Arab interest in their own language and culture after years of Ottoman oppression.

The Eli Smith Family Papers are one among various manuscript and microtext collections documenting the work of missionary translators held at the Yale Divinity School Library. These manuscript materials complement the library's extensive Missionary Bible Collection and related holdings. "Works prepared by missionaries for the use of the peoples of missions fields" constituted one of the six original categories of material collected by George Edward Day in forming the Day Missions Library.

The Yale Missionary Bible Collection now contains Bibles or portions of the scriptures in more than 175 languages ranging from Ainu to Zulu. No doubt, behind each of these volumes lies a story as rich in detail as the story of Eli Smith's translation work told here by Margaret Leavy. The stories of translators such as Eli Smith in the Middle East, Elijah C. Bridgman and Henry Blodget in China, and Samuel Ajayi Crowther in Africa combine to demonstrate the essential role played by translation in the missionary enterprise. Journals, correspondence, and printed works provide insight into the way translation has served to foster mutual respect and understanding among cultures, as well as the reverberations of the translation process leading to increased knowledge and cultural awareness.

Like Eli Smith, China missionary Elijah C. Bridgman and his colleague W.H. Medhurst thought it essential that there be a base of mutual understanding and respect before the Christian faith could be spread. Smith devoted his life to the production of an Arabic Bible of which Arab Christians could be proud, urging his mission board to realize that Arabic publications produced in a hasty and imperfect manner would only lead to disrespect for the Christian faith. Stymied by Chinese unreceptiveness to the Christian message during his early years of missionary service, Bridgman seized upon translation of a wide range of documents as the key to mutual respect and eventual understanding. Bridgman was early convinced that there was a need to translate not only the Bible but also secular Western works into Chinese, and Chinese classics into English. As Jane Kate Leonard writes of Bridgman's colleague W.H. Medhurst:

It was clear even to the novice missionary that the Christian religious message had no meaning or significance to the Chinese. A tract that was narrowly religious and devotional in content held no interest because of the vast cultural and historical differences between China and the West....
China was not, in Medhurst's opinion, ready for the Christian religious message; there was a blanket of culture, history, and tradition that had to be penetrated first, and this could not be done by religious tracts. What were needed instead were materials that would show that the West was a highly developed civilization, equal to China, and that its Christian religious tradition was worthy of respect and acceptance.³

Fred W. Drake writes of Elijah C. Bridgman:

Within two years of his arrival in Canton, Bridgman began to see his primary role as that of an intermediary between Western and Chinese civilization. During the following three decades, Bridgman tirelessly translated Chinese documents and wrote extensively on Chinese topics - particularly as editor and major contributor to The Chinese Repository - in order to make China better known to the West. In 1834, Bridgman and his colleagues in Canton formed a propaganda agency to make Western knowledge available to the Chinese. With their Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge in China (generally known as the SDK), he and his friends hoped to open China by peaceful means to trade, Western civilization, and consequently to Protestant Christianity.⁴

China missionary Henry Blodgett's experience points to other facets of the translation process - the inevitable ambiguity which arises when translating from one language to another, and the resulting investigations needed to resolve this ambiguity. Blodgett served under the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in China from 1854 to 1894. As an influential member of committees charged with the translation of the Bible, Blodgett was central in a controversy concerning the correct term for "God" in the Chinese language. Some missionaries advocated use of the term Shangti for the Christian God because it was already in use in China as the name of the "Supreme Being". Blodgett, among others, opposed the use of the term Shangti, feeling that would only lead to confusion about the uniqueness of the Christian God. Robert


Morrison, one of the first two Protestant translators of the Bible into Chinese, had advocated the use of Shen (or Shin), which meant God or invisible beings in general. The debate over the proper name for God in Chinese raged for decades and precipitated extensive research into Chinese culture and religion as each side in the controversy sought to justify its position.

The story of Blodget’s delving into history and culture in order to resolve ambiguities in translation is mirrored by Eli Smith’s translation methodology and by the experiences of others across the globe. Lamin Sanneh tells the story of Samuel Ajayi Crowther, an African who was responsible for the first Bible translation into Yoruba. Crowther had been taken in a slave raid while a boy, but freed by an English naval vessel, put ashore in Freetown, and adopted by Christians. Following seminary education in England, Crowther returned to Africa and became the first Bishop of Niger. Lamin Sanneh writes of Crowther:

Crowther was perceptive enough to realize that translation led naturally into developing a deeper appreciation for the entire culture, and he pursued this line to its logical conclusion. He wrote in 1844 that his linguistic investigation forced him to delve into other aspects of traditional African life. Thus, in response to the reverberations of scriptural translation, Crowther was stimulated to follow through to other aspects of the culture, suggesting that literal translation in itself was insufficient to take the full measure of the enterprise. "In tracing out words and their various uses," he admits, "I am now and then led to search at length into some traditions and customs of the Yorubas." As a direct result Crowther began a systematic inquiry into the Egungun secret society and the cult of Ifa divination, and contributed immensely to the strengthening of a sense of Yoruba national identity.5

The stories of Smith, Bridgman, Blodget, and Crowther all contribute to our understanding of the role of translation in the interaction between Western and non-Western cultures. We are grateful to Margaret R. Leavy for fleshing out in rich detail the story of one missionary translator.

