

* Introduction *

THE STUDY OF THE BIBLE in Arabic is in its infancy. There are hundreds of extant manuscripts containing portions of the Bible in Arabic translations produced by Jews and Christians in early Islamic times and well into the Middle Ages. But until now, with some notable exceptions, they have been of little interest to either biblical scholars or even to historians of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. This situation is in contrast to the considerable interest in the largely contemporary Abbasid translation movement centered in medieval Baghdad (c. 750–1050 CE) and its environs, in the course of which principally Greek scientific, philosophical, mathematical, and even literary works were systematically translated from Greek, sometimes via Syriac, into Arabic.¹ Less well known is the fact that in relatively the same time and place, in monasteries and in church and synagogue communities, efforts were also underway to translate the Jewish and Christian scriptures, along with other genres of religious books, from Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, and Greek into Arabic. For by the beginning of the Abbasid era in Islamic history, when Arabic had become the language of public life in the Muslim caliphate, the non-Muslim ‘People of the Book’ or ‘Scripture People’² living outside of Arabia proper, mostly Jews and Christians in the Levant, had also adopted the language. In the new religious environment that prevailed from the dawn of the ninth century onward, and even earlier, Bible translation became once again a mode of religious survival in a new cultural environment, as it had been in previous instances in Jewish and Christian history. It was as well the first step in biblical interpretation in the face of new challenges.³ As in the Abbasid translation movement, so in what we might call the Judaeo-Christian Arabic translation movement the translated texts marked a new era in the intellectual lives of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities living together in the Arabic-speaking World of Islam.

¹ See the magisterial study by Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: the Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early Abbasid Society (2nd–4th / 8th–10th Centuries)* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

² On the significance of this phrase in Qur’ānic usage see Daniel A. Madigan, *The Qur’ān’s Self-Image: Writing and Authority in Islam’s Scripture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), esp. the appendix, “The People of the *Kitāb*,” pp. 193–213.

³ See, e.g., Tessa Rajak, *Translation and Survival: The Greek Bible of the Ancient Jewish Diaspora* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

2 INTRODUCTION

In what follows we tell the story of the first translations of portions of the Bible into Arabic and of their currency in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities of the Arabic-speaking world up to Mamlūk and early Ottoman times. This story has seldom been told in a general way. Rather, accounts of its major episodes have been investigated in highly technical studies written by specialists in Judaeo-Arabic or Christian Arabic, concentrating on particular manuscript traditions or individual portions of the Bible. Nor has the story been told with a synoptic view of the role of the translations in the three main communities, living together in the same Arabic-speaking settlements, and exercising a significant measure of intellectual crosspollination. So while the present study makes no substantive contribution to the study of the Bible in Arabic per se, its purpose is to call attention to the progress that has been made by others in this undertaking, to provide an overview of the significant topics in early Islamic history in which the Bible has a major part, and not least to highlight the social and interreligious developments that resulted from the very fact of having the scriptures of the ‘People of the Book’ in the language of Islam.

In the beginning there is the question of the presence of the Bible among the Arabic-speaking peoples prior to the rise of Islam. The first chapter argues that in the world in which Islam was born, the Bible circulated orally in Arabic mainly in liturgical settings, and that such written biblical texts as may have been available in synagogues, churches, or monasteries in this milieu were in the liturgical languages of the several communities, Hebrew or Aramaic among the Jews, and Greek or Aramaic/Syriac among the Christians. Furthermore, given the wide range of biblical lore recollected in the Qur’ān, and the critique the Qur’ān makes of the religious beliefs and practices of the Jews and Christians, along with the actual historical evidences in hand of the communities on the Arabian periphery, the conclusion emerges that the Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians in the Qur’ān’s audience were the mainstream communities of the first third of the seventh century in the Middle East in Late Antiquity and not representatives of lost or dissident groups. For the Christians, this finding means that the Arabic-speakers among them belonged to communities that in later Muslim parlance would regularly be described as Melkites, Jacobites, and Nestorians. This conclusion involves the rejection of suggestions made by many scholars that the Christians in the Qur’ān’s ambience were remnants of ancient groups of Judaeo-Christians, ‘Nazarenes’, Elkasaites, Ebionites, or other groups whose presence in Arabia in the seventh century is otherwise unattested.

The Bible is at the same time everywhere and nowhere in the Arabic Qur’ān; there are but one or two instances of actual quotation. The second

INTRODUCTION 3

chapter of the present study advances the hypothesis that the recollections and reminiscences in the Qur'ān of the biblical and para-biblical narratives of the patriarchs and prophets are not random, but that they are selected according to Islam's distinctive 'prophetology'. It envisions a series of 'messengers' and 'prophets' sent by God to warn human communities, which 'messengers' and 'prophets' God protects from the machinations of their adversaries. The Qur'ān recalls only such biblical stories as fit the paradigm of its prophetology, and it edits the narratives where necessary to fit the pattern. Current scholarship has increasingly shown that Syriac narratives more often than not underlie the Qur'ān's recollection of Bible stories, even when they come ultimately from Hebrew or earlier Aramaic sources.