Ms. Leavy is also the author of Looking for the Armenians: Eli Smith’s Missionary Adventure, 1830-1831 (Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1992).

5Sanneh, Translating the Message, p. 165-166.
She has been working for a number of years on a biography of Eli Smith, based in large part on Smith’s letters in the archive of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions at the Houghton Library at Harvard University (also held at the Yale Divinity Library in microfilm copy), as well as the Eli Smith Family Papers in Yale Divinity School Library Record Group No. 30.

Martha Lund Smalley, Curator of the Day Missions Library
كتِب العهد القدِيم
وألْعَهْدٍ
الجَدِيدِ

وقد ترجم من اللغات الأصلية وهي: اللغة العبرانية، واللغة الكلتانية، واللغة اليونانية.

Title page of the Bible in Arabic
The A.B.C.F.M. Press in Malta

Eli Smith’s first assignment under the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions on his graduation from Andover Theological Seminary in 1826 was to the American mission press in Malta as assistant to its director, Daniel Temple. The press was located in Malta, as were two English presses, one run by William Jowett of the Church Missionary Society, and another by the London Missionary Society. Under British dominion, Malta was deemed the only spot in the Mediterranean region where a Protestant press could have some hope of being allowed to operate safely. The Greek and Arabic-speaking worlds were still under the rule of the Turkish Empire, where the missionaries had encountered an absolute prohibition when it came to converting Muslims and often violent hostility from the native Catholic and Orthodox churches, which resented the Protestants’ incursion into their historic territories.

The Board had sent Smith off to Malta in great haste, requiring him to accelerate his graduation by a few months and make hurried farewell to his family and friends, without even permitting him the time to consider marrying, as many missionaries did while they still could. There seemed to be an urgent need to have him at his post without delay, since Temple was expected to leave soon on a visit to France. But when Smith arrived, Temple’s departure had been indefinitely postponed, and Smith found himself with little to do and powerless to remedy the obvious shortcomings he found at the press. Smith’s lively interest in languages was, no doubt, one reason the Board was so eager to send him to the Mediterranean. He was already competent in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew from his years at Yale and Andover, and seems also to have had some familiarity with German and French, as well as with Italian, which was the lingua franca of westerners in the Mediterranean world. He was a quick learner, and in the coming years was to acquire a number of other languages, including Turkish and Armenian, and even something of the language of the Syrian Gypsies. The Board had great ambitions for its press, which was to be the linch-pin of its critical operations in the Near East. Arabic was the dominant language in this area; spoken, it was said, by one eighth of the world’s population, and - of particular importance - the key to the Holy Land itself. The Board’s clear intent was that Smith should eventually establish and supervise an Arabic
printing operation.

But so far the press in Malta was equipped to publish only a few Bibles and tracts in Italian and modern Greek. The tracts were mostly short English and American devotional works and pious stories of a kind that were very popular at home, but of doubtful suitability for their intended readers. Temple did not speak Greek, and had to rely heavily on native Greek translators whose work he did not entirely trust. Though he had only recently acquired enough Italian to preach, he and his wife did some of the Italian translating themselves. Having no printer of its own, the press had to make do with what temporary help it could get. Distribution of its output had nearly come to a halt, since there were only a few small missions as yet in the Mediterranean to use the books. Italy was closed to the press's Italian publications by church decree, and the two British presses in Malta were already supplying the small Greek market. As for prospects of publishing in Arabic, there was not one competent Arabic speaker among the Board's few missionaries in the area, though Isaac Bird, stationed in Beirut, was beginning to master the language.

Smith quickly perceived the dimensions of the problem, and when it appeared that his talents were being wasted in Malta, he took the matter into his own hands and left abruptly for Beirut to study Arabic, against Temple's expressed wishes and without so much as consulting the Board - an act of shocking insubordination in a young missionary. In Beirut he lived for a while with Bird and his fellow missionary William Goodell and their families, studying with local Arabic scholars, then moved into the mountains nearby to live with an Arab family, the better to learn the language as spoken by the people. He needed to master Arabic, both in its scholarly and popular forms, whether he was to return to the press or to be a missionary and preacher in the Arabic world. The latter seemed to be his preference at the moment. He showed little inclination to return to his post in Malta, remaining in Beirut until circumstances forced his hand in the spring of 1828, when the threat of war between Turkey and the western powers drove the mission and a number of its friends and helpers out of Beirut to a temporary refuge in Malta. He was badly needed there. Temple's wife, who had long been ailing, had died of consumption and two of their children had followed her to the grave, forcing him to return for a time to the United States with his remaining family. Two fonts of Arabic type were by now on their way to Malta from the United States, and Homan Hallock, a highly competent American printer, experienced in setting type in both Greek and Hebrew, had arrived to start printing in Arabic. The Board was eager to rush the new
Arabic press into production.

But Smith argued forcefully against this course of action. His stay in Beirut, he argued, had not been long enough to equip him properly for the task of managing an Arabic press—though the Board seemed to believe his stay had been unnecessarily protracted. He had not fully mended his relations with Boston, but the Board had come to accept his decision to study Arabic in Beirut. In a crowded and impatient letter from Malta he stated his complaints about its haste to start printing under conditions that could only produce an inferior product, which he thought would certainly be unacceptable to Arab readers.

I did indeed & do now, consider it unfortunate for the prosperity of the press that I could not have remained 6 months or a year longer in Syria. I had calculated on as much time as this when I left Malta: -- I had arrived at that point in Arabic where, at the end of a week I was seeing my knowledge of it as much increased as at the end of a month a short time before, & to leave it there was to leave an important undertaking half finished, perhaps never to be completed as I intended — I had just formed that personal acquaintance with individuals, & acquired that knowledge of the country and its customs which not only began to open before me an interesting field for missionary labor, but had laid the foundation for rapidly increasing my stock of that information & personal experience which are invaluable and absolutely necessary to a superintendent of the press, & which he can acquire only among the people for whom his books are intended.... Had I (remained), I should have hardly viewed an addition of six months to the length of my absence from Malta in the light of an objection; for so highly important do I consider it that a broad foundation be laid under the best circumstances to qualify me to issue judicious, well adapted, & accurate publications that I look upon months & even years spent in doing this well spent, while the same length of time prematurely employed in a hasty issue of ill adapted & inaccurate publications is worse than thrown away.

The press had made a diligent search both in Syria and in Egypt for a native Arabic translator, Smith wrote, and none had been found sufficiently competent in

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6 What is now Lebanon was then a part of Syria.

7 ABCFM: 16.6, #164-1 (for this and the following quotation).
English or Italian. The books the press translated from English and other languages into Arabic would require both a knowledge of the original language good enough to assure a faithful understanding of the work and a familiarity with the Arabic vernacular that no European or American possessed. It would be necessary to train a native translator, who must work under the eye of a superintendent who could teach him the principles of the business as well as correct any errors which might have crept into the translation and "make those numerous alterations & explanations which every English book needs before it is adapted to an Oriental reader."

Finally (the translator) must be present to act as corrector, for this cannot safely be entrusted entirely to the eye of any European. To train and qualify such a translator will require time, expense, &, on my part, much labor and trouble. But taking it for granted that the Board design that this press shall become an important establishment, & being their press for the Mediterranean shall be able to fill their missionaries' hands with well composed & correctly printed books in all the languages in which they wish to distribute them, I do not hesitate to propose that the step be taken.... I wish not to forget that while the press governs public opinion, it is not independent of it. Should ours get a character for inaccuracy, its publications would not be sought after, whereas if it should be as highly esteemed for taste and correctness by the people for whom we print as for example that at Venice is by the Armenians, our books would go into market under very desirable advantages.... If we are to do anything in (Arabic), I am convinced that a translator and corrector must be permanently connected to the establishment & educated to his business.

Smith did not stay in Malta long. In February of 1829 he sailed for Greece with Rufus Anderson, the Board’s Secretary, on a journey of missionary exploration, leaving Goodell in charge of the press. Goodell was then engaged in translating the New Testament into the Armenian vernacular to make it accessible to modern Armenians, who found it difficult to read the ancient Armenian version used in the churches. Though their language had its own alphabet, literate Armenians in the western parts of the Turkish Empire were accustomed to reading it printed in the Arabic characters then used in printing Turkish. In 1831, when Smith’s travels to Armenia brought him into contact with the Armenians who lived in their ancient homeland, far to the east of Constantinople, he despatched a lengthy letter to Goodell protesting that Armenians he met there, perhaps unlike those the missionaries had encountered on the shores of the Mediterranean, would not happily accept a translation of holy writ printed in the alphabet
of the infidel Turk. But Smith’s protest arrived too late, and Goodell’s translation later appeared as it had been written. It was used successfully for many years in the mission to the western Armenians that Goodell established in Constantinople.

Smith’s travels in Greece and his evident skills as a traveller and investigative reporter led to his next assignment, to explore the possibilities of new missionary ventures in Armenia and the neighboring regions. On his return he settled once again in Malta, to recuperate from the malaria he had contracted in his travels and to ready his *Researches in Armenia* for publication in the United States. It was only after a year in America, where he was at last permitted to find a wife, who returned with him to Beirut, that he became again involved in the work of creating an Arabic press.

**The Press in Beirut - A New Arabic Type**

1834, the year Smith returned to Beirut, was marked by a significant change in the atmosphere of Syria, favorable to education and the revival of an interest in Arabic culture. The Egyptian forces of Mehmet Ali had overrun the country and established a government under his son Ibrahim, who, with the intent of educating soldiers for his army and encouraging the development of a self-conscious Arab culture which he hoped might eventually undermine Turkish rule throughout the empire, set up a system of government schools. Other schools began to spring up, including mission schools, both Protestant and Catholic. Suddenly, where there had been almost no ready market for the output of the American press, schools in Syria were crying out for books. The mission’s press in Malta had been closed. Temple and Hallock were in Smyrna, publishing in Greek and Italian, and Goodell had gone to Constantinople with a printing establishment for the Armenians in the region. The Arabic font had been sent to Smyrna rather than to Beirut because of the political disturbances in Beirut and the often violent opposition of the native churches to the missionaries. But on Smith’s arrival in Beirut, he urgently requested that the font be forwarded to him, and a young printer was dispatched from Malta.