The evidence in hand suggests that the earliest written translations of portions of the Bible into Arabic were made by Jews and Christians living outside of Arabia proper after the Arab, Islamic conquest of the Fertile Crescent, from the middle of the seventh century onward. The third chapter argues that the collection and publication of the Qur'ān as a written text is the first instance of book production in Arabic and that this accomplishment in turn provided the stimulus for the production of the Bible in Arabic. Christians had written scriptures in Arabic from at least the middle of the eighth century and possibly earlier; by the ninth century Jews too were translating portions of the Bible into Judaeo-Arabic, if not somewhat earlier. Christians translated from Greek or Syriac versions; Jews translated from the original Hebrew. It is not clear where these early translations were made; the available evidence suggests that in the Christian instance the monasteries of Palestine, where most of the early manuscripts have been preserved, were also the locations of the translations.

The fourth chapter surveys what has come to light so far of translations into Arabic of biblical books and related texts under Christian auspices from the ninth century up to the Middle Ages. The effort here is not to be comprehensive or to list and describe every known Christian translation. Rather, relying on the scholarship of others, the purpose is to call attention to the many important features of the translation enterprise, and not least to call attention to the windows open to the history of the Christians living under Muslim rule that these manuscripts provide. Too often even scholars who are experts in the biblical text systematically ignore the wealth of other information the manuscripts contain, to the detriment of our knowledge of an increasingly important phase of Christian interreligious history.

The translation of the Bible, and particularly of the Torah, into Arabic beginning in the ninth century in the environs of Baghdad and in Palestine and elsewhere opened a whole new scholarly era in Jewish life and thought that extended from the eastern shores of the Mediterranean to Spain, and

4 INTRODUCTION

reached even across the Pyrenees into medieval Europe. Chapter five of the present study discusses this development, again relying on the scholarship of others. Highlighting the accomplishments of major figures such as Ya'qūb Qirqisānī and Sa'adyah ha-Ga'ōn, the chapter calls attention not only to the importance of their scholarship for the Arabic-speaking Jews of the Islamic world, particularly in the area of the exegesis of the scriptures, but also to the important interreligious dimensions of their work. The text of the Bible in Arabic became the coin of interreligious exchange in the period under study, and it was often the case that the scriptures were the focus of arguments about religion, evoking both polemical and apologetic discourse from Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike.

The availability of the Bible in Arabic in oral or written form played an important role in the formation of early Islamic religious thought and in Muslim responses to challenges from Jews and Christians. The sixth chapter discusses the use Muslim scholars made of biblical passages and of biblical lore both to articulate Islamic convictions more convincingly and to disclose what they took to be the shortcomings of Jewish and Christian exegesis and even of their custody of the text of the scriptures. The Muslim use of the Bible suggests a more general availability of its text in Arabic than modern scholars can account for on the basis of the manuscripts that have survived. And in the study of biblical narratives, some Muslim scholars of the early Islamic period, such as the historian al-Ya'qūbī, displayed a considerable breadth of knowledge of Jewish and Christian exegetical traditions. But in the long run, Muslim interest in the Bible in the Middle Ages focused less on the text as the Jews and Christians actually had it, than on the apologetic and polemical potential of particular biblical passages.

And yet even the apologetic and polemical use of selected passages from the Bible wove a web of enduring biblical connections between Arabic-speaking Jews, Christians, and Muslims from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages, resulting in a situation that may be characterized as one of 'intertwined scriptures' or better, intertwined Bible history. The brief seventh chapter calls attention to this phenomenon, and to the problematic suggestions of some recent historians of religions and advocates of interreligious dialogue that the historical intertwining of scriptures in counterpoint on the part of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious controversialists over the centuries justifies the assumption of a common scriptural heritage.

The Bible in Arabic entered a new phase in its history with the advent of printing and the increasing involvement of Western Christians in the affairs of Arabic-speaking Christians living in the World of Islam. This is a topic that reaches beyond the chronological and topical limits of the pres-

INTRODUCTION 5

ent study. The effort here has been to call attention to a neglected area of biblical studies and to an equally neglected phase of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim interreligious history, and all along to provide sufficient bibliographic annotations to lead the interested inquirer into a deeper study of the issues raised. The hope is that the scriptures themselves may yet lead to a more appreciative interreligious understanding and to a more tolerant mutual respect.