Under Smith’s direction the new press turned with a will to meeting the schools’ needs for elementary textbooks and teaching materials, gradually expanding its operations as the schools grew and the demand increased, to print a wide variety of other publications in Arabic, including portions of the Scriptures; a hymnbook; catechisms; original writings by the missionaries themselves, such as Smith’s *Office and Work of the*
Holy Spirit, Whiting’s *On Self-Examination*, and one of its best sellers, Bird’s 537-page polemic addressed to the Maronite Bishop on the vices and shortcomings of his church and the superior claims of the Protestants. There were also translations of European and American religious classics such as *Pilgrim’s Progress*, two editions of Thomas à Kempis, and Jonathan Edward’s *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. There were in addition numerous shorter tracts setting out the Protestant position on religious and moral questions, and the old perennials such as *The Dairyman’s Daughter* and *Little Henry and his Bearer*, which were slow to disappear from the list, despite a notation in 1844 that they were not thought to be very useful. Most notably, the press published a number of the classics of Arabic literature, which turned out to be a seminal force in awakening interest among Arabs in their own language and culture, which had long lain dormant under Ottoman dominion. This undertaking was in time to have far-reaching effects the missionaries could not then have foreseen.

The small hand-operated press that first arrived in Beirut fell far short of being able to fulfill the mission’s needs. Publishing was a slow and tedious process. It was not until 1841 that the press acquired a competent American printer, George Hurter, who was experienced in setting Greek and Hebrew type but had not yet learned Arabic. And only then was it able to purchase a one-horsepower steam press. Over the years improvements were made, most notably the acquisition of a new Arabic typeface designed by Smith and executed by Hallock. As need arose, more type fonts were cast, of different sizes and with new characters to permit a wider variety of publications, including an-algebra textbook, and finally the Bible, complete with marginal and other notations, as well as a best-selling pocket edition of the New Testament.

The Arabic type the press used at first was a source of great distress to Smith, who, ever the perfectionist, felt strongly that the mission’s publications, particularly the new translation of the Bible it was looking forward to publishing, must possess a classical beauty acceptable to the most-exacting readers of Arabic and worthy of the sacred text itself. Not even the Sultan’s press in Constantinople could meet that standard. Smith set about immediately on his arrival in 1834 collecting examples of the best Arabic calligraphy that could be found, from which he painstakingly designed a set of models.

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8A copy of the Edwards translation, which seems to have been done by Smith himself, is in the Sterling Library at Yale, as is Smith’s *Treatise on the Human Soul*, also in Arabic.
for each character, intending to take them to Smyrna, where Hallock would cut the punches. In 1836 he set out with his wife Sarah for Smyrna, but the voyage was a disaster. The ship was wrecked off a desolate and uninhabited coastland of Turkey, where the passengers were abandoned by the crew. The precious models, as well as most of their clothing and other possessions had gone to the bottom of the sea. It was three difficult weeks before they got to Smyrna. Sarah, who had undertaken the voyage in the hope that it would improve her already consumptive condition, suffered greatly from exposure, and died soon after their arrival.

The process of designing the type had to start again from the beginning. Smith produced a new set of 1800 drawings in Constantinople and returned with them to Smyrna, where Hallock, who was a remarkable craftsman, cut the punches and drove the matrices. Smith then took them personally to Germany where he oversaw the casting of the type by the well-known firm of Tauchnitz in Leipzig. In addition to carrying out his assignment of faithfully reproducing Smith's models, Hallock succeeded in greatly simplifying the labor of printing in Arabic whenever the use of vowel points was required. For the first time, each of the many Arabic characters was designed to permit incorporation of the points without the time-consuming labor of setting the vowels in separate lines above and below the lines of characters. Hallock's new type not only saved labor, but saved paper, and improved the appearance of the page. The resulting typeface, known as American Arabic, was widely admired; it became the standard for Arabic printing well into this century.

Directing the press in Beirut was necessarily only a part of Smith's job; there were many interruptions and competing duties. He considered himself a missionary first of all, and a missionary's chief duty was to preach. He preached daily, and was never free of duties with respect to the business of the mission with its almost unending crises and emergencies. Moreover, the Board continued to expect Smith's help in reaching out to new fields. His first assignment on his arrival in Beirut in 1834 was to make another journey of exploration, this time in the Hauran, a relatively unknown territory east of the Jordan. In 1838 and again in 1852 Smith travelled extensively with Edward Robinson exploring the Holy Land, two journeys which culminated in publication of Robinson's three-volume Biblical Researches in Palestine and in the Adjacent Regions. Syria continued to be disrupted by wars and civil disturbances, and harassment of the mission by the Maronites was unending. In 1840, war once again drove the missionaries out of Beirut for a month as the British and Austrian fleets bombarded the city in their move
to overthrow Ibrahim and restore the Sultan to power. When the missionaries returned, they found that cannon-balls had torn up the field around Smith’s house but there was little serious damage to the mission buildings and none to the press. When Ibrahim’s defeat was followed by the outbreak of a devastating war in the mountains between the Maronites and Druses, the press was shut down for a year, and the Board questioned whether the enterprise should be dropped altogether. In 1844 the press was idle for another year because the Board was so short of funds and missionaries that Smith and his assistant, Butrus Bustani, had to be pressed into service full time for preaching and pastoral duties. Five missionaries and four of their wives had died, and four missionaries had left for reasons of health or discouragement. Smith himself was discouraged, but still implored the Board for funds to expand the list of publications, which he believed should include "standard works on the Evidences of Christianity, suited especially to the Druse and Mohamme dan mind, able works on theology, adapted to the wants of persons educated in these old churches, and ecclesiastical histories, especially of the Reformation, like that of D'Aubigné". "Such works would find intelligent and interested readers even now," he continued, "for many a mind in Syria is well capable of appreciating their value, many who are not affected by our publications because they strike below them. But the works must be composed, or at least re-written; for a mere translation such as exist among us would miss the mark."  

Despite Smith’s intense devotion to the work of the press, the requirements of his personal life, as well as the usual interruptions caused by missionary duties, warfare, and other disorders removed him from the scene for protracted periods. During his years in Beirut he was widowed not only once, in 1836, but again in 1842. There is little evidence that his bereavement was ever allowed to interfere for long with his work, but it did necessitate two trips to the United States to find a new wife and marry again.

The Bible in Arabic

From the beginning the press’s great objective had been to bring the Bible to the Arabic-speaking world. It was the rock upon which the Protestants rested their claim to religious authority, but there were few in the Arab world, Christian, Muslim, or Druse, who had access to it or were capable of reading it if it were put in their hands. The mission schools were making a start on the task of creating an educated body of readers

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9ABCFM Annual Report, 1843.
in Syria, of women as well as men, but the missionaries found the existing Arabic Bibles totally inadequate. For lack of a better, the mission used and circulated a 1617 Roman Catholic version, which had been revised by a Maronite bishop in 1625. Smith considered it a "very servile imitation" of the Vulgate, and, in a report to the Board in 1844, pointed out its inadequacies for the mission's purpose:

The historical parts of the Old and New Testaments are intelligible, and as correct as the Vulgate. But in the Epistles, tho' isolated texts generally convey nearly the sentiment of the original, the meaning is often not clear; and the argument of continuous passages is not unfrequently entirely lost. In fact, the more abstruse and doctrinal parts of Paul's epistles lose in it almost all their force. Of the prophetical and poetical portions of the Old Testament much is either without force, in bad taste, or absolutely unintelligible. The whole version is not in a classical style. The structure of the sentences is awkward, the choice of words is not select, and the rules of grammar are often transgressed. We have been ashamed to put the sacred books of our religion in such a dress into the hands of respectable Mohammedan or Druse, and felt it our duty to accompany them with an apology. And some of us never think of reading a chapter in public without previously revising it. 10

It was not until late in 1848, after Smith had visited the United States to marry for the third time and to confer with the Board, that work could get under way on the new Arabic Bible. While in the United States and after his return to Beirut, Smith had consulted with a wide range of scholars about the proposed project and had assembled the best philological library that he could obtain from Europe and the East. In Beirut he was fortunate in procuring two very able Arab helpers at the press, both of whom went on to be distinguished figures on the Arabic cultural scene. Butrus Bustani, Smith's right-hand man, was charged with preparing the preliminary Arabic drafts. He was a friend and convert of the missionaries and a man of wide interests, who had been a teacher of languages in a Jesuit college before he came to teach in the mission's seminary in 1841, and had written a number of the mission's textbooks and teaching manuals. He was already competent in Aramaic, Syriac, Latin, Italian, and French, and had been studying Hebrew and Greek and improving his knowledge of English since he had joined the mission. Sheikh Nasif Yazeji was already a distinguished Arabic scholar when he came to the press. Though he was at first looked on with some disdain because of his

10 ABCFM Annual Reports, 1844, p. 254.
lack of any other languages than Arabic, he proved to be uniquely able to help Smith fulfill his ambition that the press should speak in a pure Arabic voice that would earn the respect of Arabs worldwide.

Smith’s way of working and the principles by which he was guided are so well set out in his own words and so worth reading that to attempt to summarize or abridge them would do him a disservice. His report to the Board in 1854, reprinted below, omits only a final section on his edition of the Pentateuch, (including a discussion of its format, references, notes, division into chapters and verses, etc.) which he was about to circulate for comment and criticism.

In laying before the Mission a proof of the first eight pages of Genesis, the translator wishes to make a brief report of his labors upon the Pentateuch, including a description of the edition now beginning to be printed.

He 1ps
It is proper to mention first the books with which the translation-apparatus is furnished, so far as they are connected with this part of the Bible.

1. Beginning with Hebrew grammars, I have Gesenius’ Lehrgebände (1817); his smaller grammar edited by Rödiger (1851), a gift from the editor; Ewald’s Lehrbuch (1844); and Nordheimer’s Grammar. To the last three I have had indexes made, to facilitate reference to all the passages of Scripture which are explained in the syntactical notations; and they thus become very useful commentaries. The first is provided with an index by its author.

2. Of Lexicons, I have Gesenius’ Hebrew Thesaurus, now completed by Rödiger, who kindly sent me the last part as soon as it left the press; and also Robinson’s Gesenius, a gift from the translator, I have likewise Fürst’s concordance, which contains a lexicon by the author, himself a Jew, and possessing in addition to a knowledge of modern criticism, and acquaintance with the post-Biblical Hebrew. His school dictionary, which is not without its value, is also in the translation library. Also Holdin’s concordance of the Hebrew particles.

3. Of commentaries, I have Rosenmuller on the Pentateuch, and Tuch, Delitzch and Knobel on Genesis. The latter is a part of the Exegetical Handbuch, and the same author is at work upon the other books of Moses. I have the Glossa Ordinaria, a voluminous digest from the fathers; and Pool’s Synopsis, with other more common commentaries in English.

Of non-Arabic versions of critical value, I have the London Polyglot, a gift from Mrs. Fisher Howe of Brooklyn, N.Y.; with Buxtorf’s Chaldee, and Castel’s Syriac Lexicon, and Sc lensner’s Greek Lexicon of the Septuagint, besides the Lexicons which compose the seventh vol. of the Polyglott. I have also Tischendorf’s Septuagint, containing the readings of four ancient manuscripts, and for a general Greek Lexicon, Liddell and Scott. Among modern versions, I make constant reference to that
Of Arabic versions, I possess besides that of Saadias Gaon in the Polyglott, the Ebreo-Mauritanian version, edited by Erpenius, and three copies of the version of Abu Said, the Samaritan, two of these copies, which I have made from manuscripts some 500 years old, and the other edited by Kuenen, with the readings and notes of three manuscripts. The last covers only Genesis, Exodus and Leviticus, but is to be continued. I have also a distinct version in manuscripts, apparently made from the Peshito, and written nearly five hundred years ago. The above are ancient. Of more modern versions, I have the Romish edition, reprinted by the British and Foreign Bible Society, which we now circulate, and which is conformed to the Vulgate, with frequent accommodations to the Peshito. I have also the lessons read in the Greek and Greek Catholic churchés, printed at Shuweir and translated from the Septuagint, but following often other readings than those of the Polyglott; and the Karshuni lessons read in the Maronite churches, printed at Kashaiya, and translated from the Peshito. This version of the Maronites, if reference be had both to conformity with the Hebrew and acceptableness of style to modern readers, is the best of all. But it contains, as well as the lessons of the Greeks, only a small portion of the Old Testament.

Of other helps, I may mention De Wette's Introduction to the Old Testament, Winer's Realwörterbuch (last edition), Reland's Antiquitates Sacrae, and Havernick's Introduction to the Pentateuch. Also Sherif-ed-Din et Tifasy on precious stones, and the Arab Materia Medica, called Ma la yisa, both useful in explaining terms connected with natural history and kindred subjects.

The Hebrew text used is that of Michaelis, whose notes and especially references are often valuable. And I have also De Rossis' various readings; and Bahrdt's remains of the Hexapla of Origen.

This catalogue would not be complete without mentioning the more important helps to a full understanding and proper use of the Arabic language. Among the more valuable grammers, I may mention the commentary of Ashmuñy on the Alefiyeh of Ibu Malik, the commentary of Demaminy on the Teshil of the same author, and Milla Jemy on Ibu el-Hajeb. Also Mughny el-Lebib of Ibu Hesham, invaluable for its definitions of the particles. On Rhetoric, the Mukhteser and Mutonnal of Teftazany. Of dictionaries, I have two copies of Feiruzabady, one of them in the hands of Mr. Bustany, and one of Janhuny in the hands of Sheikh Nasif; as well as the dictionary Feiyumy, and the Constantinople edition of Feiruzabady, with definitions in Turkish. Of European works, the Dictionary of Freitag, and the Arabic-Turco-Persian dictionary of Meninski (borrowed from the Sidon Station). I have also the Tarifat of Jorjany, and the Kulliyat of Abu-el-Buka, which latter, when furnished with a proper index, will help to many definitions of great value.

The whole of this valuable apparatus is, of course, not consulted upon every passage. Many works are only occasionally referred to, and others but rarely. Yet they have all been found of use, and each in its place comes up for consultation. The very extent of the apparatus, however, consumes time and accounts in part for the slow progress of the work, especially at the beginning. For the translator had, at the outset, to learn his profession. His armor he had yet very imperfectly proved. Experience has now, however, given him more facility in its use, and his progress has gradually become more
expeditious.

Helpers.

A translation is first made from the original by Mr. Bustany, who learned Syriac at Ain Warka, and has studied Hebrew and Greek since his connection with the Mission. He also studied Theology at the Maronite College. The advantages of this proceeding are: First, giving to the work a native coloring which a foreigner could not so easily accomplish. Second, 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. Third, helping to give uniformity to the work as a whole. For the different parts of the Arabic Bible most in use have been taken from translations made by different hands, and there is a great want of uniformity in the phraseology used. Our aim is to bring about uniformity. Mr. Bustany helps do this by taking the portions of the translation worked over, as fast as they come from my hands, and bringing into use as he goes on, in his own work, the phraseology that has been agreed upon. Fourth, saving much of my time which would otherwise be spent in the manual labor of copying.

When the work comes from his hands, it is thoroughly worked over, with the aid of the critical apparatus detailed above, in doing which, though Mr. B. is not infrequently very happy in the expressions he uses, the other versions are as freely consulted in reference to phraseology as his, and no authority in respect to Biblical criticism is given to his or any Arabic version of modern date. And were the phraseology taken by him from other versions, together with what is subsequently changed, deducted, it is difficult to say how much would be left. Yet no doubt, there does remain in the end a decided coloring given by the first hand through which the work passes.

Finally, I sit down over the work with Sheikh Nasif, and receive his criticisms upon it as an Arabic composition, in reference to grammar, lexicography and taste, after which he copies the work anew. His criticisms undergo a thorough discussion, often consuming much time, and special caution is constantly observed lest he sacrifice any important shade of the inspired idea to the niceties of Arab grammar or taste, which after all are not essential. Yet it is my aim to let no phrase finally pass which does not receive his sanction. Master as he is of Arabic grammar, and richly as his mind is stored with Arabic works, it was soon found that in the terms of natural history and certain other sciences, as well as in the technicalities of different trades and professions and in other like matters, his knowledge was indistinct and often very defective. And to search out and rightly select words of this kind has cost me much time. Unfortunately, also, for the last year, his mind has been under a cloud, and his health delicate; giving me much anxiety lest he may fail entirely. Yet my sessions with him are often invaluable, and I never cease to feel that his aid is essential to the best success of the work.

Principles

Faithful conformity to the sacred original, of course, lies at the foundation of the whole. Uniformity in the translation of similar words and phrases is also aimed at with much care. Then clear and impressive intelligibility is labored after, avoiding, as far as my be, all words beyond the circle understood by the more intelligent class of the community. At the same time, it is a rule not to depart from the laws of ancient grammar, nor to admit words not sanctioned by classical usage without urgent necessity. Rather than do this, we here and there adopt a word now gone out of use, especially where
the connection gives an intimation of its meaning, trusting to the future enlightenment of the nation to bring back the language again nearer to its classical richness and purity. In a word, we aim to keep within the range of that portion of the classical Arabic which is still intelligible, or may be expected to become so. In this way, we are able to avoid in a great degree giving the work the savor of a local dialect, which would be possible were we to descend to the vulgar language of conversation. We also bear in mind that the work is designed for a race—only a small portion of which are Christians; and consequently are on our guard in reference to the many words which are current among Christians in a meaning not sanctioned by Mohammedan usage, least by using them we convey a wrong idea to a Mohammedan mind. At the same time, it is our constant aim not to depart without sufficient cause from the phraseology consecrated by one usage in the current translations, and especially in the more familiar passages; so that the Christian ear shall be offended as little as possible by a perception of change and novelty. To accomplish all these delicate points is a very difficult task, and it is only by attempting it in the country where the language is spoken, and with the assistance of valuable helpers, that I have any hope of succeeding.  

Since 1830, when he contracted malaria in Armenia, Smith seemed often not to have been in the best of health. But that was a missionary’s usual lot and not to be remarked on. By the winter of 1855-56, however, he became aware that his health was failing. In April, he left Beirut for Constantinople to attend the annual meeting of the Syria Mission, where he became alarmingly ill. He was never able to resume the translation he had laid aside. He died of cancer in Beirut on January 11, 1857, at the age of 56.

The committee of missionaries appointed to decide how to proceed with the work considered the Bible all but complete. Genesis and Exodus (except for the last two chapters) had been printed and Genesis had been separately bound as a specimen of the work to be sent to scholars in Europe and Asia. A proof in the first form of the remainder of the Pentateuch had been submitted to the Board and circulated for comment in 1854. Much of the rest of the Old Testament had been translated by Bustani, but not yet fully reviewed by Smith. The first twelve chapters of Matthew were also already in print; the remainder of the New Testament the committee judged to require

11ABCFM:16.8.1, vol. 5, #209. (I have taken the liberty of simplifying Smith’s punctuation.) I have not used the typed copy of his report in the Smith Family Archive since it contains many errors of transcription.

12There is a copy of the Genesis in the Sterling Library at Yale.
"comparatively little labor (to) be prepared for the press." "With these finished specimens", Anderson wrote, "and with so large a portion of the remainder translated and carefully revised, together with the helps to translation which had accumulated, (Smith’s) brethren believed that he had laid the foundation for one of the best versions of the Sacred Scriptures to be found in any language." 14

On recommendation of the missionaries, the Board appointed Dr. C.V.A. Van Dyck to succeed Smith. Van Dyck, a member of the mission since 1840, and founder of its Seminary at Abeih, as well as the author of a number of the textbooks used by the mission schools, was already himself a well-known Arabic scholar, whose views with respect to the principles of translation to be observed, and the quality and style of Arabic to be aimed for did not differ in any important respect from those Smith had followed. It seemed that Van Dyck’s job would be simply to finish the job that Smith had so ably begun. But Van Dyck faced two major problems at the outset, the first being that Smith had expressly stated shortly before his death that he did not wish to be responsible for any of the work except what had already been printed, since he customarily reviewed each new section of the translation before it went to press, and without this scrutiny he would not vouch for it. This, Van Dyck felt, left him with much of the work to do over again, since he was not sufficiently acquainted with Smith’s assistants to trust them completely, and he had had no hand himself in the translation. The second problem was also formidable. The American Bible Society, which was expected to bear the expense of publication, insisted that no departure be made in the New Testament from the so-called textus receptus, which both Smith and Van Dyck considered not to be "the best and most authentic reading". Smith had used his own judgment in this matter despite the Bible Society’s rule, and had relied as he saw fit on the texts of Tischendorf, Negelles, and Alford. 15 Van Dyck therefore felt that he must review every verse of the New Testament to ensure conformance to the textus receptus. Rufus Anderson’s acerbic

13Saliba, p. 259


15Data Furnished by Dr. C.V.A. Van Dyck with Reference to the Translation of the Scriptures into the Arabic Language under the Auspices of the American Mission in Syria and the American Bible Society. (Transcript in the Smith Family Archives, Yale Divinity Library, p.2.)
comment on this situation was that it had not "(pleased) the Lord to grant the earnest desire of Dr. Smith to live and complete his translation of the Scriptures; and it must be admitted that his idea of perfection in the work was such that it is doubtful whether he ever could have been satisfied that his entire translation was ready for publication."\(^{16}\)

With a new assistant at the press, Van Dyck set to work on the New Testament, which was completed in April of 1860, at which time he was also charged with completing the Old Testament. The long labor of translating the Bible was done when the last sheet came off the press in Beirut at the end of March 1865. Van Dyck delivered it to the Bibli Society in New York, and remained there two years to superintend the electrotyping. He then returned to Beirut with Hallock, who had left Smyrna and had been living in the United States, to complete further editions at the mission press. The missionaries' Arabic Bible was almost universally praised. It is said to have "found a circulation unprecedented by any other book in the Arabic language."\(^{17}\)


\(^{17}\)Saliba, p.263.
Note on Sources

For an overview of the work of the mission and its press from various points of view, see:


Issa A. Saliba, "The Bible in Arabic:*, *Muslim World*, vol. 65. #4 (October, 1975). Saliba, who is an Arabic speaker, has more ready access to the Arabic sources than do most of the other commentators. Her paper is an excellent account of the history of the Arabic Bible.

There has been no overall study of the ABCFM press in Beirut. The Yale Divinity Library does, however, have a copy of an interesting paper on the subject by a recent Yale undergraduate, who also reads some Arabic. Jessica Ann Jones, "God's Agents in the Levant: The Missionary Transformation of Lebanon", Special Collections, Record Group #95.
Appendix

ELI SMITH ON THE DIFFICULTIES OF TRANSLATING AN ARABIC GRAMMAR.


Tebreez, Persia, Feb. 18, 1831

My Dear Sir,

I need not inform you that I have not yet undertaken the task you assigned me, of translating the Arabic grammar mentioned by Mr. Temple, when pressure of labour and other circumstances have hindered me so long from even replying to your letter. That grammar was, I suppose the Bahth El Mutalib of Ibn Ferhat, former Greek Catholic Bishop of Aleppo. The Arabic language contains many more erudite and copious works on grammar, a few of which are in my possession; but I recommended that for the excellence of its arrangement, the clearness and brevity of its explanations, and also perhaps from some partiality to it, for its being the first work that gave me any clear insight into the true genius of the Arabic language. I was far from wishing to disparage the work of De Sacy, which I think justly entitled to high estimation. But, even in the philosophy of grammar, for which you know it has been highly praised, it is after all little more than a compilation from Arabic authors, just sufficiently accommodated to European ideas and technical terms, to throw some degree of obscurity over the clearness of the pure Arabic originals. So that after dipping into the latter, I felt little inclination to make any other use of the learned Parisian than as a glossary for the explanation of terms not found in Golius.

You are aware that the Arabians have cultivated the grammar of their language more, and more philosophically, than perhaps any other nation has its vernacular tongue; and such is the peculiar construction of their admirable dialect, itself reaching back perhaps to the very origin of speech, that in doing this they have unconsciously developed with great simplicity and clearness, the first principles of general grammar. All their technical words, which the nature of their language enabled them to make for any occasion, are founded upon, and in fact explanatory of this philosophy. The grammars of European languages unfortunately afford few terms exactly corresponding with these so that literally to translate an Arabic grammar is impossible, or if attempted must occasion both error and obscurity. The technical terms of the original must be left unchanged, or must be formally explained. In any attempt at the latter, perhaps no one would succeed better than De Sacy had done. In short, my opinion is that the student, in order to drink deeply into the spirit of the Arabic tongue, should withdraw himself as far from the theories and technicalities of the European languages, as the language he is studying is different from them; and should plunge deeply into the native authors in their native tongue. You will therefore perceive, that besides thinking the task you impose not easily accomplished, I should deem the work of the Bishop deprived of a very large part of its intrinsic merit, when stripped of its original language. One thing I should like very much to do with it, and that is, to print an edition to be used in native Christian schools, as an elementary work.